Simple portrait lighting

Making effective professional portraits with minimal tools

by Brian P. Lawler

"Hey, Bob, stand against the wall so I can take your photo!" – that's how most *unprofessional* portraits get started. That's not how it should be done; that's how police photographers take mug-shots.

If you examine nice portraits, you'll see very quickly that they are not taken against a wall. They are made with care to get the lighting right, and to *honor* the person being photographed.

It's not hard to take a nice portrait for yearbooks, annual reports, newsletters and presentations. All it takes is attention to lighting, framing, focus, and posing.

Get away from the wall!

Have your subject stand about ten feet from any wall. That way they won't cast a shadow against the wall – and it gives you control over the background lighting. If you're working with available light, or an on-camera strobe-light, moving away from the wall will allow the light to illuminate the face of the subject, and *not illuminate the background.* That's what you want.

This portrait of Dr. Harvey Levenson was taken with two lights – a softlight on the left and one "separator" light outside the top-right of the frame. The softlight is reflected back into his face with a silver-gold reflector. This combination of lighting fills the face nicely, while separating the subject from the background.

Light and reflections

Most nice photos appear to have been taken with just one source of light. In general, light comes from just one place (the sun) so it's illogical to see shadows pointing in opposing directions in a photo. If you can make your portraits appear as though there was only one light source, they will look more natural. *Start with one light,* usually soft in quality, and direct it toward the subject from one side and a little to the front.

The second element in a good portrait is to reflect some of the main light back into the face from the opposite side.

Commercial reflectors are great for this, and my favorite is the *Photoflex 5-in-1* reflector. These are fabric reflectors that pack into a small space, but expand to make a great portrait light helper. I use the surface that is half-gold/half-silver. It adds a slightly warm reflection in the shadows, but doesn't call much attention to itself. It should not be obvious that you are using a reflector in a nice portrait; reflected light should be very subtle.

If you don't have a commercial reflector, use a sheet of white foam-core or a large paper tablet (like those you find in conference rooms). *Anything* is better than nothing when it comes to reflectors.

The lighting and reflection methods I describe here are easy to set-up, and they produce good results without the need to buy expensive equipment. Good portraits don't have to be expensive. The reflector mentioned costs $60, and substitute reflectors cost almost nothing. A sheet of foam-core costs just a few dollars.

Concentrate – separate!

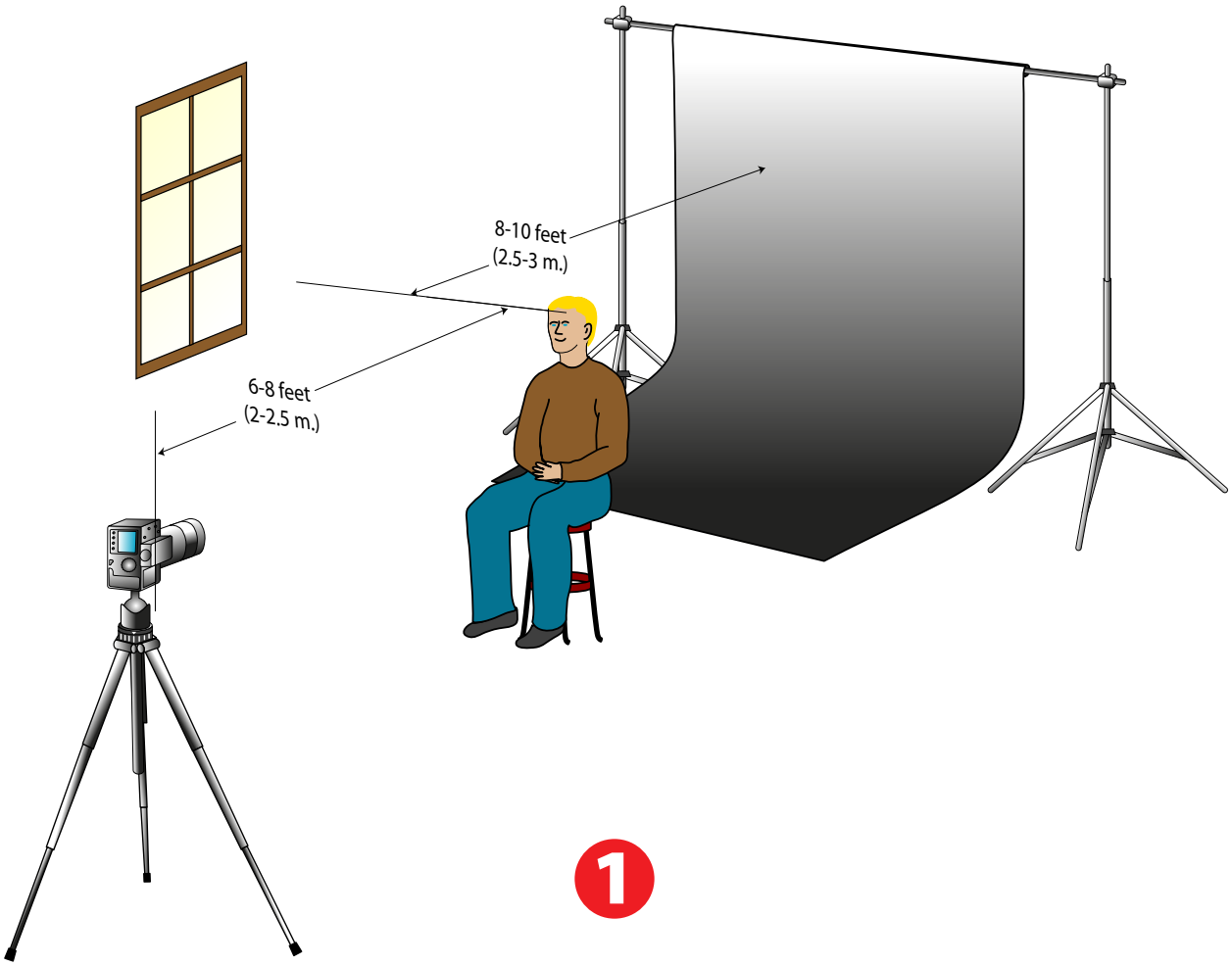
Separating the subject from the background can be tricky, but there are many ways to do it. One is to position your subject so that the background is dark, another is to set your camera so that it has the shallowest possible depth-of-field. With that setting, the face will be in focus, but the background will be out of focus. This creates a nice effect.

When you have control over the lighting, you can make sure that the light strikes the subject's face *but does not illuminate the background.*

Lens and focal length

It is common to use a medium-telephoto lens when making a head-and-shoulders portrait. On the 35mm film standard, a lens of 110-135mm is nice. Slightly longer lenses also work nicely. These telephoto lenses also have the benefit of providing shallow depth-of-field when the aperture is open.

Avoid wide-angle lenses, as their distortion and nearly-infinite depth-of-field conspire to make many portraits unattractive. The exception to this is when you are making an *environmental portrait,* one



The simplest portrait set-up is to have your subject sit on a stool about ten feet from a background, and place the camera about eight feet in front. Favor a front-side light, diffuse if possible (hanging white paper over the window is effective). If the room is painted a light color, the available light will bounce, and you'll get some light in the shadows on the right side of the face.

where the subject is being photographed in their work environment, or in a setting which better-defines the person. There a wide-angle lens will help.

Most modern digital cameras allow control over the aperture and shutter speed when the camera is put into manual mode. With these settings, it's possible to control depth-of-field, and to make the nicest portraits possible.

Tripods are nice, but not essential

If you're a confident hand-held photographer, it's best to shoot that way. You will be able to move around to maximize the framing, and to compose your photo they way you see it in the viewfinder.

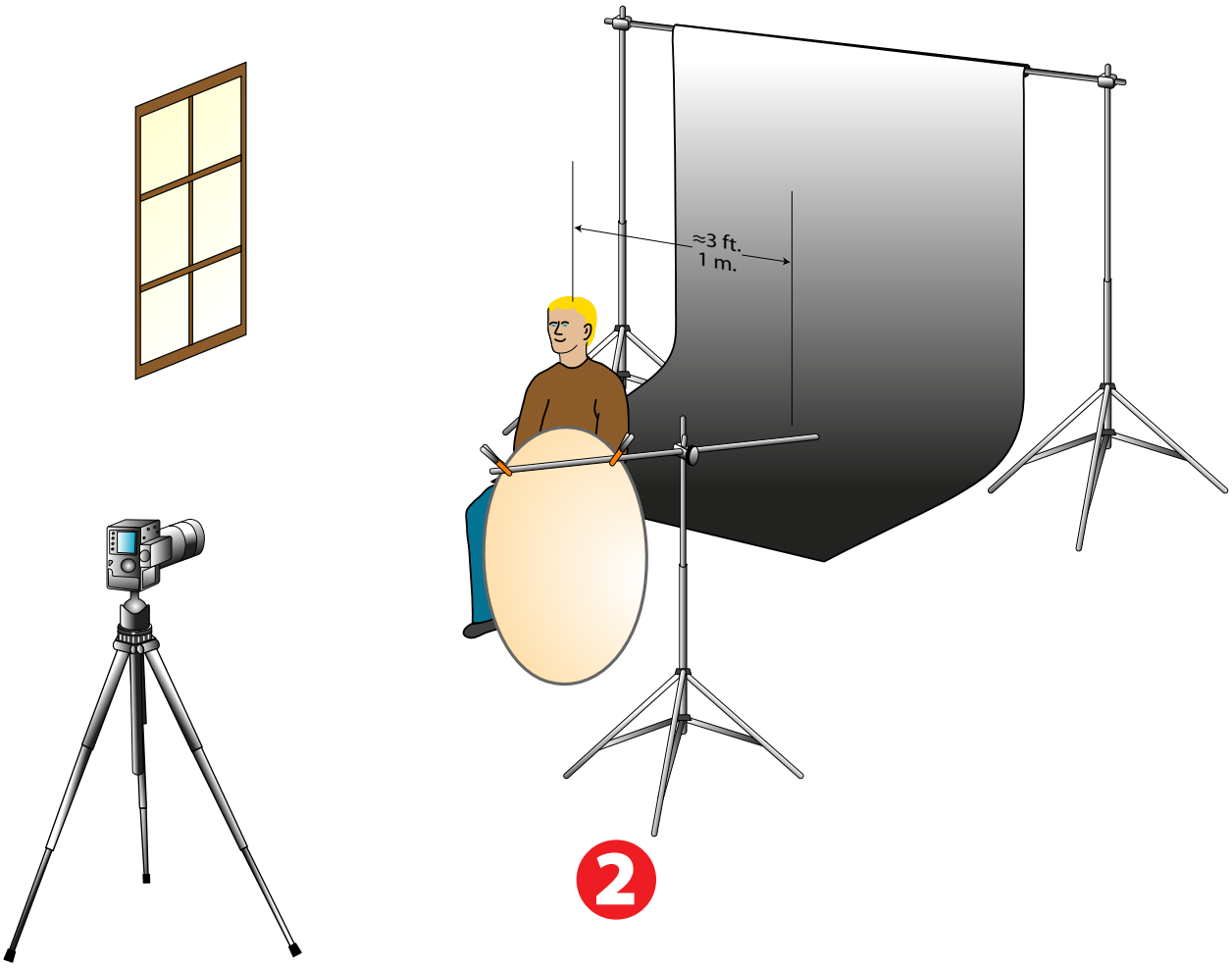
If you tend to wiggle when you shoot hand-held photos, then it's best to put the camera on a tripod. Any tripod will do. Position the camera vertically, and compose carefully before starting to shoot your images to ensure that your framing is correct. The risk in using a tripod is that it forces you to reset the tripod often, and most tripods are tricky for small adjustments.

This portrait of Theresa Block was taken with the lighting arrangement shown on page 3. The background is a painted muslin cloth.

Exposure

Digital cameras give us a distinct advantage in knowing that we have made a successful image before we are finished with the photo session. Review your images as you shoot (using the camera's built-in LCD screen), and shoot a lot – pixels are cheap!

I have used a number of consumer and professional digital cameras, and it is my observation that they tend to overexpose much of the time. If you must err, do so



By adding a reflector to this lighting arrangement you can control the reflected light on the subject's face. I use a half-silver/half-gold cloth reflector, usually held by an assistant, to fill the shadows on the side of the face opposite the natural source of light. The reflector should be about one meter from the subject's face, but may be moved in or out to create the most flattering light. When I shoot without an assistant, I use a stand and two woodworker's clamps to hold my reflector in position.

on the *underexposed* end of the scale (you can fix the exposure later in Adobe Photoshop in most cases).

ISO and depth-of-field

If you have the ability to set the ISO on your camera, choose the lowest setting possible. This will allow you to choose a wide aperture to get shallow depth-of-field, which is great for portraits.

The portrait of Jimmy Dinh, at right, was taken in the hallway of the Graphic Arts building at Cal Poly University. The camera was hand-held, and the depth-of-field was controlled by a wide aperture and a low ISO setting. The light was direct sunlight, entering the hallway through a high window. I diffused that light with a sheet of paper, then had a student reflect some of the light back toward Jimmy's face with a piece of white paper. This was a low-tech portrait! And, the result is very nice.

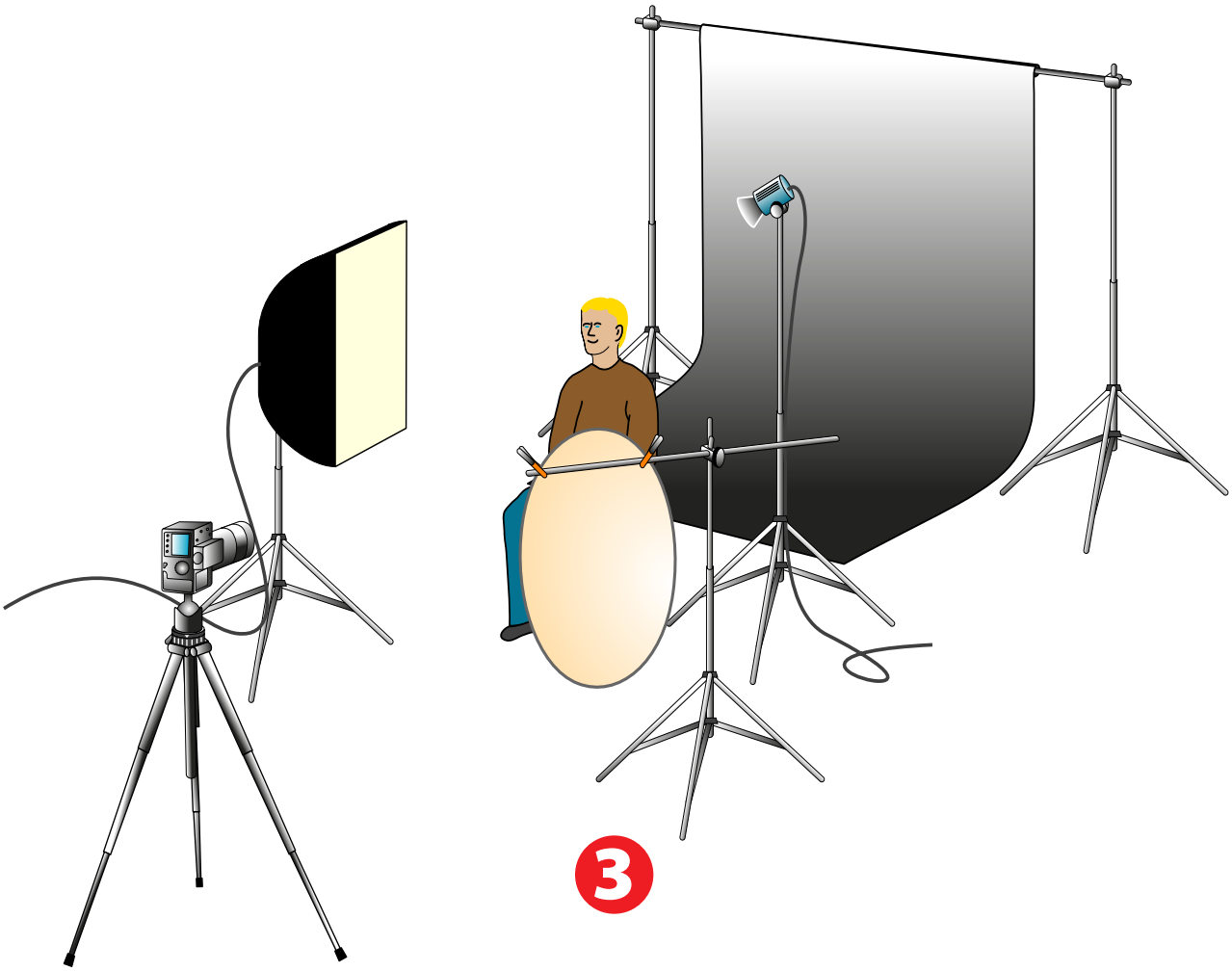
The background is *far* out of focus, which enhances the portrait. I accomplished this by sitting Jimmy on a stool about 25 feet from the wall, and using a wide aperture on the camera.

The focal length was about 135mm, appropriate for portraits like this. This is an excellent portrait.

Other simple portrait techniques

Another simple technique is to shoot almost directly toward the light source (see diagram on page 5) and then reflect most of it back toward the subject. A second reflector should be added to put some of the light on the other side of the subject's face.

The benefit of reflected light is that it is *never* as bright as the main light, and thus it behaves like natural light. In the photo salons of the late 19th



If available light is not possible, you can use artificial lighting to provide the primary light. In this setting I add the separator light to illuminate the right side of the head, and provide a difference between the subject's hair and the background (this is particularly important with black hair). This is *just a hint of a light,* it's positioned to provide only enough light to make a slight highlight. This can also be accomplished with another reflector, positioned high, and to the right-rear of the subject.

Century – before artificial lighting – studios were built with a north-facing skylight as their primary light source. Since such a window is never in direct sunlight, the result is diffuse full light that can be reflected easily to create beautiful soft-light portraits.

A large overhead softlight can make a good start for a portrait, but it requires work to prevent the face from having unpleasant shadows. To solve this problem, place a reflector on the subject's lap to illuminate the face from underneath (see the diagram on page 6 for this lighting set-up).

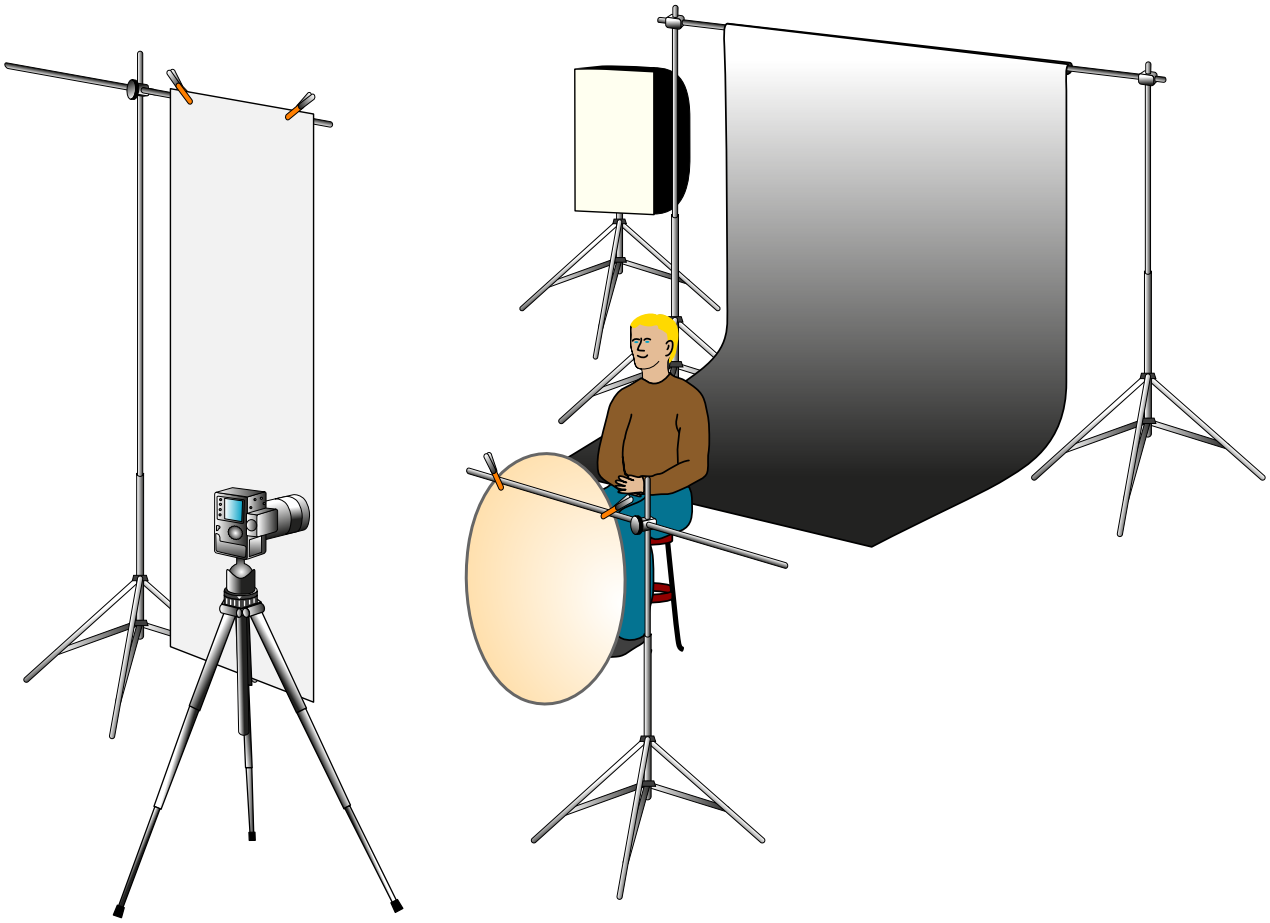
That reflector will have to be positioned to provide the nicest light for the photo. Be sure to look through the viewfinder and compose the lighting correctly to make a flattering image.

Thoughts on posing

There is a difference between a professional portrait and a yearbook photo, thus there is a difference in the way you pose and prepare for these different types of photos.

In the image at left, Anthony Randolph posed for a photo in the context of a professional portrait, but it could easily pass for a yearbook photo.

The lighting was the same as described in the diagram above, and the combination of beautifully soft main light, and carefully-reflected fill make this one of my favorite portraits. Anthony is a guy who does not readily part with his cap, so I took the photo with jacket and cap, and I took special care to reflect the light into his face, and under his cap. The combination of



This technique has the light facing the camera with a foam-core baffle shielding the lens, and simultaneously reflecting light back to the subject. It has the additional advantage of separating the subject from the background. It's also nice to add a warm reflector on the right side of the subject's face, shown. The result is an extraordinary kind of portrait.

good foreground lighting and separation from the background make this a very successful image (he's also a handsome subject, and has a beautiful, relaxed smile – he's a perfect subject!).

Notice in this photo that he is not sitting square to the camera, nor is his head straight in the photo. These are intentional qualities. Whenever I take a photo like this, I am careful to *look at the whole*. I have my subject sit on a stool, knees turned slightly to one side, and then I have them turn their shoulders to a position that is square to the camera. Then I work with the subject to get the angle of their face and neck to make the best photo possible.

This is particularly important with subjects who wear glasses. Anthony is wearing glasses in this image, but they are hardly visible. That is a result of positioning his face to reduce reflections on his glasses. Eyeglasses are often a problem in portraiture, and sometimes cause a photo to be unsuccessful. A solution offered by some professional photographers is to remove the lenses from the subject's glasses for the portrait.

A true one-light portrait

This portrait of Adrienne Schwarte was taken with the lighting set-up shown above. It is an honest one-light portrait, and a nice example of this style of work. The result is exceptional.

I took this photo while teaching a class on portrait lighting. The light source is just outside the frame on the left, deftly reflected back to illuminate her face with two reflectors.

The main overhead softlight is reminiscent of studio lighting at the turn of the 19th century. But a strong overhead light can create grotesque shadows without being countered by a reflector. In this example, that reflector is placed in the subject's lap, reflecting light back into their face from below. Position it carefully to fill the face with pleasing light, and be careful to eliminate potential shadows below the eyes and nose. In this lighting arrangement I also try to prevent the light from illuminating the backdrop. Move and rotate the light so that it does not illuminate the backdrop.

Taking portraits of eager subjects is considerably easier than making portraits of unwilling people. There is almost nothing worse than having to make a portrait of someone who does not like to be photographed. Working with such people requires skill. One must talk with the subject, and work with them to make a pleasant photo possible. Engaging the subject in conversation will help them to relax, and that can help to set the stage for a nice portrait.

Portraits of overweight subjects

One of the most common problems in portraiture is taking photos of overweight people. Head-and-shoulders portraits are best, but it's hard, for example, to get the flesh beneath the chin to look good.

A solution to this is to ask your subject to sit tall, rotate at the hips a bit, and then lean toward the camera at the waist, tilting their chin upward in the process.

This thins the subject's neck quite effectively, and makes it possible to make a nice portrait.

Retouching should be practiced on most portraits. All of us have facial blemishes, and it's usually a good idea to reduce the impact of those blemishes by retouching with Photoshop's Healing Brush tool. I recommend using a separate layer for facial retouching so that your changes can be removed or lessened after-the-fact.

These techniques can be helpful to you as you become a better photographer. You can avoid the "Hey Bob, stand against the wall!" portrait.

Originally prepared for the 2006 IGAEA Conference

Brian P. Lawler
Graphic Arts and Photographic Consultant
1329 Peach Street
San Luis Obispo, California 93401
(805) 544-8814
brian@thelawlers.com
www.thelawlers.com