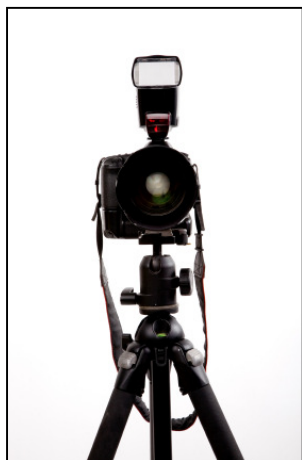


EQUIPMENT ESSENTIALS

There are many things to take into consideration when getting started as a portrait photographer. One of the most important factors is equipment. Here, we will cover the basics to get you started.

CAMERA

Just about any SLR will do when you're starting out as a portrait photographer. Later, when you have more experience, you will probably have developed more preferences that will give you a better idea of what to look for in the next camera purchase. But in the beginning it's best to stick with the basics. One important feature to look for is a rapid-fire mode. This is incredibly valuable in portraits! The other main consideration is the lens. A good portrait lens is generally accepted as anywhere from 80-110mm. Within this range (at a distance of 4-5 feet from the subject) you will get a nice shot without distorting any facial features. Finally, make sure your memory card is sufficiently large to handle plenty of shots for those extra long sessions.



TRIPOD

This one is a matter of preference, and you'll have to determine for yourself what you will want to do. Some photographers like to use a tripod to guarantee perfect clarity. This also permits the option of using a shutter release cable, which allows them to interact more freely with the subjects rather than hiding behind the viewfinder the whole time. On the other hand, many photographers prefer to not be restricted by a tripod and enjoy the flexibility of being able to move around easily. Whether you use one or not, it's always a good idea to have a tripod on hand, just in case.

BACKGROUNDS

If you are just starting out and don't have any backdrops yet, you're not off the hook. It's a good idea to have a growing list of locations with great backgrounds in the outdoors. The background will always play some small part in a portrait. For those wishing to use backdrops, there's a number of options from low-budget and creative to high-end expensive equipment. You will have to determine your needs and choose accordingly. You can get great shots with a bed sheet pinned to the wall, or with a muslin on a backdrop stand. The important thing is to always think about the background. Whatever it will be, it will play a role in the photo. So don't disregard it or forget about it in your hurry to focus on the subject. Use the background, whatever it may be, creatively.

PROPS

Props can be wonderful tools in portraits. They can be as small and simple as a single rose or as big and bold as a bunch of balloons. Props can help the subjects feel more at ease and give them something to focus their attention on. They can also add a creative element to the finished portrait. Certainly, you don't need to use props all the time, but only when you feel it would add to the picture or help the subject relax. It's a good idea to have some basics on hand. Look at portraits done by photographers you admire and see what types of props they use. This will get you thinking about what things you might like to use yourself. Get creative and have some fun!



LIGHTING

Once again, many portrait photographers start out without any lighting equipment and they do just fine, dealing mainly in outdoor portraits. If you fall into this category, it's still useful to have a nice hot shoe mount flash to use as a fill flash when needed. Another step up would be some sort of flash diffuser or modifier to soften the light. Either way, the flash can be a valuable tool. Be sure you are aware of your flash's range. Photos taken outside of that range will be too dark. If you are interested in acquiring lighting equipment, there are a wide variety of options. You can start with a few simple lights and umbrellas, and a couple pieces of foam core for reflectors. There are countless ideas of how to start into studio lighting on a budget. Do your research carefully and don't buy more than you need. And when you get started be sure to read up about lighting techniques so you can master them quickly and begin using them in your portraits. (For more information, read "Portrait Lighting" on PortraitTutor.com.)

CAMERA BAG

This may seem like a trite suggestion, but it is actually very important. Every semi-serious photographer (and anyone else who values their equipment!) should have a high-quality, padded camera bag. If your camera is your livelihood, then it only makes sense to protect it. Get a bag that has enough space in it to store all the things you will be taking with you to your sessions. If you have lighting, make sure they also have protective cases or bags. Take care of your gear, and you will be glad of it for years to come.



BACK UP EQUIPMENT

One of the most important things you can do is prepare yourself with back up equipment. This includes the little things like plenty of extra batteries (for camera and flash), an extra memory card or two (or additional rolls of film), as well as bigger things like a back up camera (or back up lighting equipment). Should you ever be in a position (heaven forbid) when your camera stops cooperating, you'll be forever glad you had a back up on hand and were able to complete the session. Most importantly, your subjects will be incredibly glad they don't have to do it all over again (if that's even an option)! So, while it may be an inconvenience, it's highly recommended to acquire back up equipment and always carry it with you.

Hopefully these suggestions will be helpful to you as you get started. There are many great books in the library, bookstores and online that can help you even further in each of these areas.