

Professional
POSING TECHNIQUES
FOR WEDDING AND PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHERS



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FOR DIGITAL AND FILM PHOTOGRAPHERS

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Contents

INTRODUCTION	4	7. SEATED POSES	41
What is Posing?	4	Men	41
Obstacles to Good Posing	4	Women	43
Goals for Posing	5	8. FLOOR POSES	50
The Purpose of this Book	5	9. SLIMMING TECHNIQUES	55
A Final Note	5	10. GROUP PORTRAITS	61
1. GENERAL PRINCIPLES	6	Groups of Two	62
The Formal Pose	6	Groups of Three	69
The Natural Pose	6	Groups of Four	72
The Exaggerated Pose	7	Groups of Five	78
Posing Basics	7	Larger Groups	79
Posing Differences: Men vs. Women	8	Design Strategies for Group Portraits	87
2. BODY LANGUAGE	10	11. WEDDING PORTRAITS	91
Communication	10	The Bride	91
Perception	10	The Bride and Groom	102
3. HEAD POSES	13	One Location, Various Options	108
4. HANDS AND ARMS	20	12. GLAMOUR PORTRAITS	111
Breaking the Rules	25	13. FREESTYLE POSING	118
5. FEET POSITIONS	30	Conclusion	123
6. STANDING POSES	35	Glossary	125
Men	35	Index	126
Women	38		

Introduction

Every time I review an image, I learn something new or am reminded of something fundamental about creating photographs. You might think that is somewhat strange for someone who has been creating images for more than half a lifetime, but not one of us is so smart that we cannot learn from simply studying portraits created by our peers. Additionally, when we review our own work, we may well see that we might have been able to improve some of our portraits with better posing discipline.

■ WHAT IS POSING?

The word *pose* as it relates to portrait and wedding photography is an all-encompassing expression. Often, we discuss posing in a loose and too generalizing manner. We refer to the pose as if it were not specific, because no matter how we freeze our subjects with our exposures, they are in a pose.

The dictionary defines the word *pose* more specifically, as “an attitude or position taken naturally, or assumed for effect; an artistic position or attitude.” It takes the description a step further when, in an additional definition, the term refers to the subject assuming “characteristic airs.” It is this definition that applies most closely to us, the image creators.

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■ OBSTACLES TO GOOD POSING

The majority of us are not aware of our natural and unconscious body positions, and so we do not present ourselves as well as we might. Most of us tend not to be concerned with how we place our hands, tilt our head, place our arms, and position our feet. Women, however (at least a significant number), are somewhat more conscious of how they present themselves than are their male counterparts, especially when it comes to how they place their legs. Their mothers have taught most young women what is, and what is not, ladylike. For instance, when women are in skirts, they will sit with their knees together. Men, on the other hand, are much more relaxed and are often careless about how they may be perceived.

■ GOALS FOR POSING

From the photographer's point of view, there is more to posing than ensuring a "characteristic air" in the image. We want our subjects to be shown in the best possible position. We want to flatter them, to make them look good. Yet, even in really excellent photographs, we can sometimes see flaws that, if corrected, would make the portrait more striking. When the positions of the arms, legs, and body are not well conceived, they can be disruptive or intrusive to the composition of the image. Attention to detail is the most important of our personal disciplines, and in honing our attention to detail, we can make a real difference.

■ THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

This book will establish a code of discipline and provide sound guidelines for the way we present our subjects. It will serve not just as a starting point for those new to portrait and wedding photography but will also show my more experienced peers how to employ some old tricks, and perhaps some new ones too, in situations where they have at least a modicum of control.

In writing this book I was inspired by my observations when reviewing other photography books and illustrated editorials, competition images, and displayed portraits. I guess that I am something of a harsh critic, not just of other people's posing, but also when I err in my own images. Having said that, I believe that there are times when you will see merit in doing many things totally opposite to what I am advocating. Indeed, there are times when I do this myself and, when doing so, I frequently like what I have done. So I am also going to offer a few ideas as to how to present some interesting poses that are not exactly classic.

This book is not intended to be a pretty picture book, though some images shown may fall into that category. Instead, it is intended to be a manual of the many do's and don't's concerning posing. This book will cover the fundamentals of good posing and will show how to achieve them with the minimum of effort. Good and not-so-good examples are shown side by side so you can see the effect that making the recommended changes will have on the portrait.

■ A FINAL NOTE

If looking through this book helps you to avoid the posing negatives, you can logically expect to create images that are always acceptable. On the other hand, if you learn to take advantage of some desirable posing alternatives, perhaps your images will be amongst the best there are.

You will note that I do not address children's portraiture in this book, as I believe the subject is worthy of separate discussion. Especially when working with children under the age of six, photographers may find that their clients lack the control required to mirror the posing strategies outlined in this book.

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1. General Principles

If we want our subjects to look good and to present them in a flattering way, there are four basic posing methods that we need to use: the formal, natural, and exaggerated styles, or a hybrid method that combines elements of the three former posing styles.

■ THE FORMAL POSE

The formal pose is that which presents the subject in a manner that is accepted in traditional portraiture. The female in this style is presented in an elegant, dignified pose. The male is presented in a manner that suggests he is gentlemanly and is a suitable companion for the elegant female. He will appear strong and supportive.

■ THE NATURAL POSE

This style will generally be relaxed and allow the subject to relate naturally to the camera. When subjects are allowed to present themselves in a *totally* natural way, however, they often look clumsy, awkward, or otherwise inelegant, so we will need to modify their presentation. This refinement should be subtle and should be carried out with diplomacy.

When you observe the two young ladies in examples 1 and 2, you will see that they do not appear to be conscious of the principles of good body presentation. Both examples show common positions that we will see when the subjects are not asked to pose. The subjects look relaxed and comfortable, but they do not look as good as they should.

In example 1, the first flaw is the position of their feet. The second flaw is that their hands and arms are shown in a less than flattering way. Their leg positions are far too casual and do not present the lines that make the female form attractive. In example 1, the young woman on the left has her hands hidden in such a way as to suggest a “photographic amputation.” The hands of the young woman on the right look slightly deformed, and her left arm simply appears too passive. Her shoulders are turned at too

WHEN SUBJECTS ARE ALLOWED TO PRESENT
THEMSELVES IN A TOTALLY NATURAL WAY,
HOWEVER, THEY OFTEN LOOK CLUMSY,
AWKWARD, OR OTHERWISE INELEGANT.



image 1



image 2

great an angle to the camera and therefore appear narrow; this makes her waist look far wider than it really is. In fact, she might well think she looks fat. That is a bad pose.

In example 2, the young lady at the right is in a common female leg position with her knees touching and her feet apart. It is an exaggerated pose that we can refine for the desired results.

■ THE EXAGGERATED POSE

In the exaggerated pose, we deliberately create a presentation of the subject in which they may not necessarily be comfortable, but from the camera position they look great, even dynamic. This style is for those who want their images to create impact and to perhaps present a dramatic attitude that transcends the personality of the subject. Some of these poses will be designed to portray aggression, belligerence or protest, or sheer exuberance. Such poses may also indicate depression or sadness, excitement or happiness, or even euphoria. Except for those trained to be very prim and proper and express themselves with pure language, humans generally use body language to enhance their verbal skills, and our images can do the same with expressive and creative poses. Of course, we need to make sure that when we use exaggerated poses they also present our subjects in the best possible style.

■ POSING BASICS

In other than simple head-and-shoulders poses, we should seek to create lines in our portraits that are attractive and make good composition. This requires us to have diagonal, curving, and circular lines in our composition, not boring vertical and horizontal lines. When posing women for a full-

length portrait, we want to create lines that are tapered and curved. In fact, unless we are seeking to present our clients with an exaggerated attitude, we should strive to create what we describe as an S curve.

When showing them in head-and-shoulders or half-length poses, we want the head position to reflect the personality of the subject. For female professionals, this may mean having the head angle in a strong presentation, or, in other words, tilted away from the near or lower shoulder, as demonstrated in example 3. For the traditional female presentation, the head is turned toward the shoulder nearest the camera to imply a more “feminine” attitude. In example 4, you can see that positioning the head in this way achieves a much softer look.

In general, head poses are not supposed to present the face squared to the camera. (The exception to this rule is the headshot that advertising photographers use when they want their model to “confront” viewers—and these can rarely be considered good portraits.) The typical headshot shows both ears and makes the face appear wider than it is. In most cases, this view is not flattering and presents a lighting challenge when modeling the facial structure of the client, be they male or female. Many headshots are really not much different than the ID photos used on passports and drivers’ licenses, except that the professional photographer uses superior lighting and camera techniques. When we have someone posed squarely facing the camera, they often feel uncomfortable and have difficulty being themselves. Such a pose also prevents them from reacting normally to your prompting for good expressions. If you observe those you engage in conversation, you will see that it is rare for anyone to present themselves square to you. Everyone tends to slightly angle himself or herself away from the square position.

If you occasionally glance at the feet positions of those you engage in conversation, you will note that they are not positioned squarely toward you, but with one foot somewhat to one side and to the rear of the other, and they will often move their foot positions. It is only the aggressive, dominating types who square themselves to you. This latter character will also tend to lean their torso in the direction of his audience. This is an intimidating stance, and only when someone wants to convey this message in their portrait should you use this position. Another exception is when we are seeking to demonstrate a defiant or challenging attitude.

■ POSING DIFFERENCES: MEN VS. WOMEN

There is a distinct difference between the posing styles that are used when photographing men as opposed to photographing women. When photographing men, we normally will seek to create strong lines and lighting patterns, while when photographing women, we seek to make them look feminine and to achieve softer lines. While it is possible in some instances to pose women in men’s poses, the reverse rarely works well. We will discuss these issues later.

IF YOU OBSERVE THOSE YOU ENGAGE IN CONVERSATION, YOU WILL SEE THAT IT IS RARE FOR ANYONE TO PRESENT THEMSELVES SQUARE TO YOU.



image 3



image 4

Another generalization is that the best feet positions for men and women are fundamentally different, unless they are used for special effect. Males can present feet positions that are wide-based and appear to support a pose, while females need their feet to be placed so

that there is a tapering as you follow the lines from the waist to the ankles. However, we will see that frequently, especially in fashion and high-school senior portraits, young women in jeans and other casual wear are presented in nontraditional poses that are acceptable since the images are made in the mode of youthful protest.

2. Body Language

Often, images are created that are simply ugly, despite the fact that the subjects in the portrait are attractive or even beautiful. You will see images in which the photographer did an outstanding job in lighting a beautiful face and used a flattering head position but was obviously so consumed by the beauty in front of him that he overlooked the fact that arms and legs, and perhaps the angle of view of the subject's figure, were less than flattering—or worse.

The main cause of such portraits is that all the elements are not considered as a whole and are allowed to simply fall where they may. Yet, when these elements are considered as a complete package, the subject will respond better, and the overall composition will become more attractive. While body language can make or break a portrait, it is important to first construct the basis of the pose, then to use body language to strengthen the presentation.

■ COMMUNICATION

Body language is very important as it helps to convey much information about the subject to the viewer. Our hands, arms, legs, and head positions are all elements we use to communicate. A good exercise in understanding body language is to observe people engaged in conversation. Watch how these persons physically communicate as they speak. Observe the hand movements, the positions of feet, and the way people present themselves to those they are conversing with. Try to mentally freeze-frame images of them as you would see them in your camera. You will see both unflattering and flattering images in rapid sequence.

■ PERCEPTION

In example 5, there is no doubt about the attitude of the ring bearer. There is clearly a message of pride and self-importance in his eyes and his head position. The moment seems real, and it could well have been ruined had



image 5

he been asked to lower his head and present a more normal portrait angle. To do so would have eliminated the inherent message.

In example 6, the young woman's shoulder angle to the camera, together with her head slightly turned toward her left shoulder, suggests sex appeal and an allure to the male viewer. It is a soft and sensual pose and tells us something about her personality. In example 7, the same model changes her head angle, dipping her chin and raising her eyes to present a more playful but still provocative image.

These examples give us clues as to how we need to pose our subjects in order to ensure they are perceived as they—or we—wish. We need to know something about whom we are portraying or what the portrait is to imply. The pose we allow in our images will be linked to the expression because we cannot create a portrait by only considering one of these important elements.

When you review the posing recommendations discussed in this book, bear in mind that the body language of our subjects is as important as their expression. Also remember that even when we are creating a head-and-shoulders portrait, the way we pose our subject has an impact on the expression we capture. If legs, hands, and arms are not placed correctly, then the expression may not



image 6



image 7

be what is most desired. In other words, the pose is as much about the impression the portrait presents as just the facial expression alone. Body language is about communication as much as is the facial expression. They cannot and should not be separated.

There are instances where a pose that might be awkward or slightly uncomfortable will look great in the final portrait. By positioning the subject in a pose that feels awkward, we are making him or her much more conscious of their body than they otherwise would be. As a result, getting a good expression will require us to rely much more on our verbal communication. Such a pose is frequently used in glamour portraits.

THE POSE IS AS MUCH ABOUT THE
IMPRESSION THE PORTRAIT PRESENTS AS
JUST THE FACIAL EXPRESSION ALONE.

3. Head Poses

To a degree, we have covered head poses while considering posing the total figure, but head-and-shoulders poses have a dramatic effect on the expression and depiction of the subject's personality.

Each time we change the angle of a subject's head, the expression will change. Humans express themselves not just with voice but also with body language. We wave our hands and arms and move our feet in order to emphasize what it is we have to say. But nothing more clearly emphasizes our message than the way we use our facial expressions, which, again, includes the angle of our head.

In each of the images in examples 8–12, our subject's body was positioned very similarly in relation to the camera, but we had her progressively change her head position. When I created this sequence, I did not communicate anything in particular to the subject so as not to influence her expression. My aim in this sequence was to demonstrate that head positions change expressions. Note that I had her shoulders turned approximately 15 degrees away from the plane of the camera, which in effect locked her into an inescapable pose. In example 8, her head appears vertically square to the camera. The expression is passive, almost bored. In example 9, because her head is slightly tilted, her expression has a hint of curiosity. In example 10, her head is tilted a little more, and the expression of curiosity is more pronounced.

In example 11, her position appears reversed, and the head was allowed to fall in the same line as the shoulders. This is a head position that will normally evoke either a bored expression or one of melancholy. In example 12, by having her tilt both her head and her shoulder toward the camera, we achieved a more interested expression.

Sometimes what may appear to be a good idea will not work, and this is illustrated in example 13. In this example, the young lady is clearly uncomfortable with her relationship to the camera. In effect, what we did by positioning her too sideways to the camera was make it a little awkward for

THIS IS A HEAD POSITION THAT WILL
NORMALLY EVOKE EITHER A BORED EXPRES-
SION OR ONE OF MELANCHOLY.



image 8



image 9



image 10



image 11



image 12

her to communicate with us. First, in order to communicate with us, she tipped her head a little back toward her left shoulder. As a result, we see a narrow view of the shoulders. Unless we have good reason to pose a subject this way, we should avoid doing so. Instead, in example 14, we had her turn her shoulders to the camera at a 15-degree angle. She then had a more comfortable relationship with the photographer, and this shows in her smile. The tilt of her head in this image is very subtle, and that is why she has what could be described as a nice, natural expression.



image 13



image 14



image 15

In example 15, our subject is shown in a position similar to that of the subject in example 14, but we have evoked a completely different expression by having the subject accentuate the tilt of her head and slightly dip her chin. This created an appealing, sensual look that was further enhanced by the lighting pattern, which added a little mystique to the expression.

In both the two previous examples, the subject's head is tipped toward the far shoulder, which traditionally has been regarded as a masculine head pose. In example 16, we show a typical teen or high-school senior head pose. The young woman leaned on her elbow so that her shoulder became a form of prop and she turned and tipped her head toward her near shoulder.



image 16



image 17

der. This is an adaptation of the “submissive” head position. In this portrait, she is clearly comfortable and was clearly enjoying the communication with the photographer. The image shows a winning smile, but the view of her shoulder is somewhat awkward and not flattering. Normally I would not recommend this pose in a close-up portrait. This would look much better if we were able to see her complete arm so that there would not be so much emphasis on the shoulder.

We’ll now turn our attention to some head poses typically used when working with male portrait clients. The first, example 17, is a simple head-and-shoulder portrait of a groom. Note that he is positioned 10 degrees away from the camera so that he is not facing us square on. This allows him to comfortably face the camera with a relaxed smile.

Example 18 is a portrait of a chef in his restaurant that shows him resting his elbows on both a table and the arm of a chair. Even though he was virtually square to camera, because he was resting in a typical male position



image 18



image 19

he appears comfortable in his relationship with the camera. Remember, men are most comfortable when they are holding an object or leaning or resting their arms and hands on something solid.

In example 19, world-renowned photographer John Howell is shown resting his left arm on the arm of a chair. His hands appear relaxed, with his right hand resting on his right thigh. Note how his left hand was pulled back slightly toward him, creating a nice compositional line that follows his shirt and tie.

In the strong contemplative pose shown in example 20, the subject's left hand emphasizes his obvious strength of character. The pose, combined



image 20



image 21

IT IS A MUCH MORE YOUTHFUL POSE THAT
PRESENTS FRESH PERSPECTIVE AS HE
TURNS HIS FACE TOWARD THE CAMERA.

with a more dramatic lighting pattern and the slightly lower perspective of the camera, adds to the power of the portrait.

In example 21, the subject was posed for a softer impression that better reflected his personality. Though not shown, both elbows rested on a table in front of him as he looked up slightly toward the camera with a questioning expression.

Example 22 shows a high-school senior with a strong self-image. His right elbow rested on a table and his chin rested gently on his loose fist with his body posed at a 45-degree angle to the camera. It is a much more youthful pose that presents fresh perspective as he turns his face toward the camera.



image 22

4. Hands and Arms

Probably the most difficult skill to acquire is that of posing hands and arms, especially when the arms are uncovered. Of the countless images that I have reviewed in all kinds of media, in print competition, studio windows, and portrait and wedding exhibitions, the most common flaw in the composition is the placement of hands and arms. When judging prints, I have found that one of the most irritating things is poor posing of the hands and arms—and these imperfections have caused me to deduct points. Many images would have been significantly enhanced if these flaws had been eliminated from the composition.

There are two very important rules when working with hands. First, avoid showing the back of the hand, especially with female subjects. Second, avoid having the hands pointing directly toward the camera. Our aim is to present both arms and hands as simple, elegant, and slim lines. We do this by presenting both sideways to the camera. The exception to this rule is with male poses. In many male poses, we can show hands in a way that emphasizes the strength of the subjects.

No matter how beautiful a subject's hand, when the back of the hand is facing the camera, it will never be seen at its best and may well appear ungainly. In example 23, we see the back of the subject's hands, and the arms are foreshortened because they are projected toward the camera.



image 23



image 24



image 25



image 26



image 27

Additionally, the knuckles are emphasized to the viewer. This is not an elegant angle. In example 24, we made an improvement by having the arms running across the plane of the camera, and the hands present a more slim line and appear longer. In example 25, we overemphasized the line, creating an unnecessary emphasis on the hands.

The same elements are examined in examples 26 and 27. In 26, the young lady presents her hands in a natural manner and is not aware of how they appear to the camera. We improve their position in 27, but because the fingers of the lower hand do not fall below the line of the bench, the side view is emphasized; this is something else to avoid when practical.

Example 28 presents a much better line, and the lovely hands appear significantly more attractive. The model in this image is very pretty; she has lovely hands and arms, and there is great temptation to exploit them in our portraits. It was suggested that she rest her chin on her hand as she might do in certain situations, and in example 29 she did just that. But notice how she placed her other hand. It appears too passive and the pose shows the



image 28



image 29



image 30



image 31



image 32



image 33

back of the hand, which we do not want to do. It does not look as nice as it might because her arms and hands present a disjointed line that does not lead you smoothly back to the expression on her face. In example 30, the lower hand is visually connected to the forearm of the hand supporting her chin. This eliminated the disjointed configuration in the previous example. Notice too how we spread her fingers in the lower hand, which presents a prettier view. At the same time, however, we made the hands a point of focus within the portrait.

Example 31 presents a different position for the second hand, which reduces the focus on her hands and also makes a simpler leading line toward her face, the main element of the portrait.

In example 32, we asked the subject to use both hands to support her chin. Note how her left hand attracts attention. This is because it is on the

shadow side of her face, making the light tones of skin stand out in contrast against the deeper shadows, and her fingers form a less than desirable pattern. We immediately corrected this problem, as shown in example 33. Note that we have created a gentle fist-like pattern and have softened the pattern of her other hand by slightly curving the fingers of her right hand.

Photographing the bare arms of a light-skinned subject is always challenging because the brighter skin tones stand out whether in high or low key—especially if the subject is wearing dark clothing. In example 34, although we created a pleasant triangular pose, both hands present the kind of pattern that is not at all flattering. It is extremely difficult to create a pleasant hand pose when one is placed directly on top of the other. It is better to make an adjustment in the pose that allows us to create a more relaxed feel in the portrait. In example 35, one hand is on top of the other, but we have used a different angle so the hands lay in a more simple style. The flow of this pose permits us to get away with a style that in other poses would be less attractive.

As we are always seeking to make our female subjects look elegant, we can experiment with arm and hand poses when we are presented with such an opportunity. The folded-arm pose for the female requires us not to hide



image 34



image 35

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