

# The Essential Guide To Family Portraits

Written by Nina Bailey

Especially for Canon EOS cameras



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## Foreword by the author

There is one area of photography which is shot by almost every photographer, and that is family portraits. They are also the pictures that are often the most treasured out of every image that you take. Whether you photograph your children, your grandchildren or just friends and families all these images will be really special to you.

Of course this also encompasses the special events, weddings, christenings, anniversaries and even special birthday events. Because this type of photography encompasses so many different things, it can be quite challenging. We are often shooting in lowlight, under artificial lighting and even sometimes by candlelight.

Sometimes we plan the images we are going to take. At other times we will be shooting candid or grab shots whenever we get the opportunity. Sometimes subjects enjoy posing for the camera, although more likely it's because the photographer or that person wants them to smile or pose again.

All of these things make shooting portraits challenging to the photographer. Some of the time due to the light levels we will need to use flash. That's a topic that scares even the most seasoned of professional photographers. For many amateurs it seems like a black art, which offers so much, but causes confusion and disappointment so often when we shoot with it.

In this e-book I will show you how to shoot great portraits. I will also show how single external flash or even the built-in flash can be used to great effect simply and easily.

I will also look at how, framing, composition, lighting work and generally help you to get the best portraits of your friends and families.

Nina





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# Introduction



## Introduction

All photographers will get involved with, at some time or another, shooting portraits of family, friends and relations. In fact these images often become some of the most treasured possessions that a family owns, so it is worthwhile making a little effort to make sure they are great images which you are proud to show and display.

Photographers that own a “good camera” all too often get roped into photographing a family’s milestone events – christenings, weddings, anniversaries and birthdays, to name just a few. These can be in challenging locations with little natural light and often backgrounds that are far from ideal. We will look at the best ways to tackle these conditions and get some great images to remember the event by.

In this ebook I am going to look at a wide range of shooting techniques with natural light, fill in flash and how to overcome problems caused by having to shoot solely with flash in low light conditions. I look at the key camera settings that will need to be used to get the very best results. I will also look at some equipment that can make these images easier to take successfully.

This ebook looks at a wide range of portrait types from the formally posed portraits through to candid shots on days out and whilst on holiday. I will show you how to make the most of the opportunities that you have, without getting in the way of everyone having fun.



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## Chapter 01

# Approaches to family portraits



## Which approach to take

This area of photography covers an enormous variety of different ways of shooting images of people, ranging from the formal portrait with the subject's full co-operation, through to candid shots of reluctant subjects.

It can be just an image of a tiny baby through to group shots of many adults. It also includes shooting by natural light through to using flash to provide all the lighting for the shot and just about everything in between.

As this is such a big topic we are going to start by breaking it down into areas and looking at the things that the photographer will have to overcome to get successful images. We will look at the actual techniques to take the images in later chapters.

### Formal portraits

The key thing about formal portraits is that they are being taken with the full consent and co-operation of the subject.

Generally the lighting is being set up especially for the shot. This could be anything from daylight only through to providing flashlight for the image.

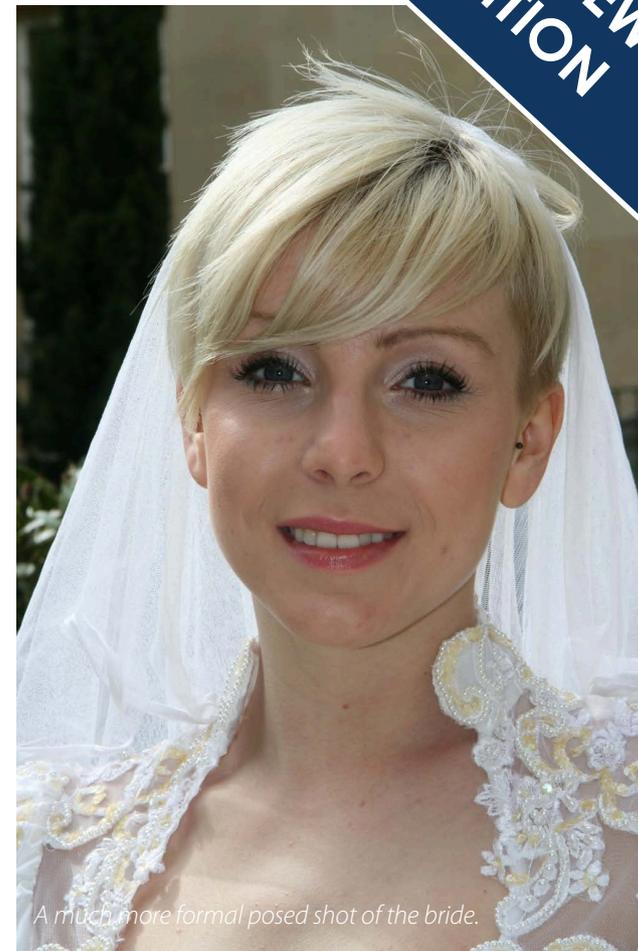
The photographer should be in control of what is happening and will have thought in advance about things like backgrounds and lighting for the images that they are taking. You also need to think about the outfit that the person is wearing. If more than one person, think about if the colours that they are wearing actually work together.



*A quick candid shot of a couple.*

Some family events will fall into this category, weddings being the most common, especially if you are the official photographer. If you are just taking additional images, then these events have more in common with casual portraits.

Generally you will have more time to shoot this type of portrait than any other and so setting up the camera in the time available is not generally



*A much more formal posed shot of the bride.*

going to be a problem. There are also more options available for how we are going to light the subject, ranging from traditional studio lighting, using dedicated flash units either on or off the camera, through to using available light and reflectors to providing the lighting that you want.

## Formal portraits

The normal downside to more formal portraits is that, although the photographer may well be more comfortable due to the extra time and options available to them, many subjects will not be happy being in front of the camera for long periods of time and can easily grow bored and restless.

This is especially important when taking images of children, as from when they start crawling up to being young adults their co-operation is far from certain.

Generally with children if we are doing a formal shoot I generally reckon that an hour is the absolute maximum time, with some children getting bored a lot quicker.

Ironically some of the easiest subjects to shoot can be smaller babies from birth up to about 5 months as they are often fascinated by what is going on.

However, I find that they do not like things that are strange to them and so mum needs to be close at hand and ideally shoot in a familiar environment.

However, it is the more formal portrait that often captures grown ups at their best, presenting them with portraits that they are happy with as we are able to take the time and use additional lighting, to capture them at their very best.

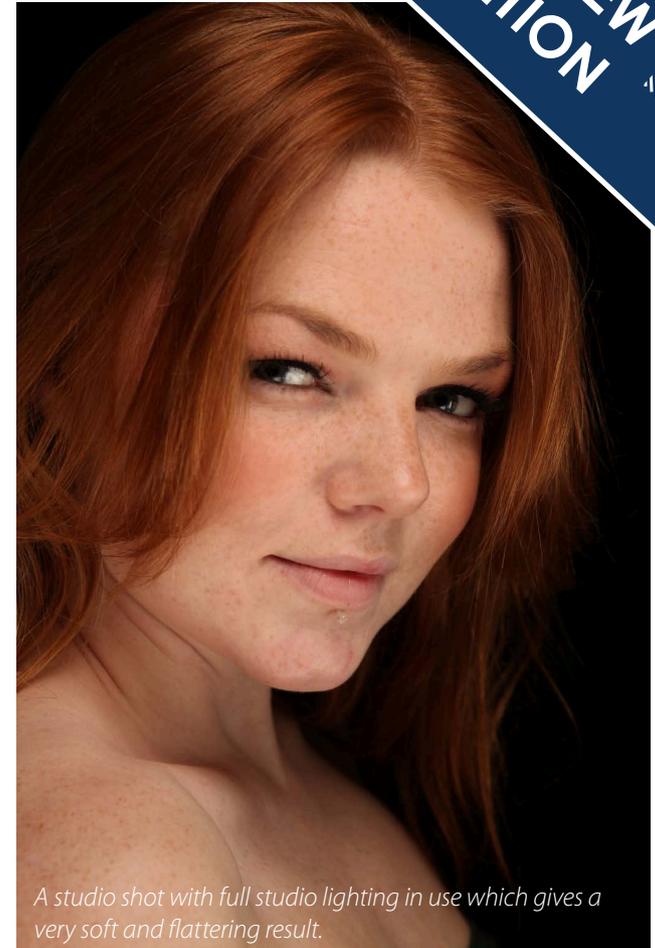
This will be thanks to the more controlled conditions, the time available, the ability to use poses to overcome some of the aspects of



*Taken on an outside formal portrait shoot using fill in flash.*

their appearance that they may be less than comfortable with and we can use lighting that flatters and compliments the mood that we are conveying.

Generally when shooting formal portraits we will be using the best lenses for the image that we are taking. Normally the best lenses for portraits are focal lengths between 70mm up to about 135mm.



*A studio shot with full studio lighting in use which gives a very soft and flattering result.*

Below 70mm the lenses are too wide and depth of field too great, above 135mm we are too far from the subject to get a good rapport going with the subject.

## Casual portraits

Casual portraits are where the person you are shooting knows that you are taking the images but is not necessarily posing specifically for the camera.

Within family photography this is the most frequently taken type of image. Most family events will fall into this category, where we want a record of the event but we are trying to spend a minimal amount of time on the images that we are shooting.

Most of the images that we take of children will end up falling into this category as well, as although they often know that we are there with the camera and will “smile for the camera” there is not the formality of a formal portrait shoot.

This presents us with one of the biggest problems with this type of shooting, the need to work very fast so that we do not miss anything. This gives us very little time to set up the camera, or think about the best way to shoot. It also limits the amount of lighting that we can use normally to a single flash, which is mostly used on camera or the camera’s built in flash.

For this type of portrait photography we can be in very varied lighting, ranging from very lowlight, where flash is going to be essential just to light the subject, through to bright light where the flash may work better just providing some fill in flash.

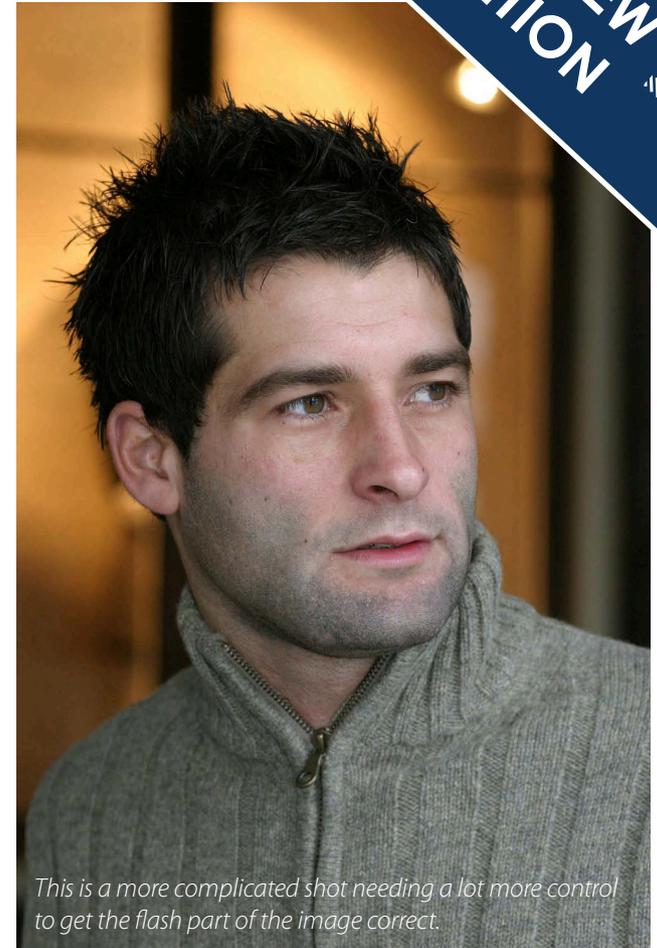
For this reason this area probably requires the very best understanding of your camera and its flash system and the ability to set your camera



*Here I was shooting with an external flash being controlled by the camera for fill in flash.*

up quickly and efficiently is essential.

It is a type of photography where you have little control over backgrounds, clothing and generally in things such as posing and so some people are far easier to capture pleasing images of, than others.



*This is a more complicated shot needing a lot more control to get the flash part of the image correct.*

Generally for casual portraits you will use a wider variety of lenses. For groups even a moderate wide angle lens may be needed in more confined spaces, for a head and shoulders shot the longer lenses, up to even 300mm, will find a use to get more natural looking results.

## Candid portraits

Candid portraits generally refer to taking images of people when they do not realise that they are being photographed.

This can be something as simple as taking the funny and odd shots at a wedding or can be trying to capture children playing naturally without the big cheesy grins that often appear.

Generally the longer the lens you use, the better the result that you are going to get. 200mm up to 400mm lenses are useful if you want a natural looking image, however, you also have to bear in mind the light that you are shooting in and handholding rules.

The very long lenses can also have the problem that people around you do not understand what you are taking and get in the way a lot of the time.

The problems with candid photography is that we have no control over the subject and we are generally going to be shooting by the available light that is present when we are taking the images.

The use of flash will normally tell our subjects that they are being photographed. This makes the lighting and when and where we are shooting, the things that will define the images that we take.

If the lighting is soft or we are shooting in shade, some great results can be obtained in this way. If the lighting is bright and harsh then the results may be disappointing due to not being able to control the lighting enough to give us a good shot.



*Capturing a moment at a steam rally.*

If we are taking images of people without them realising that they are being photographed, we need to think about the implications of this.

Grabbing a shot of a child playing on the beach may seem harmless enough, however this is not always the case in the eyes of the parents of the child. The problem is that the moment that we ask permission the shot or opportunity is often lost.



*Candid shots of children playing always capture a very natural expression.*

Although technically if you are in a public place there are no restrictions, it's often easier to avoid the confrontations.

A good guide is if the subject was yourself or your child would you have a problem with it – if the answer to that is yes – don't take the image.

## Family photography

Family photographs also includes images of the children doing activities, the places you visit and the family there, celebrations, events and often much more besides.

So I thought that I would look at the best way to tackle events, childrens activities and some of the other common areas that you want to end up with great images of.

One of the hardest things about these other areas is that they take place in a diverse range of locations. All too often these have one common link, you have no control at all over the lighting.

The equipment can be varied, though often the regular outfit that you own will cope with the majority of the images that you want to take.

Think about what you want to achieve within the portraits that you take and which of these approaches will work the best.

For many photographers the casual and candid approach will provide the images that they want. Sometimes sacrifices may have to be made, as you have a lot less control, so clean backgrounds and the ideal light may well elude you in some situations.

Formal portraits have the advantage that the photographer is in control so better results can be achieved if you have a willing subject. As we progress through this ebook we will look at all the things that need to combine to consistently get exactly the results that you want.



*Unpowered go-karts on a family holiday in the french Pyrenees.*



*Taken on a zipline course on a family holiday.*



*Sitting in a fighter plane at an aviation museum.*

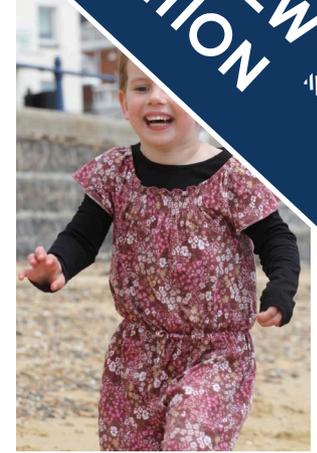
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## Chapter 02

# Equipment for family portraits



## Equipment for family portraits



This is an area of photography that can be tackled with very basic equipment and still some great results can be achieved.

This is providing the photographer thinks through the images that they are taking, takes into account the lighting conditions that they are shooting in and then sets the camera up accordingly for those conditions.

### Camera selection

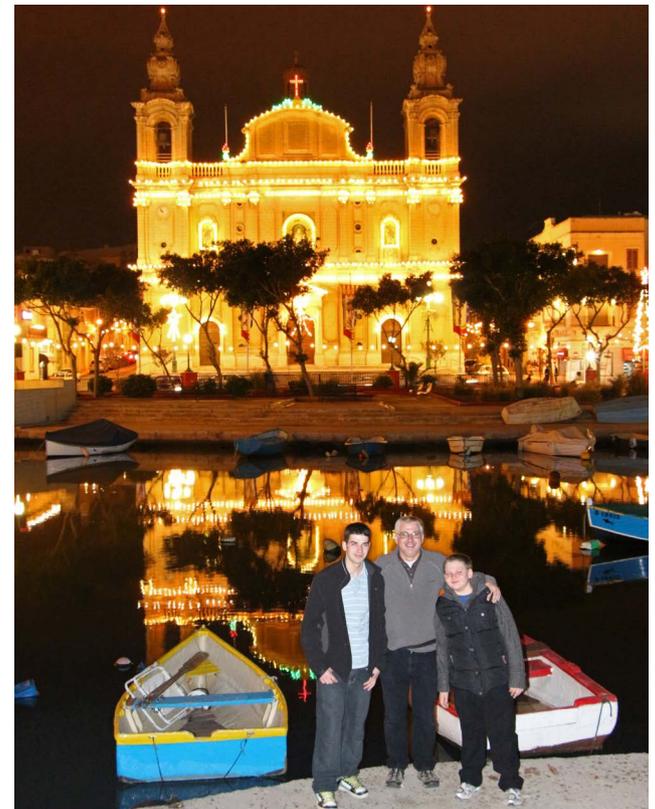


Any of the EOS models will do a good job of this type of photography. The later models featuring the wider ISO ranges which go up to 12800 ISO or even higher will have an advantage in the lower light levels as in the image on the right.

Also the models that feature the wireless flash system give some extra flexibility as to where an external flash is positioned. This can be overcome on the earlier models by simply using the wireless transmitter unit to remotely fire the flash off camera for a more pleasing result.

If a wide range of activities is to be photographed then the camera choice can become a little more critical, especially if the subject is moving a lot.

Photographing children playing sports or being very active is going to be easier on the higher specification modes that are designed for sports and action photography. These normally have the faster drive speeds as seen in the sequence above.



## Camera selection

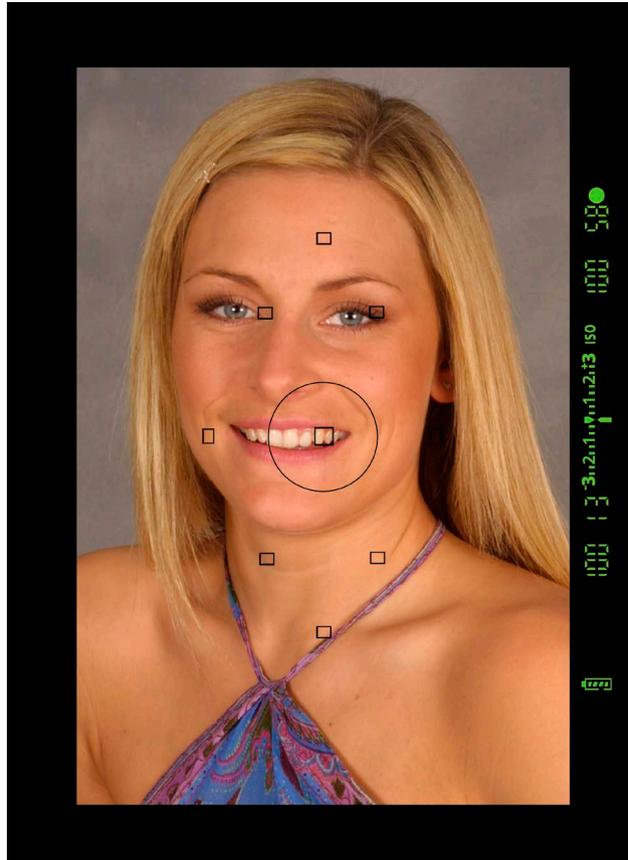
The built in flash units can work well at close range but will also prove to be limiting if shooting functions and events in larger rooms, as the flash may simply not have the power to provide the illumination for the image.

They also have problems on some of the larger lenses as the lens can cause blockage and therefore a dark semi circle appears at the bottom or side of the image. As shown in the image below.

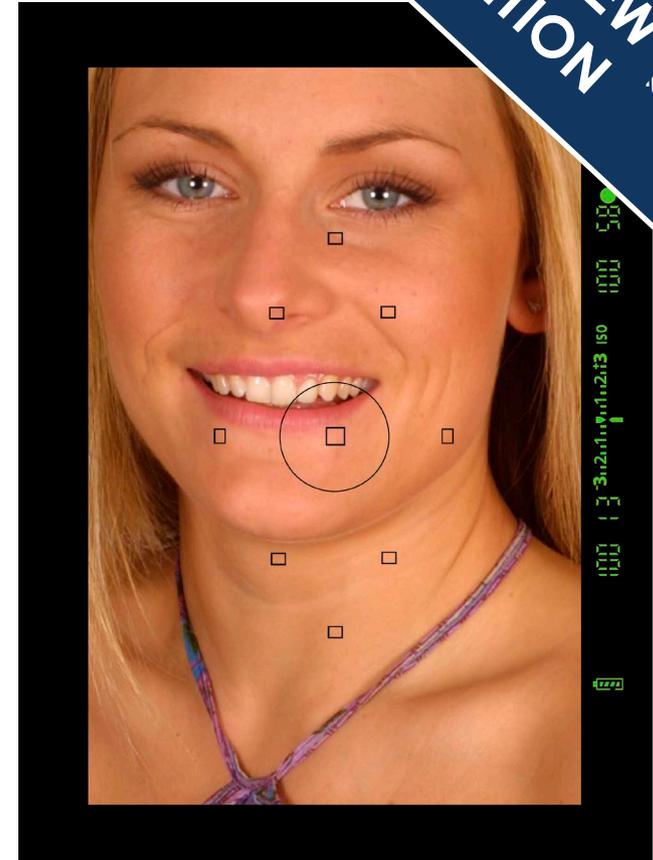
Therefore, the external flash units may be necessary for events and functions. The external flash units also provide great flexibility for both the positioning and the softening of the flash.

## Sensor size

The other consideration from a camera point of view is whether to use the 1.6 sensor models which work well for family usage, or use the 1x or full frame models such as the EOS 5D Mark III and EOS 1Dx models may prove to be a better



The image above is what you will get in the viewfinder using a full frame model or 1x model compared to shooting at the same distance with a 1.6x model..



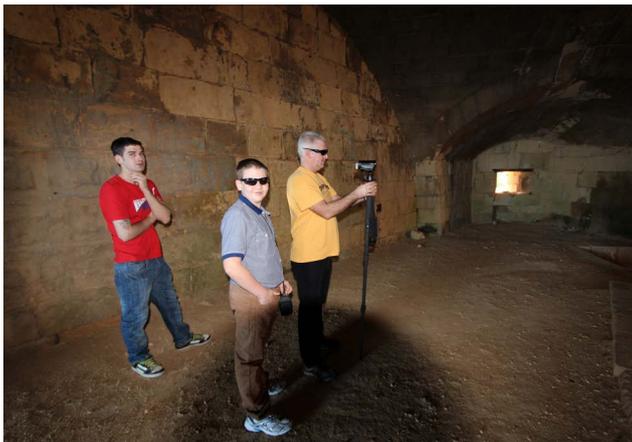
The image above is what you will get in the viewfinder using a 1.6x model compared to shooting at the same distance with a 1x or full frame model..

option for those who are looking at portraiture on a more serious or commercial basis.

The 1.6x models effectively apply a crop factor to the image and so they make all the lenses that you have appear to be a longer focal length than they actually are. In many areas of photography such as sports, action and wildlife this can actually be a very beneficial thing.

Portraiture is one of the areas where this is not always so beneficial. The normal lenses that portraits are traditionally shot on are lenses with focal lengths of 70mm up to about 135mm. These give the most flattering portraits and allow the backgrounds to be reproduced pleasantly blurred.

The problem is that on the 1.6x cameras these



## Sensor size

become 1.6x longer requiring the photographer to be further away to shoot with them, the problem is that this loses the contact with your subject and often there is not the space to get far enough away for the required framing.

The effect that the 1.6x crop sensor has on the apparent focal length of the lens is shown on the chart and we can see that to achieve the portrait focal lengths we are in effect using the standard rather than short telephoto lenses.

The standard focal lengths will give the same framing and working distances, but not always such flattering results and they will also give more depth of field with the image as they are a shorter focal length.

Some of the prime lenses that are used a lot for portraiture will work best on the full frame cameras, the EF 85mm f1.8 is a good example of this. However this lens will still work very well on a 1.6x sensor camera providing there is space to get back enough to get the framing right.

To a degree having crop sensors models is not quite as much of a disadvantage as it used to be.

Canon's range of EF-S lenses has expanded considerable over the last few years.

Lenses such as the 18mm to 135 mm f3.5/f4.5 IS STM lens, is actually a very useful lens for shooting family portraits.

However very common problem experience by photographers using the smaller sensor size is difficulty in minimising the depth of field to get

Focal length	Apparent focal length on a 1.6 x sensor camera
40mm	64mm
50mm	80mm
70mm	112mm
85mm	136mm
100mm	160mm
135mm	216mm

a pleasing background blur.

This is overcome to a degree by choosing to use lenses featuring a wider aperture. But these are often though to be too expensive for the average photographer. However the EF 50mm f1.8 is a very bright lens that offers an inexpensive option for the 1.6x models for use as a portrait lens. This lens can normally be found for well under £100 and is shown to the right.



## Lens selection

There are a wide range of lenses that do get used to take portraits, Most of the general zoom lenses that we use will do a very good job, so often very little if any additional equipment is needed.

The lenses that will work best for you will depend on a number of things:

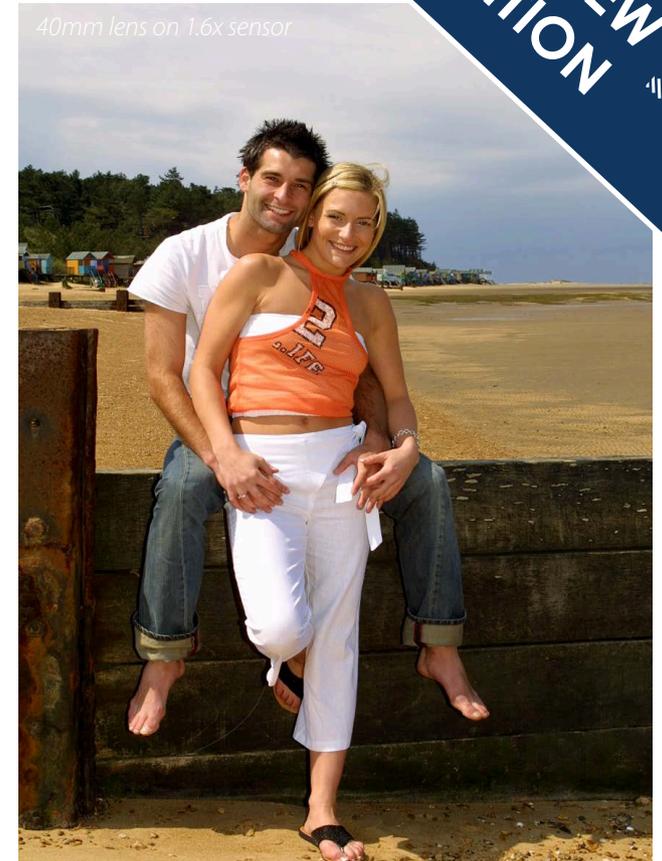
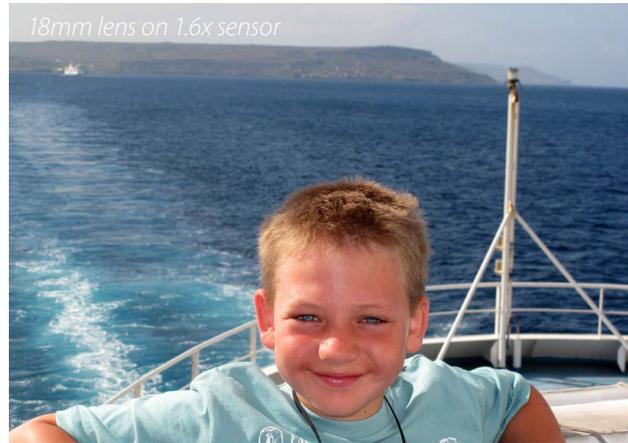
- What are you shooting
- What light levels are you shooting in
- Where are you shooting
- What are the backgrounds like
- How far away are you from your subject
- Are you using available light or flash

Like most areas of photography we need to think about what we are doing and what we want to achieve before we start shooting, so we can make the right equipment selection to get the required results.

## How what we shoot affects our lens selection

What we are shooting will make the biggest difference; children playing will require a very different lens to an intimate portrait of a head of a young baby. A group of adults at a function will be very different to shooting a single person as a formal portrait.

The subject is going to make a very big difference to the lens that we use. If we want very close head or head and shoulders shots then slightly longer lenses will work better. Generally 60mm through to 135mm work best for this type of



## Lens selection



*Shot with a 24mm lens*

shot, especially if it is a formal or casual portrait. We can use longer lenses but this will mean that we are quite a distance away and can therefore lose the rapport that we will have with the subject closer up.

The lens selection might also be influenced by the need to shoot in confined spaces where it is not possible to get far enough back for all lenses to be used.

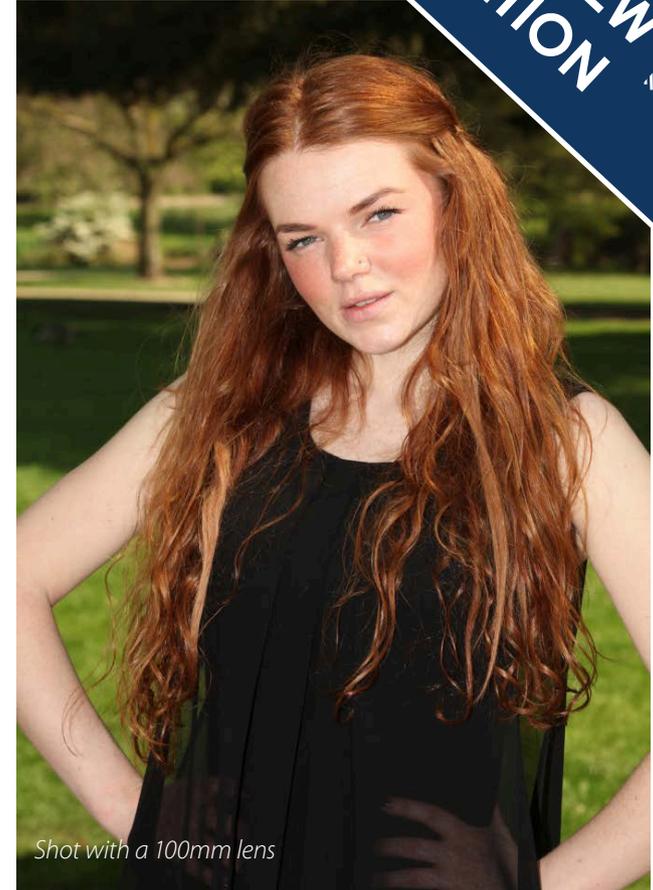


*Shot with a 50mm lens*

If we want to get more of the subject in then it might be necessary to use slightly wider lenses especially if working in a more restrictive space.

This particularly applies when we start to shoot couples or small groups. The problem with working with lenses wider than about 35mm is that they do not give such a flattering effect to the person being photographed.

They will also get more background in and this



*Shot with a 100mm lens*

can be a problem in some locations. As the lenses get wider there is little or no hope of producing enough background blur to lose the background detail.

Avoid lenses wider than 28mm if at all possible, they make facial features and bodies distort and can result in very unflattering images.

## Coping with different light levels

Often the very best portrait shots are those taken outside or in very good light levels where flash has been used simply to fill in the shadows.

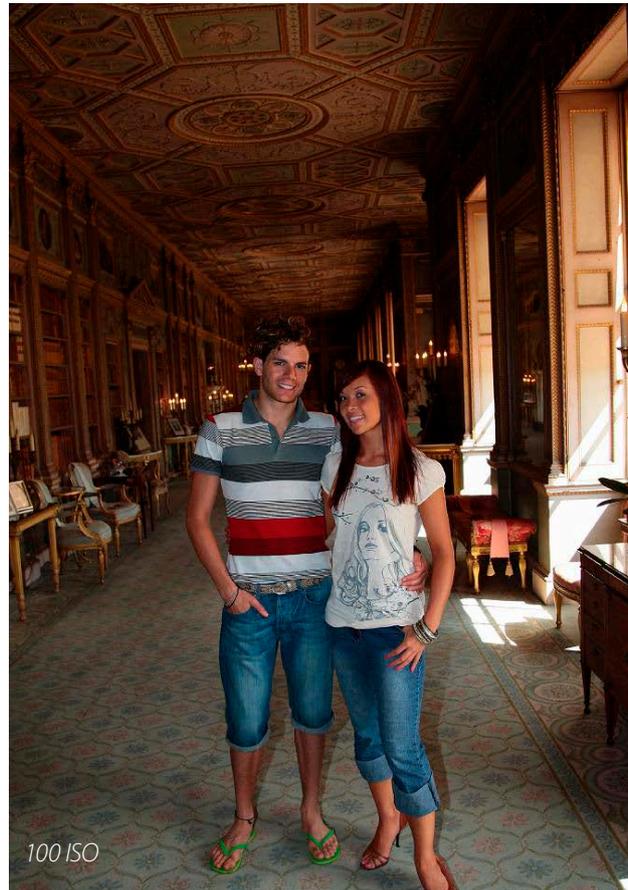
However, that's not when the majority of family shots are taken. All too often we are shooting at functions, where the lighting may be far from ideal and we may have very little control over anything.

As the light levels drop we generally start to use flash more for the lighting. However the best images are those where we still have some ambient light in the image and so we get a natural looking background.

This can be achieved by shooting at higher ISO settings. Most cameras today give excellent quality up to about 3200 ISO. We can also use lenses that offer wider apertures and therefore make it easier to shoot in lowlight. This is where prime lenses often offer a big advantage over the zoom lenses that are so often used today. The benefit given by using the higher ISO settings is shown in the two images to the right.

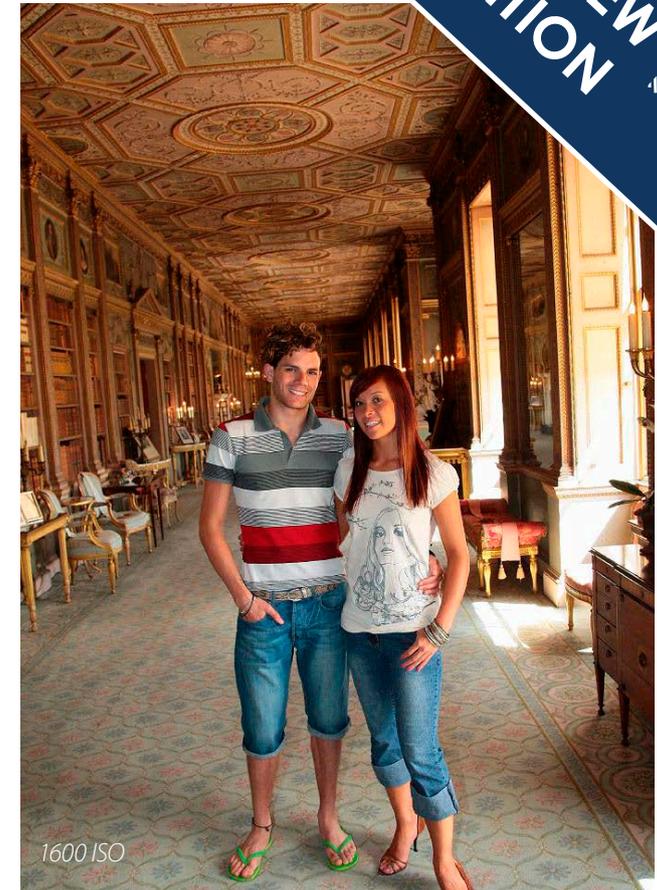
The other thing to think about is the focal length of the lenses, if we are shooting groups this is where the lenses between about 24mm and 50mm come into their own as they are easier to hold steady.

Lenses to avoid are those with the longer focal lengths, 135mm and above. These become much harder to hold steady and we cannot always get safe handholding speeds.



This is due to the low light that we are shooting in and the relatively poor widest apertures that the lenses offer, unless using the professional L series lenses.

The table to the right shows the normal minimum handholding speeds for the normal focal lengths we use for shooting portraits.



### Handholding Speeds

24mm	1/30th
50mm	1/60th
60mm	1/60th
85mm	1/125th
100mm	1/125th
135mm	1/150th
150mm	1/150th

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