

The “dog days” of summer are upon us now, which calls to mind taking pictures of our pets. I know I enjoy pictures of Catbert (our cat), and hear customers often talking about their pets. In fact, over 15% of all pictures taken in the U.S. are of pets. Taking pictures of animals, large or small, is just another dimension of portraiture. Tips on shooting one type of subject helps you shoot them all.

For natural looking pet portraits, try to get the lens level with the animal’s eyes. Avoid shooting downward while standing. Your knees were hinged for bending exclusively for taking pictures; so don’t let those joints stiffen up. If your animal, say a dog, is lying asleep, lie down next to him or her and then take the picture.

Try to avoid wide-angle lenses. The curvature of field exhibited by these optics often make facial or body features appear distorted. Also avoid very long telephotos, as these lenses tend to flatten out the perspective. Usually lenses or portions of zooms from 85mm - 110mm (in terms of 35mm cameras) supply a natural perspective for portraiture.

Lighting is very important in portraiture. One popular problem is “red-eye”. I’ll assume you’ve seen pictures of people with glowing red eyeballs. A camera with a built-in flash took almost all of these snapshots. The problem causing redeye is the reflection of the blood vessels in the back of the eye onto the film. This effect was unknown until Kodak introduced 110 cameras with the flash located closer to the lens than ever before. Because the flash is so close to the lens, and the angle of incidence is equal to the angle of reflection (remember that from Jr. High?), red-eye is the price we pay for the convenience of very small cameras.

Let’s digress for a moment and spend time on red-eye. As cited, redeye is a photographed reflection. Think back several years, when cameras used flashguns that increased the distance between the bulb to the lens. Never a problem with red-eye, was there?

So, one way to eliminate red-eye is to buy big, bulky cameras with big, bulky flashguns. There are several ways to reduce redeye, and these reduction methods are commonly built into compact 35mm and Advanced Photo System cameras.

Back to lighting. A basic rule is that just because there is a lot of ambient light, the light is good for photography. Poppycock! Don’t settle for the light that happens to be there – learn to control it. When taking pet pictures your movement tends to be followed by your pet (unless your cat doesn’t happen to want to follow your movements at the moment). If you move so that the light is coming from behind you instead of the animal, you are controlling the light. It’s not godlike control, but it’s a step in the right direction.

Inexpensive ways to help with lighting control is by using a reflector to force stray light back onto the subject. This gives the impression that a light source is

located where the reflector is. Reflectors can be cloth, cardboard, aluminum foil, or whatever is handy. The idea is to add light coming from a different direction to add or subtract shadows.

Oh boy, another digression. We live in at least a 3 dimensional world. Everything we see has some definable shape, with very few things perfectly flat and parallel to ourselves. When we read a page or look at a photograph or projected slide, we are viewing something flat. (If a book or page were not flat, our eyes would have difficulty holding a focus, allowing us to read without much of a workout for our eyes.) Photographic lighting allows the representation of dimensionality on a plane surface. The mechanisms that allow this are contrast, shading, depth of field, and perspective. Success in using these mechanisms is the understanding and control of lighting!

Pretend you are in a darkened room, holding a flashlight aimed at your pet. This is very contrasty lighting, with no visible shadows. (Substitute a flash or the sun for your flashlight, and the effect becomes magnified.) Take a second flashlight and put it down on the floor, a table, etc. at a 90 degree angle from your pet and look at him or her. You have gained 3 dimensionality! You can see shadows and highlights in the fur, plumage, or what have you. By moving the location of the second flashlight you can change the personality of the animal. By changing your perspective, you can alter the characteristics of your pet.

These basic fundamentals work in ANY lighting circumstance. In daylight, a reflector or small flash can simulate the second flashlight. You can introduce additional light sources and vary their intensities for greater effects. The more you have, the larger your choice of apertures and shutter speeds, so you have control of depth of field (as described last month).

A word about black animals. In order to get detail on the animal's fur, feathers, etc., you must introduce a second or third light source. This source will give reflections from the angle the camera sees, leaving shadows elsewhere; giving texture to the animal's exterior. Your animal will now have a shape, instead of an amorphous black blob.

In other news, our Nikon fieldtrip will be to the Renaissance Fair on Sunday, September 17. Details will be sent to you as available.

Polaroid and Olympus have announced a new jointly created product: a digital camera that houses Polaroid film for instant prints as well as digital files. The product should be available later this year for \$799.95. Kodak is allocating their new Preview camera, using advanced photo system film, with a digital back allowing you to see the picture you've just shot, and letting you determine how many prints you want initially printed of that shot (including none).

Believe it or not, later this month photo holiday cards become available. The earlier you order the less expensive they are.

Meade has introduced 2 new tabletop telescopes at \$299 - \$349 that are computerized and accept cameras for astrophotography.

Pentax has begun shipping their new zoom binoculars, which fit in a shirt pocket! Amazing!

PROmaster has begun a new warranty on their lenses. All PROmaster lenses now come with a limited LIFETIME WARRANTY! Not only are they the first brand on the market to do this, they went so far as to offer this warranty retroactive to January 2, 2000! What incredible value.

I'm pleased that several of you are becoming regular correspondents over the net. I'm getting e-mail with both comments and questions. Don't be bashful; give me feedback. If you've had a good or bad experience in either of our stores, we need to hear about it! Sometimes the impersonal use of e-mail allows people to tell me something they wouldn't talk about in person. If we don't know about a problem, we can't fix it. If you feel you don't know me well enough, or have a difficulty with me, you can certainly e-mail Lynne.

Several of our Madison customers have met Tiana, our summer intern from R.I.T. We've had the privilege of learning from her as she has from us. She's on her way back to school now, and we wish her well. Susan in our Summit store plans to continue with her schooling in photojournalism in the fall, and will be with us part time.

Happy shooting, and I'll start writing September's newsletter as soon as our vacation in Phoenix is over.

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