



**A Guide to Photography
for Those Who Should Have Left the
Lens Cap On**

By Mitch Chandran

“Let the truth be told, but not here.”

Articles in this ebook were written between 2021 and 2022.
Why they were written, I’ll never know.



COVER PHOTO: Man packaging squid by hand, Ulleoung-Do Island, South Korea, 2015
BACK COVER PHOTO: “Sheriff” of Old Tuscon, Arizona, 2024

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	Page 1
Capturing the Moment: A Guide for the Aspiring Eye	Page 2
Beyond the Shutter: Finding Your Digital Voice	Page 3
Composing a scene Using the Rule of Thirds	Page 4
Follow The Leading Lines	Page 6
Simplification, it's that Simple	Page 7
Leaving Space	Page 8
The Delicate Grandeur of Black & White	Page 11
Vertical or Horizontal, That is the Question	Page 13
Tip for Effective Portraiture	Page 15

Introduction

So you want to be a photographer, or at the very least, impersonate one. Well, you're in the right place, unless I'm in the wrong place, which means neither one of us will get anything out of this. But, life is short and since you're here anyway, let's continue.

Photography is a wonderful hobby. It's the only profession where you can "shoot" your friends and "frame" your wife without spending twenty years behind bars. But before you start snapping away like a turtle with a grudge, you have to understand the basics. And believe me, if you understand them, you're doing better than I am.

The Big Picture (Through a Cracked Lens)

The Art of Pointing:

Photography is the only profession where you can point your finger at someone and be called an artist instead of "rude." It's the art of looking at something perfectly ordinary until it becomes something perfectly unrecognizable.

The Exposure Triangle:

You've got Aperture, Shutter Speed, and ISO. It's called a triangle because no matter which side you're on, you're always wrong.

Aperture:

This controls "Depth of Field." A shallow depth of field means the background is blurry, which is exactly how I see the world without my glasses.

Shutter Speed:

This determines if your subject looks like a person or a smear of grey paint. If it's the latter, just tell them it's "Impressionism" and double the price.

ISO:

This adds "grain" to your photo. In my day, we called grain "dirt," but today people pay extra for it.

Composition:

we'll talk about all that in this book.

The Final Result:

A photograph is a secret about a secret. The more it tells you, the less you know. And if the photo is really bad, just convert it to Black and White. It won't make it a better picture, but it'll make people think you're depressed, and they'll be too polite to criticize it.

Now with all this nonsense out of the way, let's get into it.

Capturing the Moment: A Guide for the Aspiring Eye

Welcome to the world of photography. Whether you are holding a high-end DSLR or the smartphone that lives in your pocket, you have just stepped into a pursuit that is equal parts technical precision and soul-stirring art. It's easy to feel overwhelmed by the jargon—aperture, ISO, focal length—but at its core, photography is simply the act of chasing light and freezing time. To help you move from “taking snapshots” to “making photographs,” here are the foundational pillars every amateur should embrace:

1. Master the “Exposure Triangle”

Before you worry about expensive lenses, understand how your camera sees the world. Your image is controlled by three variables that work in a constant dance:

Aperture: Controls depth of field (that blurry background look).

Shutter Speed: Controls how motion is captured (crisp freezes or artistic blurs).

ISO: Controls the sensor’s sensitivity to light.

Pro Tip: Don’t be afraid of “Manual Mode,” but don’t feel guilty using “Aperture Priority” either. It’s a great middle ground for learning how depth affects your story.

2. Composition Over Gear

A \$5,000 camera cannot fix a boring composition. Start by training your eye using the Rule of Thirds: imagine your frame is divided by two horizontal and two vertical lines. Place your subject at the intersections of these lines rather than dead-center to create more tension and interest.

3. Seek the “Golden Hour” or “The Blue Hour”

Light is your raw material. The harsh midday sun creates deep, unflattering shadows. Aim to shoot during the Golden Hour—the hour after sunrise or before sunset. The light is softer, warmer, and more directional, making almost any subject look professional.

4. The Best Camera is the One You Have

Many beginners fall into the trap of “Gear Acquisition Syndrome.” They believe a better body or a sharper lens will unlock their creativity. In reality, limitations breed innovation. Use your current gear until you can explain exactly why it is holding you back.

Moving Forward

Photography is a marathon, not a sprint. You will take thousands of “bad” photos before you hit your stride, and that is perfectly okay. Every blurry shot or overexposed sky is a lesson in disguise. The goal isn’t to be perfect; it’s to develop a perspective that is uniquely yours. So, grab your camera, get low, change your angle, and start seeing the world through the lens.

The Big Exposure, or, Why I’m Always in the Dark.

The most important thing in photography isn't the camera, the lens, or even having a subject who isn't trying to sue you? It's a time of day called “The Golden Hour.”

Beyond the Shutter: Finding Your Digital Voice



Cathedral Gorge State Park, Nevada

Let's be real: we live in an era where everyone is a "photographer" by default. We carry high-powered sensors in our pockets and document our lunch with the dedication of a war correspondent. But there is a profound difference between documenting an existence and capturing a vision. If you're here, it's because you want to move past the accidental "good shot" and start creating images with intention.

Photography isn't just about gear; it's about a shift in perception. It's the ability to find the extraordinary in the mundane. Here is how you bridge that gap.

The Three Pillars of Intentionality

The Geometry of the Frame: Stop looking only at your subject. Start looking at the edges of your frame. What is "bleeding" out? What distracting telephone pole is growing out of your subject's head? Mastering composition is more about guiding the viewer's eye exactly where you want it to go.

The Physics of Light: Light is not just a tool to make things visible; it is the mood itself. Instead of shooting with the sun at your back, try backlighting your subject to create a glow, or use

side-lighting to reveal texture and drama. Amateur photos are lit; professional photos are sculpted.

The Power of Perspective: Most amateurs shoot from eye level because it's convenient. To create something striking, you have to move around. Get on the ground. Climb a ladder. Shoot through a gap in the leaves. A change in physical height often results in a change in emotional depth.

A Note on the "Gear Trap"

It's tempting to believe that a better sensor will result in better art. It won't. A camera is a tool, much like a hammer—a more expensive hammer doesn't make you a master carpenter. Your most valuable asset isn't your lens; it's your patience and your curiosity.

The Golden Rule: If you can't tell a compelling story with your phone or a basic kit lens, a \$3,000 setup will only help you take high-resolution versions of boring photos.

Your Path Forward

The "delete" button is your best friend. Be your own toughest critic, but don't let it paralyze you. The goal for your first 10,000 photos is simply to learn how your camera reacts to the world. Once the technical becomes second nature, the art can finally begin.

Composing A Scene Using the Rule of Thirds

Any time we have family visit us, or we're out vacationing or even when we go somewhere local for an event or happening, chances are the camera comes out at some point to capture these moments. With the great majority of us, it's the camera capability built into our smartphone we trust preserving these precious memories with.

Today's smartphone cameras are very powerful and able to capture high-resolution images which can be kept stored in our phones, available for emailing or texting to others, uploaded to social media or downloaded to our computers.

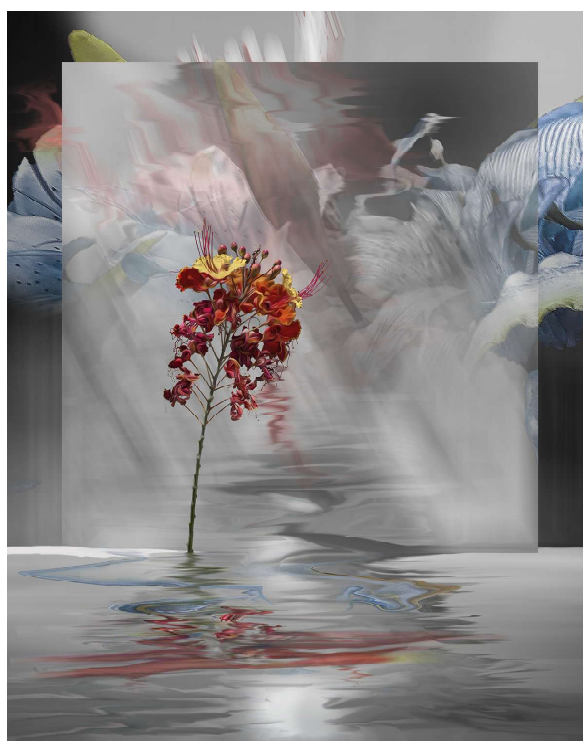
That's right, any of us can now take our smartphone photo albums everywhere we go and at a moment's notice pull it out and showcase our saved memories to anyone exhibiting the slightest interest in seeing the 82 pictures of our grandchild using the potty-trainer for the first time. Does the fun ever stop?

Smartphone cameras were designed to be point and shoot applications which we can use at a moment's notice. There is no setup required. No thought has to be given to aperture, speed or International Organization for Standardization (ISO is the rating of film for analog cameras or a camera's sensitivity to light in digital cameras).

With analog or digital cameras, you have to find the right relationship between ISO, aperture and speed to get a proper exposure in a manual setup. Or you could set the camera on automatic and let it decide what it thinks a proper exposure should be, which pretty much makes it a point and shoot. Most all smartphone cameras provide an option for limited manual settings, but not at the same level as an analog or digital camera.

You may not have much control over your smartphone camera's settings, but you have full control over the way you point your camera at your subject.

One of the best and easiest ways to take creative control and get more exciting pictures with your camera is from the perspective of composition.



Bird of Paradise - 2017



Catsup water tower in Collinsville, Illinois - 2013

anywhere in the picture and we have to stick to that.

I don't know why placing the subject in the middle is such a natural thing to do, but it is. Probably because we see it all the time in films and TV shows, or at least that would be my guess.

The rule of thirds, in its simplest term is: position your subject anywhere in the picture except the middle. Think tic-tac-toe.

Imagine the screen with the four tic-tac-toe grid lines. Place your subject on or near where the lines intersect (four points to choose from) before you click the shutter. That's it. You'll be amazed how much more interesting your pictures will be with this technique.

If you research “compositional techniques for photography,” you will find tens of dozens of rules to follow. So many, in fact, that if you were to try to follow all of them, you'd end up grabbing that bottle of bourbon out of the cabinet, or in my case out of the vase after removing the flowers.

For me, I follow three basic compositional rules most of the time when taking pictures – at least when I think any one of them are needed. I do use other rules occasionally when applicable but mostly I follow three. Again the scene which I intend to take a picture of dictates what, if any, rule I'll use for composition.

One common compositional rule that is very easy to remember and use, is “The Rule of Thirds.” When used, this one rule will make dramatic improvements to your pictures at least 75 percent of the time. I say that because I'm the one writing this thing.

We are somehow hardwired to always place our subject into the center of the screen. It's so common place that it makes for a boring picture most of the time. Especially when it comes to people, animals, objects, etc. Except spouses – they look good positioned

Follow The Leading Lines



Once Upon a Time - 2018

Today's smartphone cameras can deliver extremely high quality images but leaves you little to no control over its settings. You may not have, or even want, control over your camera settings and realistically, if you think about good composition when pointing your camera at a subject, you can achieve great pictures that even Cousin Eddie would put his glass down for to take a closer look.

A good composition can turn the blandest subject into a near masterpiece. I say "near" because I'm not sure how to quantify the word "masterpiece" since it really is a subjective term. The one thing I do know is, I haven't yet taken a picture that qualifies as a masterpiece. I know this because my wife says so.

Composition is nothing more than arranging elements in a scene for a pleasing result when viewing your picture. It's one way to guide your viewer's eyes to the most important element in your picture.

Last time, my article was about using the "rule of thirds" as a compositional technique for your pictures. This time, I'll continue elaborating on what I consider another effective compositional technique and an easy one you can use as well called "Leading Lines."

Leading lines is a fundamental technique in photography to use, not only to make your picture more interesting, but also help guide the viewer's eyes to the main subject and give it more depth. A leading line helps the viewer navigate through different elements and usually starts at the bottom of the picture and guides the eye upward, or vertically, to the subject. But leading lines can also be found as horizontal, diagonal or even converging elements in a picture and even be the primary subject of your picture.

These lines can be manmade such as a road leading to a building, rail tracks leading to a train or a stairway leading to people on top or as simple as a wake behind a moving boat. Don't discount nature either. There are leading lines in the majority of landscapes we see but may not notice right away, such as a stream with mountains in the background, a leading edge of a sand dune or even rows of trees on either side of a road. Lines also have a tendency to link elements in a picture.



Zion National Park - 2020

Simplification, it's that Simple



Once Upon a Time - 2018

So far, I've provided two compositional tips that are guaranteed to improve your photos when you use them – Rule of Thirds and Leading Lines. These are valuable tips, especially if you're using your smartphone camera.

You may not have, or not want, control over your smartphone camera's settings but you should take control over how you point your device to record a picture because that can make the difference between a snapshot or a good image. Of course, according to my wife, I wouldn't know a good image if it fell from the sky and hit me on the head, but I'll continue anyway.

In this article, I'm going to give you a third compositional tip that I use from time to time and it will help you too improve the pictures you take. I guarantee it, and if you're not satisfied, simply return this information and we'll exchange it for other information of equal value – most likely on Secrets of Effective Pangolin Breeding.

This technique is simple. Actually, that's what it is, it's called "Simplification."

Some of the most memorable and famous pictures are images that were simple. They're the kind of images where you'd say "I could have done that."

When I say simplification, I'm referring to a picture [composition] void of unnecessary clutter or other distractors that take the eyes away from the subject. Simply put, this means reducing the amount of unnecessary junk within your composition so you are accentuating your subject. You can have other elements within the composition so long as they don't overpower the subject.

Think of this idea in terms of music. If you've ever heard Frank Sinatra's songs, his voice is always dominant and the music only adds ambiance and support. The music is not overbearing and allows you to concentrate on his lyrics and the story he is communicating.

Contrast that to a heavy metal band, where every instrument is blasting and you're ears are bouncing back and forth between the vocals (or screaming), guitars, bass, drums and who knows what else.

It's the same with photography. A photo communicates a story and if you have a lot of clutter in your composition, it simply becomes noise competing with the subject, thus, it's much harder to discern what that story is.

As an example, I was in a forest during the fall time one year enjoying the changing colors of the leaves. Sure, I could have taken a wide-angle picture of all the trees holding up a sea of colored leaves and this composition would give you a story conveying how pretty nature is during autumn. But since this is a pretty common composition, and story, why not think simplification? So I moved in on a selected tree I

found bearing a sample of the colored leaves and captured the detail of a few leaves versus a whole forest. This gives the viewer a more intimate perspective of the beauty of autumn and also how delicate these leaves are during this season while changing color.

Another way of thinking about simplification is – before you take a picture, and assuming you don't do any post-processing on your pictures, think about what you can leave out of your composition to make your subject stronger before you click the shutter. You may have to move or zoom in to do that. Or, if you have a camera that lets you adjust the aperture, you can open it up to blur out the background as you focus on your subject and that can be just as effective in alleviating clutter.

Leonardo da Vinci once said “Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.” I didn't hear him say that. I read that he said it and if I read it, it must be true.



Main and Fremont, Las Vegas, Nevada - 2019

Leaving Space



Moonrise over Amargosa Mountain range, Death Valley, California - 2019

In my first article of simple camera tips for better pictures, I mentioned there are three compositional tips I follow most of the time when I'm using my camera. As it turns out, the poor grades I received in mathematics (and apparently, I didn't fare much better in spelling either) during my productive seven year high school academic career has come back to haunt me. There are actually four tips I try to use when I'm taking pictures. Now, I realize there isn't much difference between the numbers 3 and 4, unless it's a number in the millions owed to the IRS.

So far, I've provided three composition tips that are guaranteed to improve your photos when you use them – Rule of Thirds, Leading Lines and Simplicity. These are valuable tips, especially if you're using your smartphone camera.

This fourth, and final tip, can be just as dramatic for your photos if the situation arises for you to use it. It's called leaving space.

I mention “final” because even though there are other compositional rules you can follow, these four tips are most used and also these four tips have helped me achieve taking pictures that are more visually appealing than any other tip out there.

This [leaving space] is one tip I always have in mind when I'm out photographing, especially when I'm shooting landscapes. You don't always have to use it, but rule it out first before clicking the shutter because in most cases, this is a very effective compositional tip to use and will help you make some outstanding pictures.

Every scene you plan to photograph is not a candidate for every tip I offer. Certain tips are useful in certain situations. The idea is to be cognizant of these tips and rule them out if not applicable to the scene you are shooting. But in most cases, you'll find applicability of one of these tips most of the time and that's how you can improve your pictures. These tips are simple to use so try to take advantage of them.

The idea of leaving space is you don't always have to fill the camera frame up with something. Some photographers call it negative space but the term “leaving space” is a much simpler idea to keep in mind.

Leaving space in your picture allows the viewers' eyes to relax without working hard scanning the details of all the elements in an image.

Most people don't think about this but in landscape photography especially, what is in the sky is just as important as what is on the ground. Seasoned photographers will spend the extra effort to shoot landscapes in either early morning or late afternoon just to capture the ambiance, or diffused light, the sky offers during this time. Midday sun is very harsh and, except in certain circumstances, make for a very harsh photograph to look at. Longer shadows are by-products created by a lower sun and/or the

orange glow in the clouds can be captured during these particular hours. These two times are called the golden hours and specifically refers to just after sunrise and just before sunset.

Leaving space doesn't mean you have to have empty space in your picture – although in certain situations that can be desirable – it can mean more sky in your picture or blander looking trees leading up to a waterfall. This space in your image is an area where the eyes won't spend much time on allowing them to concentrate more on the subject at hand.

So lastly, remember these four composition tips the next time you use your smartphone or regular camera: Rule of Thirds, Leading Lines, Simplicity and Leaving Space.



Dawn, Zabriskie Point, Death Valley, California - 2019

Now, they tell me this camera has an 'automatic focus.' Well, I've got an automatic focus too - the moment a bill collector knocks on my door, I automatically focus on the nearest exit.

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. Personally, I'd rather have the thousand words. At least you can use them to tell the photographer to go jump in a lake.

Then there's my nextdoor neighbor. He thinks he's a great photographer because he has a camera with a 'self-timer.' I told him he should use it to time how long it takes him to realize he's not a great photographer.

The Delicate Grandeur of Black & White

Black and White (also known as monochrome) pictures can be just as, or possibly even more, stunning to look at versus a richly saturated color image.

This is an odd statement to make considering most everything we see today is produced explicitly to get our attention by incorporating vivid colors – including the camera capabilities within your smartphone.

So why would anyone even want to convert a color picture into a black and white picture



Before the storm, Southern Illinois - 2014



Three Sisters, Caesars Casino, Las Vegas, Nevada - 2017

these days? It's easy to do - even in your smartphone with a couple of clicks – but again, why? The short answer is most of the time you wouldn't. So why am I even writing about this?

Because the delicate grandeur of a nice black and white picture can oftentimes more effectively communicate a story to the viewer as opposed to an image with vivid colors dominating and detracting from the conversation, sort of speak. This is not true of every picture you take. As a matter of fact, this is not true for most pictures you take. But you might have that one picture that would speak volumes if it were converted to black and white.

I produce more color images than monochrome, especially for my artwork, but I still have a great passion for producing black and white images because of its ability to better communicate a story by forcing the viewer to really see the subject(s) instead of the colors.

The magic with Black and white photography is its ability to remove the distractions of color and allow the viewer to focus on the important elements of the image. Textures and shapes become more prominent. The subject becomes more the center of attention.

So what is a good candidate for a black and white picture? Generally, a subject or scene with few or bland colors anyway might be a good candidate. Subjects with texture, shapes or patterns could qualify. With the color gone, more attention can be given to the subject and even emphasis emotion and action.

Today's smartphone cameras have some photo editing capability in it. You can take a picture you think might be a good candidate for monochrome, change it in your camera (or desktop) and play with the contrast and luminosity (light) settings to help bring out subtle textures and lights you previously didn't notice.

Again, not every picture is a candidate to be a black and white image. But when it is,



When we were young, Gwang-Ju, South Korea - 1983



I once took a photograph of a group of people who weren't there. It turned out beautifully, but I had the darndest time getting them to sign the release forms.

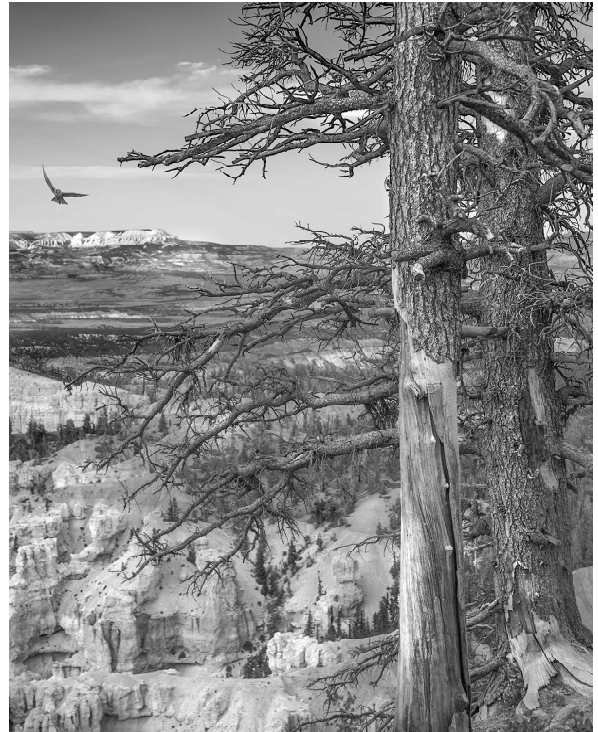
Vertical or Horizontal, That is the Question

The series of articles I've been writing regarding photography tips have been mostly targeted to readers using smartphone cameras as their primary device to capture and show pictures with.

Before taking a picture, a decision whether to hold your smartphone camera vertically or horizontally is most likely not something you give much thought too, much less for me to write about. After all, your objective may be to just capture a moment. But thinking about camera orientation, even for a second, can make a difference between a rushed snapshot and an interesting picture that others would enjoy seeing.

It may seem like a senseless question to ask yourself before taking a picture, but believe me, it's not. I ask myself senseless questions all the time. I just don't answer myself anymore – least not since Monday.

Horizontal pictures are a much more common, and natural, orientation to take than vertical ones. First, it's more convenient to hold a smartphone camera horizontally than it is to expend the extra energy and turn it vertically. That's because most hand-held cameras were, and still are, designed to take pictures horizontally. Secondly, when we hold a camera vertically, we lose a lot of the scene, or space, on the sides.



Bryce Canyon National Park, Utah - 2019



Par for the course - 2017

Horizontal images convey a sense of large places, or, can work well for small subjects in a large area. This can convey a sense of space. If you have subjects in both the foreground and background, horizontal also works well. This is called layered composition. These are ideas to consider when deciding what orientation to use before taking a picture.

Vertical pictures are best when your subject is in a vertical position – or is it? This may not always be the case. Sometimes

taking a horizontal picture of a vertical subject can create a sense of space or luxury. As an example, a vertical side shot of someone sitting on a couch with their feet up on a coffee table may not include their legs in the scene versus taking a horizontal side shot of the same person which includes their legs and can also show how relaxed the person is with the extra space in the image.

There are pros and cons to everything in life including this subject – as trivial as it may seem. So what is best?

Since I'm writing this more for smartphone camera users, here is the tip. I previously mentioned that it is much more convenient to hold the smartphone horizontally to take a picture – this is true. But consider, if you use your smartphone as a repository to store and show your pictures to other people, it is ergonomically easier to pass your smartphone to someone in a vertical position, making horizontal pictures much smaller. Something to think about is take your pictures vertically when you can. It's easier for the viewer to hold the smartphone vertically and it gives them the full display to see the image. You can also arrange your images in your smartphone gallery as a group of vertical and another group of horizontals. This avoids the person viewing your pictures from turning their wrist multiple times, giving them a better viewing experience.

Next month, I'll provide tips on how to improve taking portrait shots with your smartphone of people and animals - or if you're among the "special" people, a proud-to-show snap from your extraterrestrial encounter.



Gardner and attendant, Ulleung-Do Island, South Korea - 2015

Step into the light—no, further. Keep going until you're in the next county. There, that's perfect. Now, look into the lens and try to look like you aren't thinking about your mortgage. It's a tall order, I know, but if the picture comes out, we'll both be surprised. And if it doesn't, well, we'll both be relieved!

Tips for Effective Portraiture



Jojo - 2021

Now that the weather is pleasant, and I'm assuming it is because I wrote this in January, it's time to get out the smartphone camera and take some candid shots of family and friends. With good weather comes social gatherings unless we are still in social distancing, in which case, disregard this paragraph.

I admit, I'm probably the last person on earth to provide tips for better portraiture as I do not take many people pictures. It's not that I don't like people, it's just I haven't had many opportunities to do so and the ones I have taken, I mostly turned into artwork. I do take a lot of snaps of family, friends and even some close strangers with my smartphone. Nonetheless, the tips I'm presenting for taking better portraits are just as effective as opposed to someone who knows what they're doing.

People have stories to tell and they tell it pretty good through their facial expressions and body language – especially their eyes. Eyes are considered the windows to the soul. If you don't believe me, say something derogatory to your spouse then watch his or her eyes – you'll get a glimpse into their soul real quick. With that being said, the first – I say – the first thing to remember is always focus on the eyes. You can use your “touch to focus” feature on your smartphone to do that.

The preferred angle to be in is to be eye-level with the person you are taking a picture of. Pointing down on a person is usually considered bad form. Pointing up a little is preferred if you are trying for a different angle. This can make them appear taller. To photograph babies, you either have to get down to their level, or else wait for them to grow up to your level.

Backgrounds are usually not as important in portrait photography as they become distractors. Find a plain background or one with subtle patterns like a wall or fence if possible. This will help make your subject stand out more. If you are out in an area that you want to include the background, try selective focusing to blur the background a bit. You can also consider using a natural or manmade feature such as a frame to place the person in like a doorway, trellis or something to make the picture more interesting. You can also think about giving the subject a prop to hold that will help express their personality more.

Photographers who use a camera body and lens kit will use longer focal length lenses for taking portraits. The most popular is around 80 - 85mm because this helps keep the perspective intact. Smartphones are notorious for distortion so consider zooming in 1 – 2 times to alleviate this.

Use your phone's gridlines to help you keep the picture straight and consider incorporating compositional tips like rule of thirds, leading lines, simplicity and space to make it a more interesting picture.

