

Lens Talk:

The Portrait Lens
(Talk #3)

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New Westminster Photography Club
Keith Griffiths

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The 'Portrait' Lens

You may have heard the term before, but just what is a portrait lens?

I may not know either but here is my rendition.

I will refer to 35mm camera equipment for this expose. Portrait lenses in this format are generally between 85mm and 135mm long. A typical 80-200mm zoom works well but can be heavy for the photographer and intimidating for the model, so prime lenses are often used.

Let's start with a little experiment. Pick a partner to work with or if that isn't going to happen, get a mirror. Now sit across a table from your partner and look at your partner with both eyes open. Now look at the details, like the fact that you can see both ears. Now close one eye and check the ears again. Notice that you now see less of the ears than with both eyes open. Now there is also a little subtlety that is hard to place, but by seeing 'around' your partner's face when you have both eyes open, your brain puts the two pictures together into one vision. With one eye open and one closed, you lose the wrapped view which your brain interprets as the person being wider, hence the 10 pounds that the camera adds.

Okay, now back away from the table to say 10' or 12' away from your partner. (that would be 6' from your mirror) Remember that you are still looking at your partner with one eye. You can now see your partner's ears more like you could when closer when you had stereo vision, but your partner is small and far away. So what can we do about that? Use a longer lens.

Pick up your camera now, with a standard 50mm lens. Fill the frame with your partner's face. Take a photograph. Now change lenses to something near 100mm and back up again. Reframe your partner again to fill the frame with their face and take another photograph.

If you remember my last article on normal lenses, I touched on the topic of the compression of perspective that you get with telephoto lenses. This compression also helps out to some degree with portrait lenses.

If you compare these two photos that you have just taken, I hope you will be able to see several differences. The one from the longer lens will have a more natural view of your subject's ears, a smaller nose and a loss of weight. If any of these features are undesirable, you are welcome to go back to a shorter lens and add pounds and big noses to your friends.

If you are a glut for punishment and don't want to try this stuff out for yourself, I have included 4 self portraits.



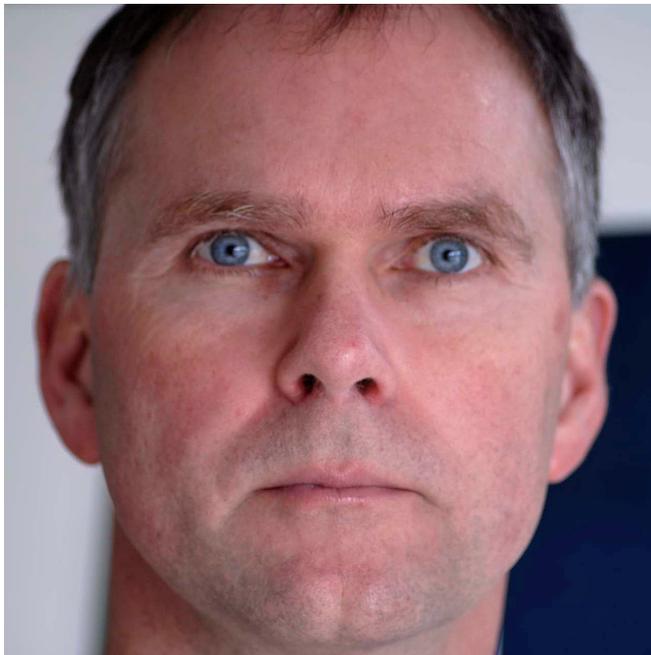
This was taken with a 24mm lens at a distance of about 15". Note the exaggerated nose and tiny ears. Try some shots of your Mother-in-law with a lens like this and she won't come visiting very often unless she has a pretty good sense of humour.



This was taken with a 50mm lens at about 4' distance. A better perspective on the nose and a more 'normal' view of ears.



This was done with an 85mm lens at about 6 feet away. There is not a huge difference from the 50mm version but the face has a slightly slimmer appearance with a better view of the ears.



This one was taken with a zoom lens set to 135mm and shot at a distance of about 8' away. I know it would be a better comparison if I was 10' away but I ran into the fire place. This view says I can get away with a few more cookies yet, but if you believe the first view I had better join a gym and the hair club for men.

Next 'lens talk' will be DSLR vs. film.

Keith Griffiths