Portrait Posing Guide for Beginners

Prompts to say out loud, simple lighting setups, and worked examples you can copy at your next session. Print it, or keep it open on your phone.

> **The one rule:** direct with actions, not positions. “Tilt your chin 10 degrees” makes people stiff; “Look at me like I just told a bad joke” gives you a real face. Every prompt below is written to be said out loud.

1. Posing fundamentals (check these on every frame)

Check	What to look for	Quick fix to say
Chin and jaw	Double chin or soft jawline	“Push your forehead toward me, then drop your chin a little.”
Shoulders	Square to camera looks wide and stiff	“Turn your body toward the window, then just your face back to me.”
Hands	Flat palms, fists, or hidden hands	“Touch your collar like you’re fixing it.” Show the side of the hand.
Weight	Both feet planted, looks rigid	“Put all your weight on your back foot.”
Arms	Pressed to the body, arms look wider	“Give me a little gap between your arm and waist.”
Eyes	Squinting or a blank stare	“Close your eyes, breathe out, open them on three.”

2. Prompts that create natural expressions

Mood you want	Prompt	Why it works
Genuine smile	“Tell me the worst haircut you ever had.”	People smile while remembering, not while posing.
Soft, calm	“Look down at your hands, then slowly back up to me.”	The movement relaxes the face; shoot as the eyes arrive.
Confident	“Look past me like you’re waiting for someone late.”	A purpose for the gaze removes self-consciousness.
Laughing	“Fake the loudest laugh you can.”	Fake laughter turns into a real one within two seconds.
Couples	“Whisper what you want for dinner in their ear.”	Closeness and reactions without forced kissing.
Kids	“Don’t you dare smile. Seriously, don’t.”	Kids love breaking a rule; keep shooting.

3. Ten beginner poses, step by step

Pose	How to set it up	Common mistake
Classic three-quarter	Body 45° to camera, face turned back, weight on back foot.	Shoulders still square: turn the feet, not just the torso.
Lean on a wall	Shoulder touches wall, far foot crossed over, hands in pockets (thumbs out).	Leaning the full back flat against the wall.
Seated forward	Sit on the front edge of a chair, elbows on knees, lean toward lens.	Slouching back into the chair.
Walking	Walk slowly toward you, look down, then at the lens on cue.	Walking fast: motion blur and stiff arms.
Over the shoulder	Back toward camera, turn the head over the near shoulder.	Turning too far, straining the neck.
Hand to face	Fingertips lightly at jaw or temple, no pressure.	Pushing the cheek and distorting the face.
Arms crossed (soft)	Cross loosely, hands visible, shoulders down.	Tight, high arms that read as defensive.
Sitting on steps	Stagger legs on different steps, lean on one elbow.	Knees together, pointing straight at lens.
Looking away	Turn the face to the light, eyes off-camera.	Eyes turned so far you see mostly white.
Close headshot	Forehead forward, chin down slightly, shoot from eye level or a touch above.	Shooting from below: chin and nostrils dominate.

4. Lighting tips that make posing easier

Setup	How to do it	Start settings (example)
Window light	Subject 1–2 m from a window, turned 45° toward it. Indirect daylight, not hard sun.	f/2.8, 1/250 s, ISO 400–800
Open shade	Stand just inside shade facing the bright, open area.	f/2.8, 1/500 s, ISO 200
Golden hour backlight	Sun behind the subject, expose for the face.	f/2–2.8, 1/500 s, ISO 100–200; +1 EV
White reflector	Hold below or opposite the light, about 1 m away, to fill shadows.	Same settings; check catchlights
One speedlight + umbrella	Light 45° to the side and slightly above eye level.	f/4, 1/160 s, ISO 100; flash ~1/8 power

Settings are starting points for a full-frame camera with a 50–85 mm lens. Check your histogram and adjust. Keep shutter speed at least 1/(focal length) for handheld shots.

5. Worked examples

These are illustrative scenarios showing how the prompts and setups combine — not records of specific shoots.

Example A — nervous friend, living room, overcast afternoon.
Seat them on a stool 1.5 m from the window, body turned toward the glass. Prompt: “Look down at your hands… now back up to me.” Fire as the eyes lift. Settings: 85 mm, f/2.8, 1/200 s, ISO 800. Fix: shoulders crept up, so ask them to breathe out and let them drop.

Example B — couple at golden hour in a park.
Put the sun behind them. Have them walk toward you holding hands, then stop and whisper dinner plans. Expose for faces (+1 EV) and use a white reflector held low by a helper. Settings: 50 mm, f/2.2, 1/640 s, ISO 200.

Example C — LinkedIn headshot in open shade.
Stand them just inside a building’s shadow facing the bright street. Body 45°, forehead forward, chin down. Prompt: “Think of a coworker you actually like.” Settings: 85 mm, f/4 (both eyes sharp), 1/500 s, ISO 200.

6. Your 20-minute session flow

Time	What to do	Goal
0–3 min	Chat, show one test frame on the back of the camera.	Lower nerves, build trust.
3–8 min	Easy poses: lean on wall, walking, looking away.	Warm-up; don’t expect keepers.
8–15 min	Three-quarter, seated forward, hand to face, with expression prompts.	Your strongest frames.
15–20 min	Close headshots and one ‘wild card’ idea from the subject.	Variety and a personal touch.

7. Pre-shoot checklist

☐ Battery charged and spare card ☐ Face-detect / eye AF on ☐ Lens wiped ☐ Reflector or white card ☐ Three prompts memorised ☐ Location light checked at shoot time ☐ Ask about stray hair and collars before every set

Keep learning: lenssuite.space/guides/natural-light-portraits · lenssuite.space/guides/golden-hour-portraits