

# How to Read a Portfolio

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## Reading a photographer's portfolio is a quick way to learn the most important things about her; her people skills and her technical skills.

How she describes her style and approach should be less important to you than what you actually SEE in her portfolio. A camera captures everything going on in front of the lens, but if you look carefully, you can see what's going on behind the lens as well.

### USING THE PORTFOLIO TO UNCOVER PEOPLE SKILLS

It may not seem obvious, but the best way to see how a photographer deals with people is to look at their photographs. How someone behaves at a coffee shop while calmly discussing her work is one thing. How she copes with 200 strangers in the middle of a hectic and tiring shoot is something entirely different. Spending 10 hours with a photographer is not an option, but that's not a problem if you know how to look at their photographs.

Are people smiling naturally? A good wedding photographer has a sense of people and can wait for those moments that really show the full range of emotions going on at a wedding. If every person looks like they were just smiling a minute ago, or their faces are frozen in the middle of an awkward grimace, the photographer probably doesn't know how to read people. Now, if you don't want any overdramatic emotions, then this may not be such an issue for you, but look at the photos

and you will see just how in tune with people your photographer is.

How are people interacting with the camera?

In this case, there is no right answer. Different styles of photography call for different personalities of photographer and a different level of interaction. If people in the images are often looking at the camera, smiling and laughing, you've got a bubbly photographer who likes to get involved.



She'll be remembered by the guests at your party, and she'll probably spark some great moments. On the other hand, if the people in the photos are not interacting with the camera, and seem involved in their own world, almost like the camera is in a secret hiding place capturing the moment... This photographer won't be the life of the party. He'll use long lenses and try to be completely invisible as he does his work. That might be exactly what you're looking for if you want real photojournalism.

Knowing what to look for in a portfolio won't tell you what to like, because that's different for every person, but it can tell you a lot about the photographer who took the photos.

## USING THE PORTFOLIO TO UNCOVER TECHNICAL ABILITY

Popular wisdom says that the best way to evaluate a photographer is to look at one entire wedding's worth of photos. My mother always said I was popular, but I think an entire wedding misses the point. A typical shoot could easily get to 4 or 500 photos. Unless this is your own wedding, you'll probably start tuning out at about 40 or 50 images.

One entire wedding tells you how a photographer dealt with one set of conditions and one set of people. Since you don't know exactly what's going to happen on your day what you actually want to know is that your photographer can deal with a range of situations. A photographer's flexibility is key for you, and can best be seen in a sampling of images.

If you're looking at 50 images that represent a range of weddings, with different lighting conditions, and different people, here's how to figure out the photographer's expertise.

First, look at the lighting in the images. Overall, are the foreground and background in balance? Inexperienced photographers tend to blast the foreground with flash and you end up with a background that is too dark and a foreground that is too light. It takes experience to learn how to work with your camera to make sure you capture even lighting.

Second thing to look at: focus. Some photographers use blurring in the image for a visual effect, and that's just a matter of taste. If every image you see makes you think you need a new set of glasses, THAT is not a style, that's an inexperienced photographer. With weddings, there's a lot going on and unpredictable lighting.



A new photographer will struggle to keep everything in focus, and the inexperience will show in their work. Sharp clean images are not all you want out of your photographer, but it's a basic starting point.

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