



*6 Secrets to*  
**STORY-TELLING**  
CHILDHOOD PORTRAITS

*Hi,* I'm **Nicki O'Donovan** and I'm so excited you're here! This is a cheat sheet guide I've put together to share some of the **best secrets to getting magical childhood captures.**

I am a stay-at-home mother of 6 children and my photography journey began as a simple desire to take story-telling images of the joys of my life. Time waits for no man or woman and as the years fly by I want to create a lasting legacy in the form of images that will capture the beauty of my children's childhood. A picture is worth a thousand words, so as I freeze moments in time, I secure memories of our unfolding family adventures in Ireland.

If you are a parent wanting to capture your children's lives in a breath-taking way...**before they are all grown up...** or you're an amateur or professional photographer wanting to improve your lifestyle, fine-art photography skills, I have good news!

I will be sharing some of the **best tips** I've discovered for taking enchanting, story-telling portraits.



Love,

*Nicki*



# *First things first*

## THE RIGHT LENS

Before we delve into our 6 keys I'll briefly cover two basics. The first is using the right lens. **Prime lenses** are ideal for portraits because they have a wider maximum aperture.

A **wide open aperture** helps to **isolate your main point of interest** and gives your portraits a soft, dreamy background.

The prime lenses I use on my Nikon DSLR are the 50mm f/1.4 and 85mm f/1.8. The faster the lens, the greater the photography advantages you have.

## MANUAL MODE

Next, is learning to shoot in **manual mode**.

The turning point for many aspiring photographers is moving from auto mode and learning to shoot in **manual mode**. This was a turning point for me and gave me more control over how my images turned out.

If you don't already shoot in manual mode, we have some videos to help familiarise you with how it works. It will transform your photography!

*- Now let's get started with our keys-*



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## 1. ARTISTIC INSPIRATION

**The creative process for story-telling portraiture begins with being artistically inspired.**

**The beauty of your work as a photographer** will be in the way you skillfully weave your **life experiences, childhood memories, dreams and passions** into your photography.

**It is important to fan the flame of inspiration** through the books you read, the movies you watch, the art you enjoy, the work of other photographers, the music you listen to, and the way you spend your time, etc.

The goal is to **awaken your imagination - light that creative fire.**

The creative process begins with being  
artistically inspired



Once you have a creative idea, the key is creating the moment for that idea to become a reality. This involves **intentional planning ahead of time**.

You need to think about the props you want to use, the clothes your subject will wear, the ideal location, as well as the time that location has the best lighting.

How are you going to **convey your story in a way that is emotionally moving**? Careful forethought of these things will help create **the right environment for the natural unfolding of the story** you are wanting to capture.

Awaken your imagination - light that creative fire







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For example, I wanted to get a photo of my son flying a kite. I had a vision in my mind of what I wanted it to look like.

My **plan of action** was to make the kite with him - a beautiful brown paper kite - and then pick the right day where the **weather conditions and the lighting would bring my idea to life**.

I had picked out the outfit I wanted him to wear and I had scouted out the location ahead of time. I was on the lookout for an area where he would be able to run freely without having trees or any other obstacles in the way. I also wanted him backlit for this particular enchanting childhood scene.

Consider what your plan of action needs to be





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I watched the weather closely each day, waiting for my opportunity. I happened to wait two weeks from the time when the kite was made to the time we got perfect lighting conditions for this particular shot.

When the lighting was right, we went to the location 10 minutes from where we live and I snapped away as my son attempted to fly the kite (with the help of my daughter) for the first time. He told me afterwards that it was the best photoshoot ever.

I took the **artistic inspiration** I had, **planned my scene and then created the moment for me to capture it**. The execution of my concept was a success but more importantly **an exciting memory was made**. What I had envisioned in my mind's eye is now an actual image, a keepsake for our family.

Take what you envision in your mind's eye,  
create the moment and capture it as an image.





## 2. SCOUTING FOR THE RIGHT LOCATION

Once you have an idea of the story you're going to capture, you want to start looking for **the right locations that will create the ideal backdrop for your scene**. Or it may be the other way round – that you find the perfect location with amazing lighting and then you can start planning what scene you want to create in that location.

What I have found invaluable is **going back to the same locations and mastering the lighting in those areas**. I am mostly always looking for my subject to be backlit or sidelit. This is what creates that magical element! Once I know where the sun rises and sets, I know where I need to place my subject in relation to the sun. **In each location, I assess the backdrop behind my subject bearing in mind that the sun will either be coming at them from the side or it will be behind them.**



In other words when I photograph, the sun is not coming from behind me. If the sun is behind me, shining onto my subjects, they are frontlit. I tend to avoid this type of lighting for this kind of portraiture.

A couple of tips I've learned in choosing locations:

**Make sure the backdrop directly behind your subject(s) isn't sky, but rather some kind of landscape** in the form of trees, hills, mountains or buildings.

**Keep in mind that if there aren't any clouds in the sky or any trees or buildings diffusing the sunlight at your location, you will more than likely have to wait until the sun is almost set.** This is because the sun can be too bright or harsh otherwise.

**An overcast day is not ideal for scouting locations.** You can't get a clear picture of what the lighting will be like when there is no sun.

**A forest that is not too densely populated** with green trees and has a lot of open sky or a **park with some tall grass and trees** can be the ideal location.





### 3. ATTENTION TO DETAIL

An essential part of mastering story-telling photography is **looking at the world through the eyes of a child**. As we get older we often lose that childlike wonder and miss many little details. Noticing these details is what creates opportunities and gets the creative juices flowing.

A spider in its web has the potential for a photo of a little boy with his magnifying glass. A puddle of water can mean a photoshoot with a boat reflection or a playful splash caught in motion. A particular way the light is falling can be the spot for an enrapturing moment. A pretty little cottage or picturesque gate can be the backdrop for a memorable scene.

Look at the world through the eyes of a child.





As the seasons change in all their wonder, they bring **fresh inspiration and new ways of expressing the beauty and stories of life.**

In an image you can **freeze a moment in the middle of the action** evoking emotions that transport the viewer to what it was like being there at that moment. It takes the viewer on **a journey of their own fond childhood memories or dreams.**

**Hand gestures and body language** as well as **facial expressions are key factors** and contribute to the mood and atmosphere of your story. There are many little nuances that can bring movement, flow and harmony to your photography. We will delve into this more in future videos.

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## 4. BECOME OBSESSED WITH LIGHT

**Light is the essence of photography** and your journey as a photographer is **finding the right light**.

The more aware you become of **the fundamental role light plays in mood, atmosphere, and the communication of your story**, the more exciting photography will become! Quality light is what you are looking for. Without it, your photo can look flat and uninteresting. You can have the most beautiful landscape or backdrop, a heart-warming scene and lovely models, but without that quality light, your image will look more like a snapshot rather than a work of art.

Your journey as a photographer  
is finding the right light.







When the sun is high in the sky on a cloudless day you get harsh light which results in harsh shadows or blown-out highlights.

**Soft light, on the other hand, will wrap around your subject and landscape. The shadows are soft and gradual.** This light is what most portrait photographers are looking for. You'll find many photographers agree that their favourite time to take photos is during golden hour, which is also known as magic hour.

This is the time of the day when you get **quality lighting that is warm and diffused because the sun is low in the sky.** Golden hour is roughly one hour after sunrise and one hour before sunset, although that is just a guideline. The further away from the equator you are, the longer your golden hour is.

The best part about golden hour is that it is free! Photographers spend a fortune on softboxes and studio lights in the attempt to mimic that dreamy, soft golden hour glow.



If you are doing an outdoor shoot when the lighting is more flat because the sky is overcast, then **creativity is key**. **Other forms of light can work their magic like candles, lanterns, lights inside homes or battery powered artificial lights.**

**Window light is amazing for emphasizing depth and texture** and I find it a wonderful solution for rainy and gloomy days. Another one of my favourite opportunities is when you have **direct sunlight that is filtered through trees (so it is diffused) coming through a window** around golden hour.

I would encourage you not to limit yourself to taking photos at golden hour. I personally take photos in different lighting situations at different times of the day. **The key is learning how to best use the light you have.** The creative possibilities are endless as you experiment with natural light and artificial continuous light both indoors and outdoors. I cover this in-depth in our online course.





# 5. THE ROLE OF POST-PROCESSING

**Post-processing is important, but it will never be more important than how you capture the raw image.** If you pay particular attention to the previous tips, you will have a great image to begin with, and all the tweaks and adjustments you make to the image in Photoshop or Lightroom will reward you handsomely.

This aspect of photography is particularly exciting as you grow in your skills and enhance your work as a **photo artist**. You can add lightrays, cloud overlays and make colour adjustments to get gorgeous tones. You can create composites. You can merge a few photos from the same photoshoot if you weren't able to nail all the elements in one photo. I explain this in more depth with case studies and tutorials using my before and after images in our online course.

Here is a little secret that I use in my photography.





I tend to **photograph an image with space around my subjects instead of getting too close.** This way, when I bring my photo into Photoshop I can compose the image as I please because I have space to work with. Composition is SO important and you can't get back what you did not capture in-camera.

## 6. LEARN TO BE A THINKING PHOTOGRAPHER

It takes **patience in the learning phase to become a more consistent, thinking photographer.** Enjoying the process will make the journey more satisfying as you recognize the growth in your skill and artistic development.

If you can **carefully and thoughtfully assess your progress after each photoshoot and consider where you still need to improve,** you will notice your photography advance in leaps.







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**That may even mean attempting a particular photo idea more than once to successfully achieve the storytelling image you want to capture.** Some photos I only nail on the third or fourth photoshoot. Yes, you read that right. One photo I captured of my son blowing bubbles took 4 photoshoots. Each photoshoot was at a different location, on a different day, with varied lighting scenarios, until I found the backdrop and lighting that put those beautiful bubbles on display in a way that was visually fascinating. **Oftentimes in the beginning, it is trial and error until you find the locations and lighting that make your images pop.**

I have the benefit of experimenting like this because I'm primarily photographing my children. I encourage you to try this approach with your own children or family members or friends.

Enjoy the process as you grow in your skill  
and artistic development.



**The wisdom you will glean in the process will make you approach each new photoshoot more intelligently and with far greater skill.**

**Find those photographers that inspire you.** Spend time studying their work and ask yourself important questions as you admire their photo art -

Where is the light coming from?

What time of day was this photo taken at?

What is the subject wearing and how does it add to the overall scene?

How do the facial expressions and hand gestures of the subjects help to convey the story?

What about the image moves me emotionally?

Are there props? What role do they play?

How can I incorporate these elements into my own work?

Friend, I hope you found these keys helpful! They have been instrumental in my own photography journey, and I know that you will see your own work advance as you implement them.

Please join our **Master Creative Photography Group** and share your masterpieces with us. We would love to connect with you there and have you be a part of our wonderful photography community. We share many more tips and are invested in helping you reach your photography dreams.

*About Nicki O'Donovan*

Nicki is wife to her hero and stay-at-home mother to six precious children. She loves her home in Co. Wicklow, Ireland and is constantly dreaming up new photo ideas with a mug of homemade bullet-proof latte in hand. You can see more of her work at [www.nickiodonovanphotography.com](http://www.nickiodonovanphotography.com) and visit Master Creative Photography at [www.mastercreativephotography.com](http://www.mastercreativephotography.com). Here you will find online workshops that teach photographers how to master the light, learn the keys to compelling story-telling & discover secrets to fine-art finishes in Photoshop .