



36exp – Flash Lighting Workshop

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Harsh Shadows

Direct sunlight casts harsh shadows on people's faces. The contrast between dark shadows and light highlights is exaggerated by the camera's sensor, which can often lead to an unattractive portrait. Lighting on location can simply be about softening these shadows, whilst retaining a natural look.

Reflectors and Diffusers

These can be used to reduce harsh shadows and improve the lighting on a subject. A diffuser is a large piece of translucent white material which is held between the light or sun and the subject. As the light passes through the diffuser its edges are softened, and this produces a softer light which is often better for photographing people.

A reflector is a large piece of reflective material, usually gold or silver, which is used to bounce light onto the subject. This can be used to reduce shadow, and can be used to add a natural looking lighting to a subject. You can reflect both sunlight and flash.

Using Fill Flash

On camera flash can be used in a similar way to a reflector to reduce shadow or to add some subtle lighting. The easiest way to do this is to use either BTTL mode or TTL mode, and use flash exposure compensation to reduce the flash exposure by one or two stops. This will light the subject without washing it out with flash.

A good use of this technique is to light the subject with your flash from the front when you have another strong light source (e.g. the sun) behind the subject to highlight the hair, or when using a strong directional light coming through a window.

Flash Sync Speed

Flash sync speed is the maximum shutter speed that your camera can synchronise with your flash, it is usually 1/250 sec. You cannot use your flash at shutter speeds which are faster than your flash sync speed. Some flashes have a function which allows faster shutter speeds to be used, but at the expense of flash power.

Balancing Ambient and Flash Exposure

When using only ambient light, exposure is controlled by three factors – ISO, shutter speed and aperture. Changing one or more of these will effect the exposure of the scene.

Flash exposure is controlled by three factors – ISO, aperture and flash/subject distance.

Assuming your shutter speed is less than your camera's flash sync speed, shutter speed does not have an impact on flash exposure because the duration of the flash

burst is approximately 1/1000 sec or faster. Therefore shutter speed of 1 sec will capture the same amount of flash light as a shutter speed of 1/100 sec and 1/2 sec. To demonstrate - set your camera on manual mode, and your flash on TTL. As you decrease the shutter speed e.g. from 1/200 sec to 1/50 sec, you will see a darkening of the background, but the subject lit by flash will remain perfectly exposed.

Flash Exposure Lock

When calculating flash exposure the camera uses the centre portion of the frame. So, if you have a subject that you want the flash to expose, put them in the middle of the frame, press the flash exposure lock button on your camera, recompose and shoot.

Off Camera Flash

Off camera flash is a good way to create dramatic portraits. Using basic triggers you can fire your flash remotely. Experiment with different flash positions, flash powers, subject to flash distance, aperture and shutter speed settings. It is probably best to have your camera and flash both in manual mode, and set the ambient exposure first, e.g. to make background dark by setting up the camera to underexpose by 2-3 stops, then set the flash up to expose the subject perfectly. Changing the zoom settings on your flash will give you more of a spot light (e.g. at 105mm) or a wider spread of light (e.g. 24mm).

You can also shoot your off camera flash through a diffuser, or into an umbrella for a softer light.

Bounce Flash

When indoors, or if you have a handy wall, shoot your on camera flash so that it bounces off the wall or ceiling. This creates a softer light and is ideal when covering events. In TTL mode the flash will still work out correct exposure if the subject is in the middle of the frame, and the camera will work out the ambient exposure when in auto mode. The flash will need to fire at a higher power because it has further to travel when bouncing, so try to use a larger aperture and/or high ISO to save batteries and enable your flash to recycle more quickly.

Shoot Through Something

To add interest to a boring shot, look for something you can fire your off camera flash through. A plant is ideal as it will make interesting shadows on the subject and/or background. Manual mode on both camera and flash is best for this. Experiment until you are happy with the balance of ambient and flash exposures.

Two Light Set Up – Rim and Main Lights

In a dark place e.g. under a bridge, set up on flash on a stand behind your subject to create a rim of light around them, and then use the main light, above and in front of the subject to light the face. Try the flash behind on 1/2 power and the flash in front on 1/4 power as a starting point, and adjust aperture, flash power and flash to subject distance to get an exposure you are happy with.

Two Light Set Up - Lighting the Background

A good way to easily create a professional looking portrait is to point one light to hit the background, and shoot another light into an umbrella to light the subjects face.

Having the background lit gives good separation between background and subject. This works best with the subject 1-2m way from a coloured background.

Experiment with Movement and Flash

Try shooting a moving subject using flash. The length of your shutter speed will determine the amount of movement captured e.g. 0.5s, and the flash will freeze part of the motion. This is best done in a dimly lit place, and you will see a lot of blur caused by the long shutter speed, combined with a sharp image captured by the flash. Explore the differences between front curtain sync, and rear curtain sync.