

Photography Lighting:

The Importance of Light

Light is all around us. Everywhere we look, light allows us to see things in perspective. When capturing light via photography, make sure you are truly seeing the light.

Quantity of light is important, and this is what we're most concerned with while taking a snapshot. However, when it comes to photography, we should start to think more about the quality of light. Before you shoot, take a minute to think about alternatives. Is this the best way to light this shot? If I stand elsewhere, how is the shot enhanced? Experiment with the light.

There are different ways to look at light: hard vs. soft light and natural vs. artificial light.

In fact, before you even pick up your camera for this lesson, please take a moment to notice the light around your home. Where is it coming in from? How does it change throughout the day? How does this light fall upon you? Look closely at how light and shadow work together to create texture on the objects around you. Seeing with light and really seeing the light doesn't happen instantaneously. It happens over time. Sometimes, it'll stop you in your tracks, and you will be mesmerized by it. Mastering light is the journey of the photographer.

Types of Lighting

Hard Light

This type of light comes directly from the source. Sunlight and on-camera flash are two types of hard light. They're strong types of light that create strong and distinctive shadows. Strong light can eliminate details, flatten a subject, and produce the harsh shadows.

Soft Light

This type of light is indirect. It can be sunlight coming through curtains or the hazy sunshine we often see on a cloudy day. Shadows are not as harsh with softer light. This type of lighting is ideal for portraits.

Natural Light

Pretty self-explanatory, I know, but worth mentioning. This type of light comes from a natural source. Sunshine is the prime example of natural light.

Artificial Light

Artificial lighting comes from photofloods, halogen, "local" light (the lamps in the room), candlelight, etc.

How to Manipulate Light

Light is everywhere, but how do we get it to do what we want it to do? There are a number of ways to manipulate light, based on the vision you have.

Flat reflectors are great and now they come in various colors. Before you go out and get this as equipment, try it out first. A large piece of white poster board or foam board works well. If you've got a live (and patient) subject, that helps to see skin tones. If not, an object works well, too.

When you move the board, how does the reflection from the sun affect the subject? How does it change the look of light on a person's face? Go from side to side...any difference? Kneel down lower and prop the board on the floor. How does that change the light? What about if you stood on a chair and angled the board downward?

What if the light is too strong and gives off harsh shadows? Unlike tanning, between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. are not good times for photographing with sunlight as your main source. While you can get a strong tan during these hours, the rays are too strong for portraits.

The best thing to do is to diffuse the light. Softening strong light is a great way to soften shadows. Here are some examples:

Umbrellas are a great way to produce a wide and diffused light.

A diffusion screen (like translucent plastic) helps to soften the light.



A softbox encloses one or more lamps and will produce the desired effect.

The more diffused the source, the softer the light will be. Even a white curtain or sheet draped across a window can help to diffuse the light. Anything to soften the light coming in, natural or artificial, will work.

When you envision what you'd like to photograph, are there adjustments to lighting you will have to make? Waiting for early in the morning or late in the afternoon will naturally diffuse the light.



More about Photography Lighting

As with the previous section, knowing immediately which types of photography lighting are available to you, how they work, how to use them to your advantage and which would suit the image best is an acquired skill.

The ability to make an instant decision to use flash or not during a wedding shoot is of paramount importance. The correct lighting could make or break an all important shot. If in doubt, and if you have time, do both, with and without flash.

Natural - Natural plus fill in flash - Flash - Ambient - Studio/Softbox

Natural Light

Probably the most flattering form of lighting, perhaps because this is the way we see most things and most people everyday.

I always try, when I am able, to make the most of any natural light whether it is outdoors, indoors or just a shaft of light coming in through a window, even if I have to bounce it using a reflector.

Natural - Window Light

If the daylight can't quite reach the subject, use a reflector or two to bounce and throw the light like in this example.



If shooting portraits of people or wedding portraits or church scenes etc, try using any available daylight, even if it means moving people to another room in their house. Diffused window light, not direct beams of sunlight, can create a real sense of calm and mood to an image.



Outdoor Light

The *worst* type of natural light for portraiture is direct sunlight. It can cause heavy lines and shadows as well as squinting and is very unflattering. If you have no choice, spin the subject around with the sunlight behind and fire away whilst exposing for the face.

Overcast days are perfect, especially for weddings (although not for the couple) as many of your shots will be outdoors.

Natural Plus Fill-in Flash

When shooting using available light, you only have so much control and there are times when you need to help out a little. For example, if you simply **have** to shoot in direct sunlight, especially at weddings or events where many shots are outdoors, try "pinging"

The photo on the left was taken in full sun and show the hard shadows. The image on the right was taken with a different sun angle and had some fill-in flash.



Fill in flash – used to help brighten the subject when the sun is behind the subject.



The use of flash outdoors can reduce the amount of heavy shadows. The image on the right has some fill in flash.



Flash/Speed lights

Direct flash indoors is horrible and tends to wash out the colors and leave nasty shadows behind your subject.

If you are using direct flash, to lose the shadows try and maneuver your subject so that they are a healthy distance away from any walls etc, and open up the aperture to blur the remaining background.

The options open to you to diffuse flash light are;

- Bounce the flash from a ceiling or wall. Remember that by bouncing the light, you are effectively doubling the distance the light travels thereby increasing the risk of underexposing the subject. To counteract this you can, if your camera is able, increase the FEC (or flash exposure compensation) by 2 or 3 stops until it looks correct. This **adds** power to the flash output to allow for the extra distance. If you don't have that option, just increase the exposure using **exposure compensation** (open aperture or slow the shutter speed) and see if that helps.

Basically, this is an area you would do well to practice until you feel confident in any situation. Correct use of bounced flash can be very flattering, I use it all the time.

- Attach a "mini softbox" to your speed light. If you are creative, you can [build your own](#) or, like me, simply buy one from companies such as [Gary Fong](#) or [Stofen](#).

Ambient

What is ambient light and how does it affect your photography?

Ambient light is the general "man-made" background light shining all around us. It softens any contrasts between brightly lit "task" areas and their surroundings. Fluorescent, halogen or incandescent recessed lights for example, usually found in the ceiling, cast light directly downward and outward.

Wall sconces and halogen "touchier" floor lamps shine their ambient light upwards at the ceiling, which then reflects the light throughout the room. Table lamps with differing colors of translucent lampshades cast soft light in a room.

With each of these kinds of ambient lighting comes a problem for the digital photographer as they tend to leave a harsh color cast in your images, usually yellow or red.

You can adjust for this at the time of shooting by switching to manual white balance and adjusting accordingly (see chapter 8) and/or adjusting the color tones in [post-processing](#) later on.

Try combining ambient lighting with bounced or diffused flash, you will still need to adjust the white balance or colors but you will have much more evenly spread light than if you were to turn out the lights and use just the speed light.