

Topic – 3 - Exposure: Introduction to Flash Photography

Learning Outcomes

In this lesson, we will learn about a number of ways (e.g. bouncing the light, the TTL mode, high-speed sync, using gels) in which we can use flash to improve lighting for our photography.

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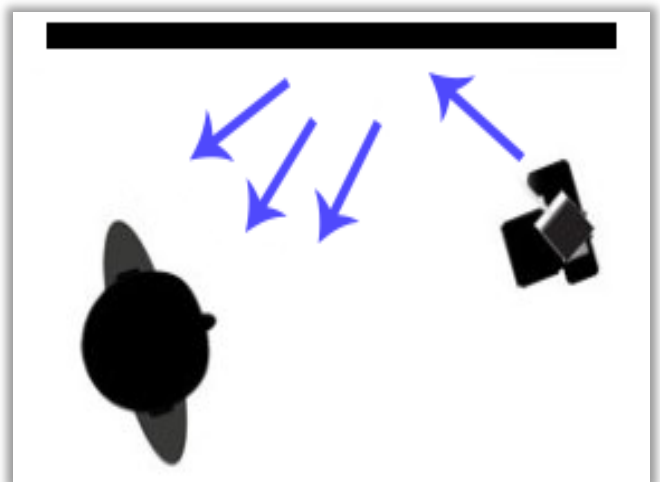
Introduction to Flash Photography

1. Bouncing the Light.

Bouncing the light is possibly the best tool when it comes to on-camera flash techniques. Indoors, a standard room that has bright-coloured walls or ceiling will provide you with all the bounce surfaces you need to make beautiful photographs. Using this technique, you can achieve soft box-style lighting, or even very broad lighting, with your flash unit alone. You can also achieve this by using bounce boards. This takes a bit of practice to get it right and to know how to direct the flash, depending on the distance between you and your subject. Bouncing the flash off a bounce board, ceiling or wall will provide a wider, more diffuse “light source” for the subject.



To create a portrait with the bounce technique, you can tilt the flash unit to hit the ceiling or wall as it will act like a soft box. This technique works because it gives you a versatile look and very often you can get a range from dramatic split-lighting to soft and subtle lighting. The secondary bounce around the room provides fill light which is important when creating stunning portrait photography.



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2. Size Matters

The size of your light source, relative to your subject, will affect the final look of your scene. Generally speaking, a larger light source will produce a much smoother transition between light and shadow, or what we call 'softer light' in photography. This can be achieved with a simple bounce card, which works like the bounce boards described earlier. More professional setups involve using soft boxes, which work exactly like the name suggests as they create nice, smooth and diffusive light for your scene.



3. Through The Lens (TTL).

Most modern flash units offer a variety of modes to shoot with. Through-The-Lens (TTL) mode puts the flash unit's output under the control of the camera and flash. The camera and flash basically work in unison, to decide how much light the flash produces in order to properly expose the subject. TTL can be used in most shooting situations, including shooting in your camera's manual mode, outdoors, and even when using bounce techniques. Since TTL works well in fast-moving shooting situations, it's very useful to use it for on-camera flash work.



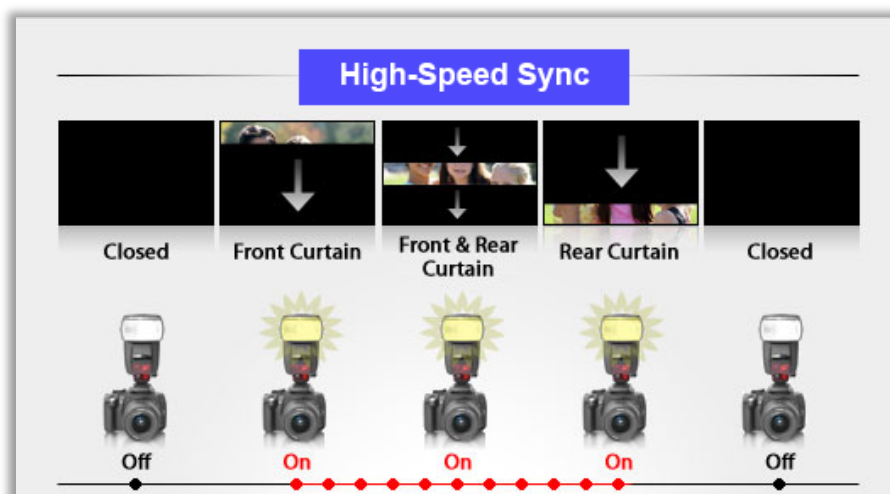
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4. High-Speed Sync.

Most modern flash units have a high-speed sync setting, which is very useful. These sync speeds for your flash will be limited to about 1/250th to 1/350th of a second. This is generally okay for an environment in which you are dealing with dim light. When shooting indoors, where the light might be dimmed, you can shoot at any appropriate shutter speed, up to your normal flash sync speed limit. This means that you can just as easily shoot at 1/40th of a second to record ambient light. If you want to isolate the action, you have the option to go faster here.

However, regardless of whether or not you are indoors or outside, if your exposures require a higher shutter speed, high-speed sync will allow you to shoot at pretty much any shutter speed, generally up to 1/8000th of a second. If normal sync at your chosen aperture and ISO will result in overexposure of the ambient lighted sections of your scene, you're going to have to work with higher shutter speeds.

This is particularly common in outdoor portrait situations. This occurs because the ambient background is moderately bright and often you might find that you want a small amount of fill flash on your subject. High-speed sync can help you with this. It's important to realise that, contrary to what some people think, your camera and flash will only use high-speed sync if you are shooting beyond the normal sync speed. Otherwise, the flash will simply comply with how it normally behaves.



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5. Gels

One of the great features of digital photography is the capability of controlling colour. DSLRs are advantageous in that they can dictate colour control via the white balance (WB) that they have. As we've said, shooting in RAW ensures that you collect enough information in the image file, with minimal processing, to adjust for proper White Balance afterwards using software like Adobe's Photoshop or Lightroom.

However, there will be occasions in which you would like to make sure the light coming off your flash unit is close to the same colour as the ambient light. This will ensure that most of the light in your images are in the same region, in terms of colour temperature. For best results, as we've mentioned before, adjust the White Balance during post processing, so that the images will have a more consistent colour throughout. To bring your flash into the tungsten range of colour for most ambient situations, you can use a Colour Temperature Orange (CTO) filter over the flash lens. Set your camera's White Balance to tungsten and you can fine tune the White Balance in post-processing, as you deem necessary.



6. The Importance of Ambient Light.

When the camera is exposing well for the flash illuminated subject, but not enough the environmental light is being recorded, we get this dark funnel effect. This is an example of poor on-camera flash. Ensuring that the ambient light and surroundings appear in the image will ground your subject in the world and give the scene a sense of atmosphere. This is very important in photography.



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This is another scenario where switching to the camera's manual mode is recommended. This will allow you to manually determine slower shutter speeds to achieve exactly the amount of ambient light you want for the photograph. At this point, you should feel comfortable using manual mode and more you practice, the stronger you will become. In my experience, shutter speeds of 1/15th to 1/40th or 1/50th of a second work for most environments. This includes interior and exterior photography.



7. Enough Is Enough

On-camera flash will often be of no use to you. It's important to realise when you do not need it as it can negatively impact your work. Once you know how it works and what type of effects you want, use it as the situation needs it. However, don't become dependent on it. Remember, natural light, when available, is usually the preferred source in most situations. However, when you need a little more, it's valuable to know that you can always use the flash to capture the photograph that you have envisioned.



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What have we learned in this lesson? A Summary

We have learned more about flash photography and a variety of ways in which we can use it in order to attain the best results. We looked at bouncing the light, the TTL mode, high-speed sync, gels, the importance of ambient light and knowing when to use the on-camera flash.

