Shutterbug
photography training

Lifestyle Family Photography: Class 2

Observe the Light

It's a common misconception that the best photos are those taken in the most light, however, it's the **quality of light** rather than the **quantity of light** that counts most. When you are looking at light, you are really observing five different factors.

Amount: how much light do you have to work in? The amount of available light determines your ISO needs; **a lot of light will permit a low ISO**, while **low-light requires a high ISO**.

Quality: quality light is referring to whether the available light is **soft** (creating soft shadows), or **hard** (creating hard shadows.) This is an important consideration when it comes to portraits because soft light is more flattering on peoples' faces than hard light.

Observe the Light

Direction: the 'direction' of light refers to not only *which direction the light is coming from*, but also the *location of your subject in relation to that light*. Are your subjects lit from the front or the side, or are they backlit with light coming in from behind them?

Angle: this relates to the *direction of light*… are you working in bright midday sun with lots of harsh shadows, or morning, or late afternoon when the sun is low to the horizon creating soft, diffused light? Is the light bouncing off a white wall and filling the space with diffused light, or is it a concentrated stream illuminating one area?

Knowing the *angle of light helps you decide where to place your subject* based on the sort of atmosphere you want to create.

Observe the Light

Color Temperature: color temperature is the *natural color a light source has*, and white balance is how the color white appears in your image. The color temperature of light can affect your photos appearance, causing whites to have either a blue or gold color cast.

You can compensate for this by either adjusting your white balance settings, creating a custom white balance, or by shooting in RAW and fixing it later in post (recommended.)

Conclusion: it all comes down to what kind of light you're working with and the outcome you want to achieve. There are many variables to consider when creating an image, and the more familiar you are with them, the better your results. *Practice and experimentation are key*.

Front Lighting

Light coming from behind you, and falling on your subject's face, is called *front-lighting*. This is by far the easiest type of light to work with when creating portraits.

Front light gives you the best chance of getting the exposure right and *eliminates any harsh shadows or bright highlights*. The multi-zone metering mode works well when your subject is front-lit.

This type of lighting is *best used when the light source is soft*, such as when the sun is rising or setting (sweet light) and less intense. The softer the light, the better the results you'll have.

Since front light doesn't produce shadows, *subjects that are aging will find this type of light source more flattering*.

ISO 1600
1/250 sec
f/2.8 @ 50mm

ISO 400
1/125 sec
f/2.8 @ 50mm

Side Lighting

Side-lighting is light that falls on your subject at *roughly 90 degrees to the camera*, placing one side of the subject in the light, and the other side in shadow.

This type of light is *less forgiving and more difficult to work in than front lighting*, especially when your subject has a lot of pent-up energy. Try multi-zone and spot metering to see which is best for your light.

Side lighting is often *more effective with portraits because it adds a wonderful three-dimensional quality* to your photos. The shadows and highlights caused by side lighting *provide more depth and texture*, visually defining the subject from the background.

TIP: side lighting is great for slimming down your subject.

ISO 3200
1/125 sec
f/2.8 @ 85mm

ISO 100
1/250 sec
f/2.8 @ 200mm

Back Lighting

Shooting into the light is known as *back-lighting*, and is the exact opposite of shooting with sun over your shoulder. The best times to use back-lighting are during the last 30 minutes of daylight, on up to about 15 minutes after sunset.

Since you will be doing a majority of your shooting in natural light, backlighting is a good technique to understand, because always *shooting in open shade gets boring and is not always available*.

Multi-zone metering doesn't work well in this light unless you choose to overexpose by a stop or two. The reason for this is because there is just *too much contrast* in the image. So, to make back lighting work, you will need to *use the spot meter*.

ISO 100
1/325 sec
f/2.8 @ 200mm

ISO 400
1/250 sec
f/2.8 @ 200mm

Using Back Lighting

Camera and subject positioning: make sure you are facing toward the sun and your subject is facing toward you (with their back to the sun.)

Diffuse the sun: don't start out in an open area or other location that has nothing to diffuse the light… those are much harder conditions to shoot in. Instead, choose a location where the *sun can be partially or fully hidden*, such as trees or buildings.
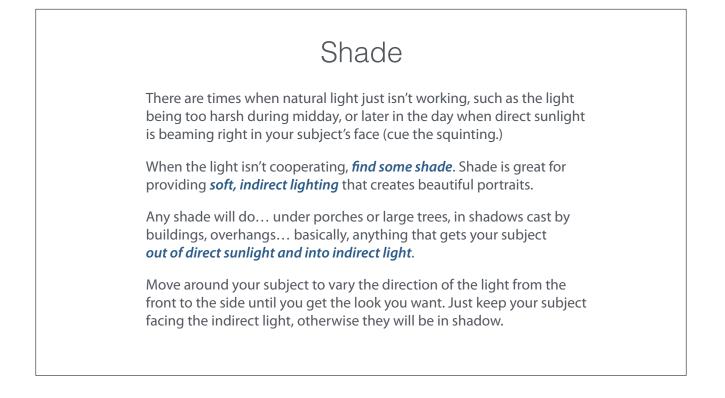
Metering mode: *spot metering is the go-to mode when shooting in backlit situations*. Use this setting when you want to ensure a very specific area is properly exposed, or in situations when your subject is surrounded by extremely bright light, like snow or the beach. For best results, try exposing for the darkest part of your subject's face.

Using Back Lighting

Overexposure: because the background will be bright, your meter can become confused and underexpose your image. To compensate, *overexpose slightly using exposure compensation*. Be sure to check the 'blinkies' to make sure there aren't any blown highlights, and that you still have a fast enough shutter speed to get a sharp shot.

Fill light: unless you have a natural reflector in front of your subject, such as a sidewalk or bright wall, there are two things you can do to make sure your subjects are lit properly against the bright background:

1. Use on or off-camera flash to add a small amount of fill light.

2. Use a reflector to bounce some light back onto your subject.

Shade

There are times when natural light just isn't working, such as the light being too harsh during midday, or later in the day when direct sunlight is beaming right in your subject's face (cue the squinting.)

When the light isn't cooperating, *find some shade*. Shade is great for providing *soft, indirect lighting* that creates beautiful portraits.

Any shade will do… under porches or large trees, in shadows cast by buildings, overhangs… basically, anything that gets your subject *out of direct sunlight and into indirect light*.

Move around your subject to vary the direction of the light from the front to the side until you get the look you want. Just keep your subject facing the indirect light, otherwise they will be in shadow.

ISO 200
1/320 sec
f/2.8 @ 200mm

ISO 200
1/125 sec
f/3.5 @ 85mm

Silhouettes

Creating silhouettes is simply a matter of making use of back lighting. While technically under-exposed images, they are quite easy to pull off and can provide some fun images if done properly.

Silhouettes are best created when *subjects with clear outlines are placed in front of a bright background*. Silhouettes of people just standing there don't work well, and you will need to make sure your subject's limbs are separated from their body to prevent 'the blob.'

In order to capture strong silhouettes, you are going to be using the camera's *spot meter to take the exposure reading*. The multi-zone meter is designed for use with nice, even light, and while useful for most situations, it will fail miserably when used with back light.

ISO 400
1/250 sec
f/2.8 @ 200mm

ISO 400
1/250 sec
f/2.8 @ 200mm

Silhouettes

Unlike the multi-zone meter, *the spot meter measures the exposure from only a small area of the frame*, which is usually in the middle. Since you want your subject to be rendered as pure black, place the spot meter on a bright area of the scene and halfway depress the shutter release button to take a meter reading.

Once the exposure is set, *lock these settings in* by using the *auto-exposure lock button, or AE-L*. Now, recompose and focus your image with the locked exposure setting and take the shot.

For better placement of your subject against the bright sky, try to *shoot from a low position*. You may get dirty and look silly, but the shot will be worth it.

Window Light

Window light is one of the most beautiful and versatile light sources you can use for portraits. In essence, it provides the same effect as a large soft box, which diffuses light for soft, flattering images.

Ideally, *a large (floor to ceiling) north or south facing window* is preferred. This orientation will provide a soft, indirect light all day. If you don't have a window with a north or south orientation, it's still possible to use this light effectively.

Just as if you were shooting in open sunlight outdoors, *sunlight directly coming in through a window also creates hard light*, which is not ideal for portraits. With that in mind, you should be mindful where you position your subject and the sun's position in the sky.

ISO 1600
1/100 sec
f/3.5 @ 85mm

ISO 3200
1/80 sec
f/3.5 @ 50mm

Working with Window Light

Expose for the bright area: unless you are shooting with your subject either directly facing the window for nice, even light, or if their back is to the window, you will experience contrasting bright and dark areas.

Because of this, you will want to *expose for the brightest area of your subject using your spot meter*. If you were to expose for the shadowed side, the brighter areas would be over exposed and blown out. Multi-zone metering is hit or miss here, so experiment as needed.

Turn all other lights off: it's a good idea to turn off all other light sources in the room that may also light your subject. Interior lighting produces a different color temperature and may cause a color balance shift or unnecessary shadows under your subject's eyes.

Working with Window Light

Diffuse the light: sheer curtains are perfect for creating soft, diffused light that rivals expensive soft boxes. They are great to use for back-drops, and you can carry one around if you don't have a diffuser.

Fast glass: even though you are using the sun to light your subject, window light isn't really all that bright. This is where using a lens with a wide maximum aperture is beneficial.

High ISO: since you will essentially be working in low-light, you will likely need to use a high ISO setting. If your camera doesn't have a high enough ISO to achieve an adequate shutter speed, or you don't like the looks of your camera's higher ISO settings, consider using a tripod to provide some stabilization.

Catchlights

A catchlight is simply a *light's highlight reflected off the surface of your subject's eyes*. They are often considered a very desirable part of a portrait because they introduce life into your image.

The light source you're using, how strong it is and how far it is from your subject, will determine the shape and size of the catchlight. The *larger the light source, the bigger the catchlight* will be, and if you have multiple light sources, you can end up with more than one catchlight appearing on the eyes.

There are no hard and fast rules as to best positions of catchlights, however, the most *typical position for portraits is the 10 and 2 o'clock positions*, or the upper corners of the iris. These positions create the most 'natural' looking eye.
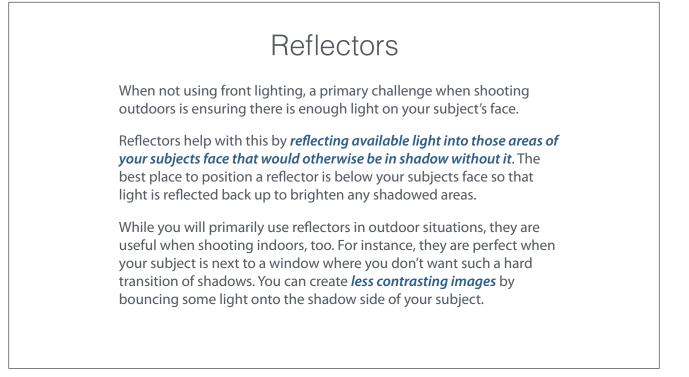
ISO 1600
1/125 sec
f/2.8 @ 85mm

ISO 3200
1/125 sec
f/2.8 @ 85mm

How to Create Catchlights

Outdoors: when outdoors in bright sunlight, *find a piece of shade and position your subject on the inside perimeter*. Have your subject face in the direction of the sunlight so their eyes will reflect the light to create catchlights. Be mindful of the 2 and 10 o'clock positioning.

By having your subject in the shade, their eyes will be wide open and bright (no squinting) and you'll get a nice even exposure on their face.

Indoors: the best way to create catchlights indoors is to *use window light*. Not only will this produce beautiful diffused light, the shapes of the window will be reflected in your subject's eyes.

To use, position your subject facing a window at roughly 45 degrees. This angle will place the catchlights in the 10 and/or 2 o'clock position.

Reflectors

When not using front lighting, a primary challenge when shooting outdoors is ensuring there is enough light on your subject's face.

Reflectors help with this by *reflecting available light into those areas of your subjects face that would otherwise be in shadow without it*. The best place to position a reflector is below your subjects face so that light is reflected back up to brighten any shadowed areas.

While you will primarily use reflectors in outdoor situations, they are useful when shooting indoors, too. For instance, they are perfect when your subject is next to a window where you don't want such a hard transition of shadows. You can create *less contrasting images* by bouncing some light onto the shadow side of your subject.

Reflectors

Reflectors generally come in three colors; *silver, white, and gold*. Each color gives off a different light, with silver giving a bright and whiter reflection, and gold giving a warmer and more subtle light.

When using a reflector, you'll want to *get it fairly close to your subject without it showing up in the shot*. Place your subject so that they are not looking directly into the sun, such as when using back or side light, and then position the reflector so that it's glow bounces to light up onto your subject's face.

Ideally, you're looking for a *nice even light with no shadows*, so keep positioning the reflector until you achieve this. Having someone assist with holding the reflector is helpful, or if the crop is tight enough, the subject can hold the reflector on their lap.

Without Reflector

With Reflector

Without Reflector

With Reflector

Diffusers

Harsh light is unflattering when it comes to taking photos of people, unless you're after something edgy. Soft light is often the best light to use, but what if you don't have any soft light available?

Diffusers are portable translucent panels that are *positioned between the sun and your subject to spread out any direct light*. The closer you place the diffuser to your subject (without it showing up in the frame,) the softer and more flattering the light will be.

You will need an assistant or a stand to hold the diffuser in place, so keep that in mind when you head out. If you're doing a tight head shot, then your subject could hold the diffuser just outside of the frame.

TIP: sheer curtains on a window serve as effective light diffusers.

Without Diffuser

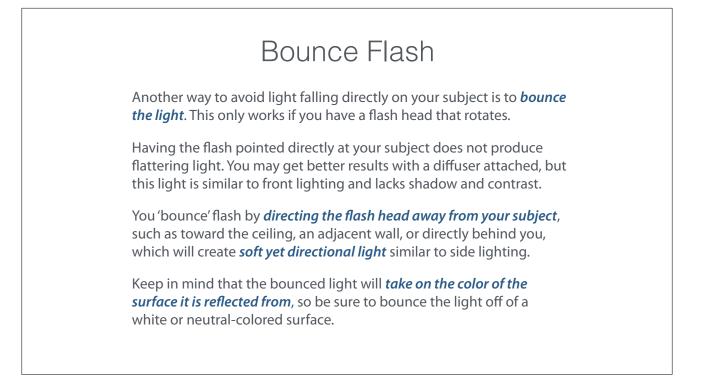With Diffuser

Diffusing Flash

While this class is heavily geared toward using only natural light, there are times when a flash is desirable, such as filling in eye shadows caused by overhead light, or necessary, because it's just too dark.

When working with flash, the most important thing to consider is *diffusing the light*. By doing so, you lessen the harshness of the light and keep your images from looking washed out.

Diffusers: whether you are using your built-in pop-up flash, or an external speedlight, there are special *translucent light modifiers* called *diffusers* available that attach over the top of your flash head.

Their purpose is similar to hand-held diffusers, which is to spread out the light so that it doesn't create harsh shadows on your subject.

Without Diffuser

With Diffuser

Bounce Flash

Another way to avoid light falling directly on your subject is to *bounce the light*. This only works if you have a flash head that rotates.

Having the flash pointed directly at your subject does not produce flattering light. You may get better results with a diffuser attached, but this light is similar to front lighting and lacks shadow and contrast.

You 'bounce' flash by *directing the flash head away from your subject*, such as toward the ceiling, an adjacent wall, or directly behind you, which will create *soft yet directional light* similar to side lighting.

Keep in mind that the bounced light will *take on the color of the surface it is reflected from*, so be sure to bounce the light off of a white or neutral-colored surface.

Bounced from Ceiling

Bounced from Side Wall

Flash Exposure Compensation

Your camera, and/or external speedlight, has a function similar to exposure compensation that allows you to *control the output power of the flash* and help balance its light with the external light.

This is very handy when the camera's idea of the 'correct power' is either too much, which is usually the case, or not enough.

For cameras with a built-in flash, you can typically access this function by a button located near the flash itself that is marked with a small lightening bolt symbol accompanied with a plus (+) and minus (-).

External flash units have a similar function, but with the large variety of makes and models available, you should consult your user manual for more specific instructions on how to use this feature.