

Flash Photography

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The flash and light emphasis recently in the DigiCam special interest group (SIG) all started last year. So I'll start at the beginning: I was born at a very early age... No, not that far back! It began when group member Judy H. purchased an external flash for her digital camera that does not have one built-in. When using it she was always surprised by the photo's appearance. I figure the reason is the nature of Single Lens Reflex (SLR), or interchangeable lens cameras. Most camera designs allow you to see the moment you take the picture, so the brief flash is visible. SLRs have to move a mirror up out of the way to enable the shutter to open and sensor to receive the exposure, then drop that mirror once again. Your view is blocked during that bright flash.

Another problem is the default flash setting for those like Judy who prefer to use aperture priority (Av) program mode. By default, Av wants to add available light, called "ambient", to flash photos and often allows the shutter to stay open *way* longer than you can hold the camera steady. This evens out exposures and prevents all-black backgrounds. Because of this lengthy shutter opening, Canon recommends *always* using a tripod when in their default flash + Av mode. Alternatively, her and my cameras have a custom function to set the shutter at a fixed 1/250th sec., but resulting dark backgrounds may not look the best either. If the LCD shows something you don't like (glancing at it is called "chimping"), it is best to use Manual mode (M). This way, you set both shutter and aperture to taste, or you can rely on the automatic Program mode (P).

Last month, John Hoffmann showed us a fast-paced and pro-level Nikon School DVD, *The Speed of Light*, that also covered using 2 or more flashes. An assistant or a light stand is often needed here and below where I mention 2 also. If you thought this Joe McNally video was too fast-paced, you might enjoy reading some of Dave Black's Nikon flash photography "how-to's". See reference below. You'll be wowed that he shares some of his secrets. Hey Nikon, next time ask Dave to do your DVD and you'll sell more flashes! Honest.

The outline below was discussed along with a few slide examples in the March meeting including the dark, 'raccoon eyes' you get with overhead bounce lighting. We ran the gamut in audience attention. There were folks on the edge of their seat (Bill), and others bored to tears (okay yawners-- you know who you are!). In our next meeting, Bill Draper plans to address more lighting issues. Stay tuned.

Some things I added to the outline were: 1) Flash exposure compensation (FEC)-- set it to minus if the flash is too bright, 2) The need for external flash to mostly be a foot above the eyeline whether horizontal or vertical (portrait) mode to prevent 'outlining shadows', 3) If you can afford 2 flashes, hold the off-camera flash about 45-degrees to one side of an individual's nose, however they're facing, or use low sunlight at that 45-degree angle (short lighting). You can also use sunlight from behind and to the side to add "modeling", a 3-D appearance to your subject's features while the on-camera flash is less bright, and 4) Built-in flash spreaders for wide-angle and Fresnel lens add-ons for telephoto work. Reading the links at the bottom can help as well as searching the 'net.

When to use flash:

1. Harsh contrast like midday sun 10am-4pm
2. When you can fill-in shadows with flash
3. When at nighttime gatherings, eg. parties, family shots
4. Unevenly lit shade like under trees midday.
5. To avoid noisy, high ISO photos lacking shadow detail
6. Indoors without enough window light
7. **Tripod** inconvenient or absent
8. Flexible **Bracket** used for vertical shots to keep flash above subjects

When NOT to use flash:

1. Early morning or late evening sunlight
2. Cloudy outdoors or subject in evenly-lit shade
3. Window light away from sun
4. No-Flash events/concerts with special stage lights
5. When your judgement says at least try without it
6. **Tripod** available for slower shutter speeds
7. When a homemade **Reflector** can do the trick
8. Subject too wide/too far away (not using 'normal lens')

When to Bounce an external flash:

1. White wall or low ceiling available
Caution: avoid 'raccoon eyes' from light directly overhead
2. You can use a homemade, high **Reflector**
3. Flash add-on devices permit pleasing soft bounce

Further Advice

Experiment! Studying tutorials on the web can help. But only real-world practice and examination of your results via histogram onsite or computer later will give you the feedback you need. *Become skilled at determining where light sources originate (study the reflections in eyes and nose/chin shadows).*

Dual Flash Use:

Generally, if you can use two flashes for casual portraits, you want to have the stronger flash off-camera, called 'short lighting', and the fill flash on your camera (broad lighting) set weaker to prevent harsh shadows in face creases. For best 'modeling', the 3-D effect of light, the stronger flash should always be about 45-degrees to one side or the other of subject's face, no matter how their face is turned. The stronger light should also originate a foot or so above their eyeline.

References/Tutorials:

- *Strobist*, click under 'First Time Here?' <http://strobist.blogspot.com/>
- *PCWorld's Digital Focus* by Dave Johnson Nov. 9, 2004 dealing with harsh lighting <http://www.pcworld.com/article/id,118317-c,digitalcameras/article.html>
- Chuck Gardner, former assistant to the late-great wedding photog, Monte Zucker <http://super.nova.org/DPR/> This tutorial set includes Canon-specific flashes.
- My inspirational 'How-to's': <http://www.daveblackphotography.com/workshop/index.htm>
- Manual for your flash should have suggestions and any limitations spelled out.