

You find the perfect place to pose your subject, but the lighting is flat. The portrait lacks snap. What to do?

BY DOUG BOX, M.PHOTOG.CR., CPP

Location *light*

ADD OFF-CAMERA FLASH TO OUTDOOR PORTRAITS

On-camera flash is for amateurs. Flat! Boring! Try flash off camera. It adds direction to your lighting and dimension to your subjects. Adding flash also cleans up the skin tones. If you don't have a good, clean light source, the skin tones take on the color of the light. When light bounces off grass or leaves, it casts an unflattering green



The ambient fill lighting method adds dimension and direction to the light, cleans up color of the skin tones, and solves the problem of "raccoon eyes" due to an overhead light.

When the background and subject are lit the same way, and you want to add directional light, use the ambient fill method. First, meter the ambient light illuminating the subject (in the ambient mode). Here, it's 1/20 at f/4, ISO 800—the fill light for the subject and the background light. The camera should be set to manual. Set the meter to the flash mode. With the flash set to manual, meter the flash with the same shutter speed as the ambient light reading, 1/20. This is the combined reading of the ambient fill light and the flash main light. The goal for this reading is two-thirds stop over the ambient alone, or 1/20 at f/5. Set the camera at this meter reading. Adding light two-thirds over the ambient light adds direction and looks natural.

One small soft box and a battery-powered flash can add excitement to your images, direction to your lighting and dimension to your subjects. Use it as...

- an additive main light outdoors, giving direction to flat light
- the main light in images of sunsets and sunrises
- a second light at weddings
- the single light in most in-home portraits
- a light-matching flash for sports and activity shots
- a kicker light in the studio



For more drama, I moved the light above the subject. As with the profile pose, the light placement is important. Position it about 45 degrees to the face to yield catch lights in the eye at about the 10 o'clock or 2 o'clock position. I usually shoot into the shadow side of the face, so the light goes in the short lighting position.

THE GOODS: TUTORIAL

tint. When you correct for the color of the skin, the rest of the image takes on unusual tones. Don't plan to fix it in Photoshop; get it right when you make the exposure.

All you need for pleasing, professional lighting is a small portable flash, a light modifier, a radio slave, a light stand, a light meter and a camera. I prefer a soft box, though an umbrella will work if there's not a bit of wind to blow it over and damage any lights attached. A tent stake holds down my light stand. My current setup includes a 22-inch Larson Soff Box, PocketWizard radio slave unit, and a Sekonic L-358 Flash Master meter with built-in PocketWizard transmitter. I use either a Nikon SB-800 AF Speedlight or Canon Speedlite 580EX flash unit, though any flash will work.

With the technique described here, ambient light acts as fill light. I call it ambient fill lighting. Off-camera flash is the main light.

A fill light provides total overall illumination of the subject. Its

purpose is to facilitate proper exposure for shadow detail. Alone, fill light is rather lackluster lighting.

The main light—also called key light or modeling light—is the dominant lighting on the subject. It's positioned to produce the contours of highlights and shadows.

1. Meter the ambient light. Here, we'll use a reading of 1/60 at f/5.6

THE DOUG BOX

I worked with Larson to develop an easy way to attach a shoe-mount flash to the 22-inch Soff Box. People started calling it the Doug Box Soft Box, then shortened it to the Doug Box Box, and now it's affectionately called the Doug Box. To order the official "Doug" Box location lighting kit with an educational DVD, color booklet and posing and lighting recipe cards, go to www.texasphotographicworkshops.com. —D.B



When the light on the background and subject are different (above), match the output of the flash to the background. With the sun lighting the background, the subject would be in silhouette without an additional light. In this situation, first meter the background. Using the in-camera metering system, I determined a base exposure of 1/100 second at f/6.3. With the camera in the manual mode, adjust the power of the flash up or down until it matches the base exposure, f/6.3. I had the camera on a tripod and used an external battery pack on the flash for faster recycling. The light was on a stand, and a friend held the light. (Please be careful if you use a flash in or near water.)

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2. Change the meter to flash mode. Use the shutter speed obtained from the ambient reading, 1/60.

3. Turn on the flash and read the two together. Your goal is a two-thirds stop over the ambient light alone. Here, you want the combined reading to be 1/60 at f/7.1.

If the combined reading is greater than two-thirds stop over the ambient reading, turn down the flash or move it back. If it's less than two-thirds more, turn it up or move it closer.

This technique presents a couple of challenges. Without a modeling

light, you have to visually know where to put the light. The secret is to place your camera where it will be when you capture the image, then ask the subject turn her face as she will for the portrait (i.e., full-face view, two-thirds view or profile). Place the light accordingly.

It's really not as hard as it sounds. If you want to short-light a two-thirds view of the face with catch light in the 2 o'clock position, there's only one place for the light: angled 45-degrees from her nose.

Mind the size of the light source. (The smaller the light source, the harder the edge of the shadow; the larger or closer the light source, the softer the light and shadow edge.) I start with the soft box just out of the view of the camera, to keep the shadow edge soft as possible. Alone, plain flash can be too harsh. A soft box softens the light and makes it more pleasing.

As with any new technique, do some test runs with this method before using it on clients. ■

QUICK REFERENCE

Do you have trouble remembering one-third stops? I made a quick-reference pocket guide that shows one-third f/stops and shutter speeds. Get one free by sending a SASE business-size envelope to Doug Box, 2504 County Road 235, Caldwell, TX 77836. —D.B.