TWOPEASINABUCKET.COM PHOTOGRAPHY COURSE: 12 WEEKS TO BETTER PHOTOS

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LESSON Four: Flash

Ah, the Flash. Is it our nemesis or is it our friend? Personally, we'd rather avoid it altogether, but as you've certainly discovered over the past few weeks there are times when even the best combination of ISO, aperture, and shutter speed won't help us capture what we want in low light situations.

You might gather from reading that this we're not overly fond of flash use. Mainly we're not big fans of the way a flash can detract from a photograph's impact. That being said, proper use of a flash can really make a positive difference, and that's the topic of this week's lesson: tips & tricks for using your flash effectively.

There are two main types of flash for your camera - internal & external. An internal flash is a part of your camera (you can't remove it from the camera body) whereas an external flash is a detachable camera accessory. For the purpose of this discussion we're going to concentrate on using your internal, on-camera flash (though we'll touch on external flash a bit at the end.)

So first things first:
Whether you're indoors or outdoors, when should you use your flash?

Indoors

We are big fans of natural light, but, realistically, when you are indoors and there is insufficient light to capture your picture with a combination of ISO, shutter speed and aperture, you have very little choice but to use your flash. Still, within that use, there are some things to do to achieve a more pleasing effect with the flash.
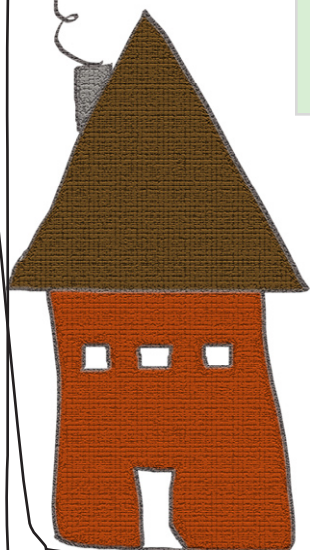
Consider distance

Because the camera flash becomes the dominant lightsource when used, it can cause some lighting extremes that will affect your photos. For example, the photo on the left was taken with the subjects standing directly in front of a light-colored wall. Notice the strong shadow behind the baby?

Placing a subject near a wall will cast a very strong shadow against that wall. **Move your subjects as far away from walls as possible.** If you do have to place them near a wall, try to find a dark colored wall that will lessen the impact of the shadow.

Camera flashes tend to be strong and extremely over eager in their desire to light the subject. A flash fires as low or as powerful as it believes the meter is telling it to, which means that if you're in a dark environment, the flash will attempt to light up the entire area. Because your flash tends to cast light on your subject like a bright flashlight, your subject can be washed out if you're standing to close to it (as shown in the photo on the left.)

A good rule of thumb is to **keep your subject at least 5-6 feet in front of you**, and leave at least that much distance behind the subject and the closest wall. In addition to keeping subjects at a consistent distance, meter on the subject as much as possible. You may lose your background, but it won't overblow your subjects. For the second carseat photo, we took a step back before taking the photo again.

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Finally, in regard to distance (both indoors and outdoors) it's important to keep in mind that **most built-in flashes have an effective range of about 10-12 feet**. This means that if you're trying to take a picture of something a good 12+ feet from you, your foreground will be well-lit but your background will be dark (which is really not helpful if you're trying to photograph that object in the background.) This also applies to telephoto lenses - your flash may not be strong enough to light up your subject if your lens is extended all the way out.

Consider Glare

It's very important to **consider the surfaces in front of you** as you look through the viewfinder. A glass, shiny, or mirrored surface is going to reflect that flash right back at you in your photo, which is not so appealing.

In regard to eyeglasses, a recent tip we read on the photography message board (such a valuable resource of information!) is to have your subject tip their glasses down slightly by lifting the part of the glasses that goes over the ears. (Tip courtesy of 2peas user flute4peace, real name Nikki.)

Speaking of eyes & reflection, red eye is caused by the reflection of the flash off the backside of the eyeball (the retina). Many point & shoot cameras have a **red eye reduction** setting that fires short bursts of the flash before the main flash fires. These bursts are meant to contract the iris of the eye and reduce the reflection on the retina from the main flash, and this technique seems to have varying degrees of success. Another option is to **have your subject look slightly over your shoulder instead of directly into the camera**. In your photos, they will appear to be looking at you, but the slight angle will prevent the flash from reflecting off the retina and greatly reduce the instances of red eye.

Q: amanda_m asked:
How do you handle lighting in a dark area besides bumping up ISO or using a flash?

A: If you're still frustrated with your indoor photos using an in-camera flash, look into diffusing your flash. There are products on the market now specifically designed for diffusing, or softening the intesity of the flash on a point & shoot camera. OR you can make your own diffuser -- while doing a Google search we read various accounts of people using everything from used dryer sheets to semi-opaque adhesive tape to coffee filters to vellum placed directly in front of the flash to help eliminate its harshness.

Using your Flash Outdoors

Let's not overlook a flash's usefulness outdoors. "What!?," you say, "Why would I use a flash outdoors when I have all that natural light?"

Even when you're outdoors you'll encounter situations where your subject's eyes are completely shadowed because the light source is too high or your subject is slightly in the shade while the rest of the scene is well-lit. This is where your flash will come in handy as a **fill flash.** Basically, a fill flash is your normal flash. But in scenarios where you already have ambient light, your flash is merely "filling in" the areas of your photo that may be shadowed or poorly lit. Here's the important part -- not only is fill flash helpful on bright, sunny days where you subject is backlit, but it can help "pop" your colors on gray, overcast winter days.

no flash
vs.
fill flash

Lastly, a bit about night portrait mode, also known as night scene mode. This mode can come in handy for lighting your nighttime photos. By using a slow shutter speed and syncing the flash, night portrait mode allows you to take a photo that properly exposes both the foreground and the background. It usually helps to use this mode with a tripod. Also, most importantly, make sure that your subjects remain still while you're taking the photo.

WEEKLY CHALLENGE: Experimenting with Fill Flash

So here's the question we want to focus on this week:
What can I do to eliminate shadows in outdoor photos?

Last week we told you to stay inside for the challenge. Now this week we'd like you to head outdoors if at all possible (we know it's hard this time of year) and take on one (or all 3) of the following parts of the challenge. [*We're giving you a few choices here based on the type of camera you own and the amount of control you're comfortable having over your camera.*]

You can use almost any shooting mode (such as AV or portrait) to accomplish parts 1 & 2, as long as the mode allows you to turn on your flash.

1. Use fill flash to "pop" colors on a gray day.
This one should work well with winter! Take a photo of your subject outdoors without the flash. Then manually turn on the flash for your camera so that it fires when you're taking a photo. (It helps to have a colorful subject or setting for this part of the challenge.)

2. Use fill flash to eliminate dark shadows on the face on a bright day.
Take a picture of a human subject outdoors in the sunshine without the flash. Then manually turn on your flash. (Your camera is going to think you're crazy since it knows that it already has enough light on a sunny day, so double check to make sure that your flash is going off before taking the second photo of your subject.)

3. Use fill flash to combat backlighting on a shadowed subject.
This challenge works best if your subject is in a shadow, or not as brightly lit as the background and surroundings. **You will get the best results if you do this option in manual mode.** The best thing to do is to manually turn on your flash on the camera, then meter on the brightest area of the photo you wish to take. Set your exposure meter for the bright area. Then recompose to focus on your subject and press the shutter. Ideally, your flash will fire, giving light to your subject while the camera takes care of the background. Your camera will expose the brighter area of the photo correctly and your flash will fire enough to expose your shadowed subject correctly. Now turn off your flash and take the photo again without the fill flash.

Bonus points: Experiment with night portrait mode if you have it on your camera.

The above photos are an example of part one of the weekly challenge. The first photo was taken without the flash, while the second was taken using the in-camera flash.(Note how using the flash can also create catchlights in your subject's eyes.) The photos below are an example of part two of the challenge (same kid, 5 years later.) The first photo was taken without the flash. Note that the fill-flash did overexpose the subject in the second photo, but it's nothing a few steps in your photo editing program can't handle. Check out this week's challenge online for more photo examples.

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Q & A: Flash

Q: Caroscraps asked: Do I need an external flash and why? (and why are they so expensive?) and Holly Koenigsfeld said as well, "I would love to know about external flashes and how to use them."

A: Do you absolutely need an external flash? No. Are they more versatile and useful than a built-in flash? Definitely. The biggest benefit to external flashes is that you can control both the intensity of the flash as well as direction of the flash (so it doesn't always have to be on full-beam facing foward.) You can turn the flash away from your subjects, bounce the flash off walls or the ceiling, or diffuse the light with an accessory such as a Lightsphere to soften the appearance of the flash in your photos. In fact, you might not be able to tell that you've taken a flash photo at all!

External flashes are more expensive because, just like your camera body, you can adjust almost everything on one to suit your needs, and all that control comes with a price. We honestly believe that a good external flash is just as worthy an investment as quality lenses when it comes to SLR (and dSLR) photography.

Q: Theshyone asked: hot shoe, slave flash, whatever you call it, how do you use it?
A: A hot shoe is the bracket on an SLR or digital SLR camera where an external flash attaches to the camera. A slave flash is a second flash, not attached to your camera, that responds to the flash on your camera and fires in sync with the shutter. The flash on your camera controls the slave flash, and you can set it up so that the flash on your camera doesn't fire but your slave flash does fire, or have both fire at the same time. A slave flash is a secondary light source, and is useful for additional lighting or contrasting lighting in a photo.

Q: Juliettie asked: What is the best way to use fill flash outdoors? My camera doesn't have a fill flash per se...I can force the flash but it seems to create new problems (harsh skintones with loss of dimension) in place of old ones (heavy shadows undereye, etc.)
A: You, dear reader, may enounter these same problems while you complete this week's challenge. While an external flash allows you to control the intensity of the flash, it's hard to control a built-in flash. The best thing to do is experiment and become familiar with situations that work with the built-in flash. If you're in a brightly lit situation that needs fill-flash, you really need to try to meter on the brightest spot of the photo and set your exposure based on the brightest area. If you accidentally meter on the darkest area, your camera is going to tell your flash to fire with full power because it thinks it's dark, and then your subjects will most likely be washed out.

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