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# SHOOTING GREAT PORTRAITS WITH ONE LIGHT!

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Written by Kent DuFault



Vanessa Hutd  
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/svenjajan/2971916995>

We all start photography with minimal equipment. Perhaps we didn't even start out with a DSLR!

But once the photography bug bites, most of us expand into a DSLR camera, a lens or two, a tripod, and perhaps even an external electronic flash.

It's at this point that we often want to stop spending and start creating!

I've been asked many times if it's possible to create great portraits with a single light source.

The answer is, yes.

You might even have more light sources available to you than you realize!



web4camguy

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/web4camguy/9992345094>

*This portrait was lit by one light. The light source was a window. This is a great portrait. It has personality. It says something about the subject. There is visible background that gives the image depth, but it's not distracting. The subject's dark skin and shirt contrast nicely with the lighter background. These opposing elements force the viewer's eyes to the mid-tone of the man's face. And the nose ring has an unusual shape, which serves as a focal point; it directs the viewer's eyes to the face and anchors them there.*

As you can see from the above photograph, much of a portrait's success lies not only in your choice of lighting, but also in the composition, background, props, and focus.

Would this image be as successful if the background were dark? No. The man's head would begin to disappear. We wouldn't see the texture of his hair or the shape of his face.

### **When working with a single light source- What is Your First Consideration?**

Your first consideration should be- Are you going to create your portrait inside or outside?

This decision will have a major impact on all the decisions that will follow.

## INDOORS

In the example above, the photographer did not create as compelling a portrait as the previous example.

Why is that?

1. The use of the light was very limited in its scope.
2. The light is very directional, and the light is only hitting the woman's face.
3. A poor choice of background color made this woman blend into the background.
4. There isn't a compelling composition to anchor the viewer's eyes to any particular part of her face.



*When working indoors with a single light source, your goal should be to expand the capabilities of that one light. (By the way... Did you notice how this woman's head is disappearing into the background?)*

Jay DeFehr

[https://www.flickr.com/photos/jay\\_defehr/8723313395](https://www.flickr.com/photos/jay_defehr/8723313395)



nydia hartono

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/nydiahartono/14337689795>

*Here, the photographer made several choices that are an improvement on example number #2.*

When shooting indoors you want to try and 'divide' your one light into multiple lights. You can do this through the use of bounced light, a technique called feathering, and reflectors.

For those of you that may be unfamiliar with the term, 'feathering'; it's when you position a light source so that it hits more than one object. Take a look at the example.

1. The single light source was bounced off of a wall to the left of the camera. This helped the portrait by creating a softer (yet directional) light source.
2. The bounce also 'feathered' the light from the subject to the background. This kept her head from disappearing. The single light source now effectively lit two objects.

The image could have been improved with the addition of one simple technique.



Kelly B

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/foreverphoto/2187894315>

This photograph has all the elements of the previous example: one light source to camera left and the light was feathered to hit the subject and the background. But, one additional element was added. A large reflector was brought in from camera right. This kept the woman's face (and the background area to the right of the image) from going completely black. Reflecting your one light source is another technique to divide the light for a better effect.

It occurs to me that you may be thinking, "I don't want to purchase more camera gear such as reflectors!"

Good reflectors can be found just about anywhere. Here are some examples of reflectors that I've used in the past.

- Someone holding a white bed sheet
- White art board that was taped together
- White Styrofoam insulation
- Tinfoil glued to cardboard
- A mirror removed from a wall
- A piece of sheet metal
- White Foamcore purchased from an art supply store

Your reflector could be as simple as placing your subject close to a white (or light) wall.



Melissa Ann Barrett  
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/dreamingmom/3930074562>

*Here is an excellent example of finding natural reflectors within the home. The single light source was a large window to camera right. White furniture and white walls surrounded the child; these natural 'reflectors' filled in the shadows on the child's face creating a pleasing portrait.*

Now, when you're digging around the house looking for something to use as a reflector- keep these points in mind.

- You want the reflector to be as opaque as possible so that the light reflects back and doesn't just pass through the object (for example, a white bed sheet should be doubled up).
- You want the object to be white or close to white. If the object has a color, the light will pick up that color as it's reflected. This will throw a colorcast onto your subject.
- Reflectors that are white will bounce back a broad soft light. The intensity will be much lower than a bright reflector such as metal, mirrors, or tinfoil. White reflectors need to be closer to the subject. Bright reflectors need to be further away from the subject.



Dustin Gaffke

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/onepointfour/8358911793>

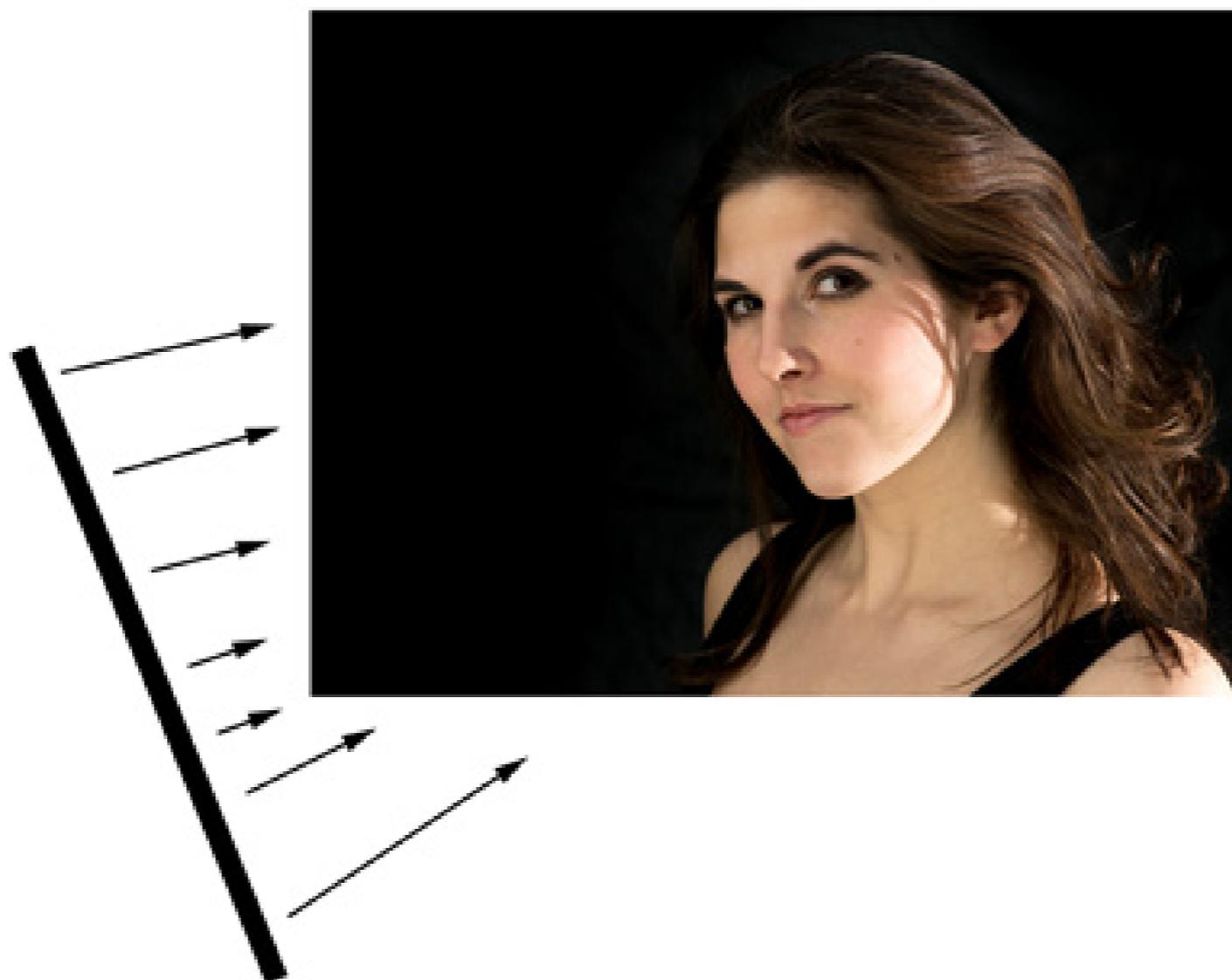
*It's also important to develop your skill in evaluating the 'quality' of the light that is available to you. The light hitting the model's cheek and hair is harsh window light. This type of light comes from a window that has direct sunlight, or a flash unit that is directly pointed at the subject. Had that light hit her face, it would not be a pleasing portrait. This photographer solved the problem by using the harsh light as a 'rim' light from behind. The photographer also utilized 'feathering' by allowing some of that harsh light to pass by the model and hit a reflector (where the quality of the light was turned into soft light). The reflected light became the 'main light'.*

When working with one light, an important skill that you want to develop is how to evaluate potential locations for your portrait.

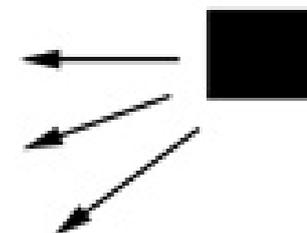
1. Should the background be light or dark?
2. Are there any natural reflectors around?
3. Can you add light by using existing resources such as a window, doorway, or incandescent lights?

**The Reflector returns  
a large soft light source.**

**This becomes the main light. We have utilized  
all three techniques here: the light has been split, feathered,  
and reflected.**



**Harsh Light  
Source is feathered  
away from the  
background and  
toward a  
reflector**





Dustin Gaffke  
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/onepointfour/8358911793>

*You could place your model in total shade. That choice eliminates the sun from having a major factor in the lighting of the model. But... you could 'split your light source' by allowing the sun to illuminate the background. Then, use your electronic flash (your one light source) as the main light on the model. Imagine in your mind what this photograph would have looked like if the photographer had chosen a point of view that put the shadowed trees to the right into the background. The flashed main light would then have looked overpowering and harsh. The background would be too dark, and the image would lack depth. Evaluating your location is a key skill.*

## OUTDOORS-

Maybe you hadn't thought about this- but virtually any time you shoot portraits outdoors (unless it's at night) you're going to get some additional lighting from Mother Nature.

That additional light from Mother Nature can be helpful- but it can also be harmful.

Again, this goes back to your evaluation of your location.

Let's say that your one light source is your portable external flash, and the setting is a park with midday sunlight.

You want to create a pleasing portrait of a young woman under these circumstances.

Let's look at two ways that you could handle this.



jdogg90

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/fortheunofit/6845257928>

*A metallic pie tin makes a great ring light for your flash. This will soften the light, yet give you the flash power that's necessary in outdoor, midday, lighting situations.*

The harsh light of the direct flash worked pretty well in this instance. You need to learn how to balance the exposure between your main light and the background. The harsh flash worked well because it matched the quality of light coming from the sun. What if this photograph had been taken at sunset? It would look terrible because now the light from the flash is not in sync with the sun.

What would you do to fix that?

You would have to soften the light from the flash.

When mixing harsh midday light with an electronic flash, it's best to use manual mode.

1. Put your camera and flash in manual mode.
2. With the flash off, determine your exposure for the background. Make sure the shutter speed is within the flash sync range (usually 1/250th of a second or slower).
3. Make a note of your aperture.
4. Turn your flash on.
5. Using a TTL flash mode, set your camera to a metering pattern of center weight or spot, and set your flash exposure compensation to +1/2 stop.
6. Shoot a test shot and adjust the flash exposure compensation as necessary.

**QUICK TIP** - If you're interested in an inexpensive way to soften the light from your flash you can make a ring light out of a pie tin. (Just make sure there is no pie left in it!)



Cut a hole in the middle of the pie tin so that it will slip over the head of your flash unit. Use a few pieces of duct tape to secure the tin to your flash. This will instantly turn your direct flash into a more pleasing light source.

Mike Nelson

[https://www.flickr.com/photos/mike\\_nelson/4681015171](https://www.flickr.com/photos/mike_nelson/4681015171)

*This man was photographed with a pie tin flash. Can you see it reflected in his glasses? Did you notice how this direct light from the flash has been softened?*



Timothy Marsee  
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/tmarsee530/4713079316>

*The second way to handle this situation would be to place the model in full sun, but position her so that the sun is hitting her from the back. Even in direct midday sun, it is possible to place a model so that the sun will illuminate them from the back. This way you have used nature to create a secondary rim light. Your flash (your one light source) is then used as your main light.*

*Examine this photograph and the previous example of this woman. Look how different the lighting appears despite the fact that the main light source was the same for both photographs! I can't overstate the importance of learning how to evaluate your location.*

The second way you could photograph your young model is like this-

What would happen (in the above example) if we took this photograph without our one light, the electronic flash? Her face would be underexposed and way too dark. But, what if we increased our exposure so that she wasn't too dark? Then the background would become blown out from overexposure. Is there an alternative if we don't have a flash? Sure! You could use a reflector to bounce some of that sunlight back into her face.

This setup is also best shot in manual mode. Set your metering pattern to spot or center-weighted. You want the meter to evaluate the model for your exposure, not the background.



Adriel O. Socrates  
[https://www.flickr.com/photos/adriel\\_socrates/5560606768](https://www.flickr.com/photos/adriel_socrates/5560606768)

*In this example, the photographer's only light source was a window. They placed their young model close enough to the window to provide soft light that feathered across the girl's face and the background. They then practiced the technique of dividing the light source by bouncing some of the light back onto the face (from the shadow side) using a white card.*

Again, use the TTL mode for your flash and set your exposure compensation to +1/2 stop.

I bet you're wondering why I keep telling you to increase the flash exposure by 1/2 stop?

It's because most skin tones are lighter than 18% gray. So, the meter has a tendency to want to make skin tone too dark. Of course, this will vary based on a person's skin color.

I have found that +1/2 stop is a great place to start, and then make adjustments from there.

Let's examine some portraits that were created with one light source, and see what we can learn from them...



Mr Seb

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/mrseb/4208666827/in/photostream/>

*In this portrait, the photographer's single light source was a simple household lamp. But, take notice how they evaluated their location and used it to produce a better lighting scenario. The photographer placed the model next to a wall mirror- two advantages were achieved by doing this: 1.) That side of the photograph didn't go completely dark. The mirror reflected what was happening near the light source. That choice also kept the model's head from disappearing into darkness, which added depth to the photograph; and. 2.) The mirror 'reflected' specular light from the lamp back onto the model, giving her a hair light on the shadow side.*



Peter McConnochie  
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/dougliz/9553559887>

*This photograph demonstrates a technique we haven't discussed yet. Can you identify it? This technique is, "the subtraction of light". Subtracting light can create a pleasant modeling on your subject's face as much as adding light. In this example, the single light source was open shade. Open shade is very pleasant lighting for a portrait; it can, however, be somewhat flat. By placing the subject close to the dark wall, the light was absorbed by the wall, and shadowing was created on her face.*



Vanessa Hutd

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/svenjajan/2971916995>

*One important thing to remember- if you only have one light, it's best if it's not coming directly from the camera. Try to bounce the light source, or place the light source at an angle to the subject. Direct lighting (such as the example above) with deep shadows usually works best for men.*



Kare Davy  
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/karedavy/5240517990/in/photostream/>

*The quality of the light (harsh or soft) is just as important as the direction of the light- maybe even more so. A skilled photographer can take any light and alter the effect it will have on the subject. Most of the time this means trying to soften the light so that it doesn't create harsh shadows. If your one light source is a simple external flash, you can alter the quality of light by simply attaching a homemade bounce card.*



Dwight Sipier  
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/photofarmer/2968551437>

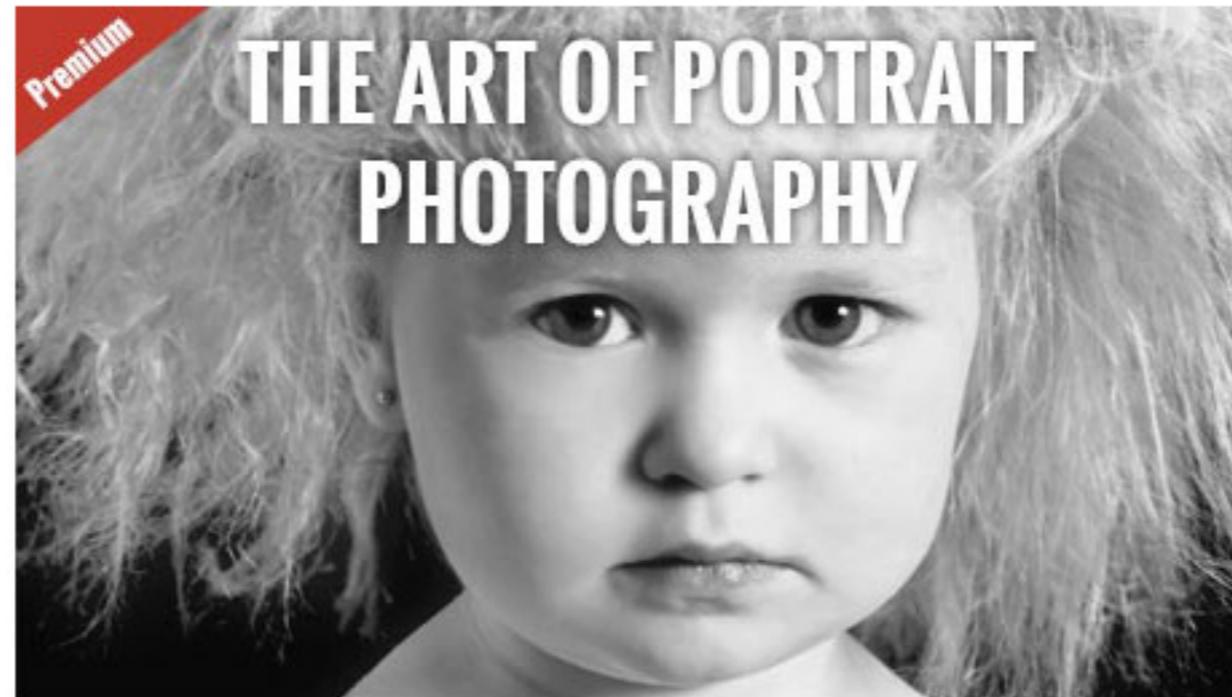
Let's recap some of the skills that you will want to acquire, so that you can take great portraits with a single light source.

- Evaluate your location
  - Look for other light sources that are a part of the environment
  - Look for natural reflectors
  - Look for natural flags (to subtract light)
- Evaluate your subject
  - Are they light skinned or dark skinned (your background would most likely be the opposite tone)?
  - Are they male or female (females usually look best with full light and males can get by with deep shadows)?
  - Is the portrait a head shot, half body, or full length (how much area does your one light source have to cover)?
- Learn to recognize ordinary objects that can expand the scope of your single light source (divide the light, feather the light, reflect the light, minimize the light)
  - Any large white, silver, or mirrored object can make a reflector (think bed sheets, trashcan covers, and tinfoil)
  - Any translucent object can soften harsh direct light (think frosted plexiglass, rice paper, or sheets of plastic)
  - Any large dark object can subtract light (think black spray paint and cardboard)

I hope you've enjoyed this guide.  
Have fun and keep shooting!  
Kent DuFault

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