3 LIGHTING TIPS FOR PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY

Quick Guide
Written by Lauren Gherardi

I remember the day that I purchased my very first studio strobe. I was working in a camera store, and I had saved up money from at least two paychecks. At the time, Annie Leibowitz was one of my biggest inspirations and the amazing work she would create with just one light was genius!

I thought about how much this would up my photography game. Getting that first light, a reflector, and a pack of colored gels, I thought my photo quality would just sky rocket from there! I was soon to discover that I was not quite the photography prodigy I had imagined myself to be.

Little did I know that there was so much more to learn. Before I bought that strobe I had been using continuous lighting, or "hot lights."

What I knew about those lights was that you place the light where you want it and shoot.

I hadn't taken into account the sheer power (light intensity) of a strobe.

There was this tremendous amount of extraneous light bouncing around in the living room of my one-bedroom apartment, and it would change the amount of detail my camera would pick up in an image, unless I learned how to control it.

A couple years of practice, tons of reading, and many experimental photo shoots later, and I feel that it's safe to say that a one-strobe setup is one of my favorite techniques.

In this guide, I'm going to explore three portrait lighting techniques using just one strobe, a beauty dish, and a bounce reflector.

I will show you examples of how light positioning can completely change the look and feel of your final image.

In this guide we will cover the following topics:

· Considering your space for your shoot
· Choosing your diffuser
· Front lighting: how to best position your light on the subject while still giving you room to shoot
· Top lighting (*Bohemian Rhapsody* anyone?)
· Back lighting: making your subject glow

Recommended Reading: If you'd like to learn more about light and how you can use it to create better photos, grab a copy of Photzy's premium guide: Understanding Light Book One.

Example of front lighting. The light is positioned to camera right and 45 degrees above the model, angled downward. A white reflector is placed to the left of the camera.

CONSIDERING YOUR SPACE

Whether you are shooting in a low-ceiling, one-bedroom apartment or you have a large studio space, it's important to consider how the space will affect your lighting, and also what diffuser sizes will work best for the space that you have to work with.

I have a few very large diffusers starting at about 60" in size and going up from there.

I enjoy using large diffusers, as it softens and spreads the light out over a much larger surface area.

However, for the shoot illustrated in this guide, we were in my living room, and we were mainly focusing on headshots.

I didn't need to use something as large as 60+ inches.

Key Lesson: The size of your portrait lighting diffuser is important. Consider the area that you will be working in, as well as the area that you need to light. Choosing a very large diffuser could be impractical if your shooting area is small, or you aren't lighting a large area (such as a full-length portrait).

You also want to consider bouncing the light, especially if you're in a tight space and you want to use an open-ended diffuser, such as some of the adapters that simply attach to the end of a portable electronic flash.

You may be surprised by how much light fills the space when it is bounced off of the ceiling and walls.

The trick for a smaller space is to have the subject a few feet away from the backdrop, the light source, and your camera, and a few additional feet away from the subject. This allows **more room** around the subject to position the lighting in different ways.

Key Lesson: When shooting in small spaces, leave at least a few feet from the subject to the background. Also, give as much room as you can between the subject and the camera, as well as the subject and the light source. You want enough room to play with the positioning of the light.

Photograph by Lauren Gherardi

Example of front lighting.

CHOOSING YOUR DIFFUSER

We have our strobe, reflector, model, and background.

We just need to figure out what lighting effect you are going for.

Let's go over your diffuser options.

Soft boxes, octoboxes, and stripboxes

These lighting boxes attach to your electronic flash and are going to give you **directional soft light**. They control light spill fairly well, and they mimic daylight by producing an even spread of light and softer shadows on the subject.

Umbrellas…ellas…ellas

Umbrellas normally come in two styles: reflective and shoot through. Reflective umbrellas are black on the outside, and on the inside they can be white, gold, or silver. Some umbrellas allow you to 'shoot through' the umbrella. These models typically allow you to add a black backing that turns them into a 'bounce back' reflective umbrella. The reflective umbrellas are better at providing controlled lighting. Shoot-through umbrellas produce softer light, but it spills everywhere. Reflective umbrellas can offer some 'warmth' to portraits when the interior is a gold surface. White shoot-through umbrellas soften the look of the harsh strobe, but do very little to control the direction or shape of the light.

Beauty dish

This is the diffuser of choice for my example shoot in this guide. It creates harsher shadows, and the effect is somewhere between a soft box and direct flash. The dish is reflective, and it helps to spread the light evenly over the subject. The model that I worked with here has very defined features, and I felt that the harsher shadows would really compliment her look.

> ◈ **Key Lesson:** Shoot-through white umbrellas offer very soft light, but very little control over the direction or shape of the light. Bounce umbrellas offer better control, and you can alter the color temperature of the light by varying the interior surface of the umbrella. Some umbrellas can be converted to bounce or shoot-through umbrellas. Boxes soften the light and offer a greater degree of control over light spill. Boxes also mimic daylight very well. A beauty dish creates a slightly harsher light source, which can be beneficial when a subject has very defined features.

Photograph by Lauren Gherardi

Example of front lighting.

FRONT LIGHTING

Front lighting was my lighting of choice for this example shoot. The image on the left and the ones on pages 3 and 5 all have the 'front lighting' position.

The difference in the three photographs was my direction to the model on how to position her head, hands, and body.

I positioned the light source slightly to my right, at a 45-degree angle to the model.

It was attached to a boom light stand.

> ⬦ **Key Lesson:** A boom light stand allows greater flexibility in positioning the light. You can move the light source closer to the model, while also keeping the stand out of the picture area. Here is an example of a 'boom light stand.'

The reflector was used as a slight fill light for the shadows. It was positioned to my left.

I didn't want to fill in all the shadows,

but add some soft, reflected light. If I filled in all of the shadows with my reflector, it would defeat the purpose of using the beauty dish!

> 💎 **Key Lesson:** In portrait photography, considering the shadows is equally important to your considerations on the lighting.

Using the boom stand, with front lighting, also helps to create more space for you as the photographer to move around your subject while still being able to have your light source directly in front of the subject.

Don't own a boom stand?

It's not a problem when you're starting out. Place the light source directly next to your camera and adjust the stand upward, slightly higher than your subject, and pointing downwards toward them.

You'll create a similar effect, and you can adjust your reflector accordingly if the shadows aren't quite what you are looking for.

Out of the three lighting schemes discussed in this guide, front lighting would be the most natural for

you to try first.

Consider this: Had I used a light-colored background instead of a dark background, it would have lightened the entire image. The dark background absorbs the light.

This is the most straightforward option when you're starting out with portrait lighting, and it requires the least amount of post-production editing.

For the final images in this guide, I felt that this lighting really produced the look that I was going for.

> ⚠ **Note:** The texture that you see in the background of the final images is a duplicate layer with motion blur added. Perhaps I will write a guide on this technique for you!

> 👤 **Recommended Reading:** If you'd like to learn more about light and how you can use it to create better photos, grab a copy of Photzy's premium guide: <u>Understanding Light Book One.</u>

Photograph by Lauren Gherardi

Example of back lighting.

BACK LIGHTING

In setting up for the back lighting examples, I created a look that ranged from a 1970's rock star (a.k.a. Grace Slick) to a 1980's heavy metal band (think Debbie Harry of Blondie) in one quick movement of the light source.

◈ **Key Lesson:** When you're working with only one light source, the source must provide the back lighting. In general, this will not be the 'main light.' The main light is the light that illuminates to subject's face. With the light source being placed behind the model, the white reflector becomes the main light on the model's face.

Photograph by Lauren Gherardi

Example of back lighting.

You can see in the image on the previous page and the image on the left that there was some light spill onto the backdrop, which took away from the intense black that we saw in the first few images of front lighting.

If I were using a much smaller diffuser than the beauty dish, I could have also placed the back lighting strobe directly behind the model and just slightly lower.

This would have created a tighter halo effect around the subject, and it would have preserved the intensity of the dark backdrop.

◈ **Key Lesson:** Back lighting tends to require a higher level of skill in controlling both the direction of the light source and the light spill.

Something that I enjoy about back lighting is the ability to make your subject glow.

Depending on what the subject is wearing, and the color that you choose for the background, you can really have some fun and create unique effects with back lighting.

In the image examples on pages 9 and 10, I placed the light source behind the model and to camera right. I positioned the light so as to not interfere too much with the backdrop.

The reflector (the main light) was to camera left, and I had the model turn toward the reflector.

When I backlight images, I enjoy seeing the light come through the texture of the clothing, hair, etc.

It gives the image an 'otherworldly' appearance.
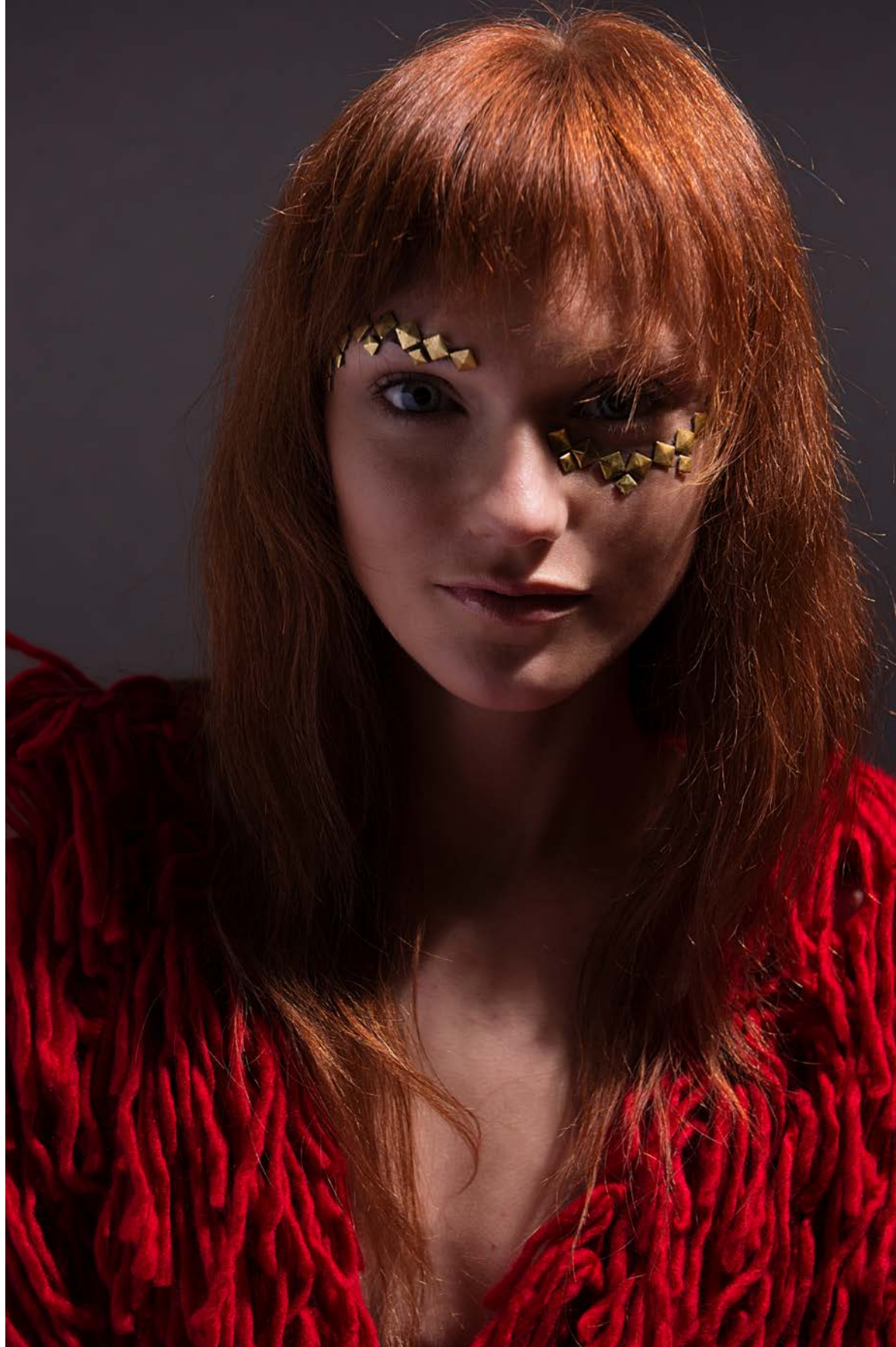
Photograph by Lauren Gherardi

Example of top lighting

TOP LIGHTING

Top lighting instantly gives me a flashback to the *Bohemian Rhapsody* music video by the rock band Queen.

Top lighting can create really dramatic effects in portraiture.

It only highlights the horizontal plains of the face, while leaving the rest in shadow.

For these example images, the model worked to find the lighting by tilting her head back.

I had the reflector beneath her to help soften the intense shadows that top lighting can create.

This is typically not the most flattering light for traditional portraits, because of the harsh shadows that it creates under the eyes.

However, it is challenging to us as photographers to find new ways to light things.

Photograph by Lauren Gherardi

By directing the positioning of the model, I have made creative use of top lighting that really creates a dramatic portrait.

The image on the previous page has the model facing straight on to the camera to illustrate the amount of shadows that top lighting can create and where they fall.

The image on the left illustrates the model leaning back, and facing up, thus positioning her face for more flattering light.

In the image on the left and the one on the next page, you can see that the reflector is placed directly opposite of the strobe: slightly underneath the model and facing upward.

◆ **Key Lesson:** Top lighting can provide some really wonderful dramatic results. However, you must take the time to study the light carefully, and then adjust your subject accordingly.

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Photograph by Lauren Gherardi

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WRAPPING IT UP

No matter which lighting set up appeals to you, the best thing that you can do is experiment.

Try different-colored reflectors and backdrops, and most definitely try different lighting diffusers. Play with props and a colored wardrobe. Shoot in different areas to learn how the space affects your efforts.

Once you master the one-light setup, adding more strobes to your shoots will start to make more sense. You will be able to see where you want to fill in the image with light or add light to a different part of the set without compromising the lighting on the subject.

Shooting in my smaller apartments over the last few years has taught me to love more simple lighting techniques, and it helped me grow my collection of different diffusers and gels.

It has also helped me to become more comfortable shooting in smaller spaces, and become more prepared to use an appropriate setup for whatever space I have to work with.

This is why, before adding more strobes to your collection, you should consider the space that you have to shoot in.

Learn which diffusers will give you the desired effects that you seek by trying out different types on a single lighting scheme. Get comfortable with using your reflector for fill lighting or as a main light.

Although a full studio with multiple strobes can create incredible images, don't doubt your ability to do the same with a more simplistic setup within your own home!

Self-Check Quiz:

1. Which lighting setup is the least flattering for traditional portraits?

2. Before setting up your strobe, you need to consider your _____ in which you will be shooting.

3. Why is it important to choose the correct diffuser?

4. Using a _____ stand is an easy way to have the light source directly in front of your subject while still having space to move around with your camera.

5. How can you create a tighter halo effect behind your subject?

6. Which music video does top lighting remind me of?

7. What is the difference between using an umbrella or a soft box?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lauren Gherardi is a photographer and a jewelry designer. She enjoys capturing women as her subjects, and she is inspired by all things retro, floral, brightly colored, and too many photographers to count.

You can find her on Instagram at @arlaphoto.

Congratulations! You've completed this Photzy guide!

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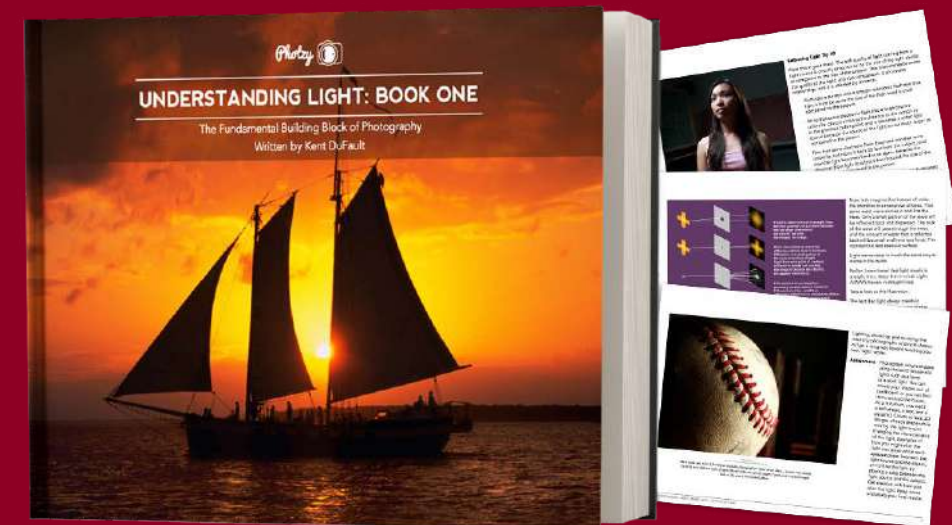
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