

TIPS TO IMPROVE YOUR OCF PHOTOGRAPHY

I love, love, **LOVE** using my lights. Indoors or out, in the shade or in full sun, I use at least one in every single portrait session. Don't get me wrong, I know there are tons of gorgeous natural light portraits out there but for me and my style, using light is the way to go!



There are many reasons why I prefer creating my own light vs using natural light but the biggest one is it allows me shoot anywhere any time of day. How many times have you had a session where it was really gloomy outside or you had the light run out before you were finished with your client? Sure, you can crank up your ISO; but at some point, there just isn't enough light. When you use Off Camera Flash (OCF), you create your own light!

Whether you're using speedlights or strobes, here are a few tips to help you on your lighting journey.

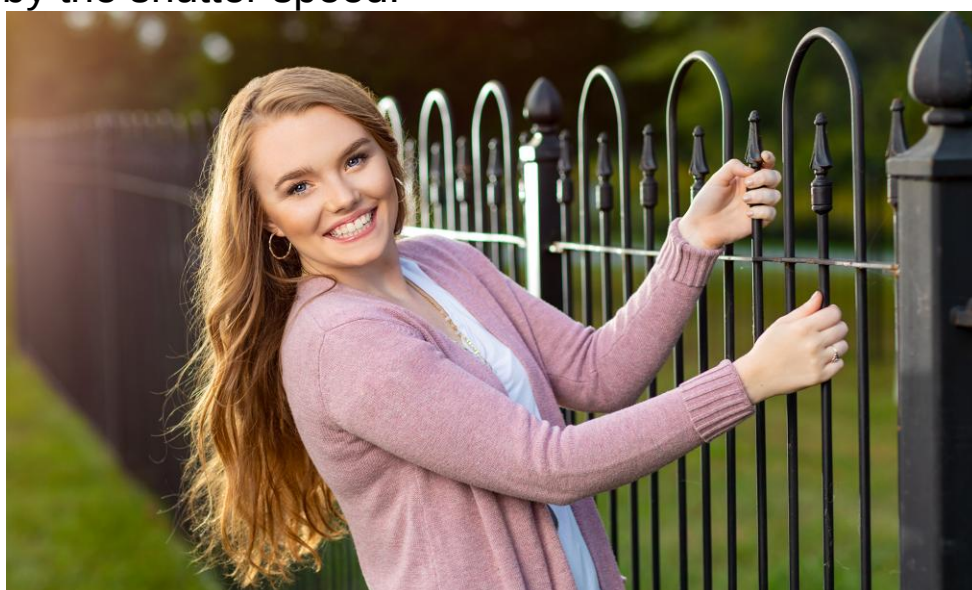


1. Put it in manual mode.

I know this may seem intimidating but trust me, it's super easy! You just adjust the power of the flash/strobe up and down depending on how much light you need. It's the exact same principle as adjusting the exposure on your camera. Move it one way, you get more light, move it the other you get less light.

The biggest thing to remember is the aperture controls the flash/strobe power and the shutter speed controls the ambient light. If your subject is too bright raise your aperture; too dark lower it. If you want to have more ambient light showing in the photo, lower your shutter speed. If you'd prefer less light, raise it up to your camera's max sync speed. Adjusting your ISO will also affect the ambient light in a photo.

The exception to this rule is if you're using your flash/strobe in high speed sync (HSS) mode. Then the ambient is also affected by the shutter speed.



2. Decide what you're trying to achieve ahead of time.

You can use your flash/strobe in so many different ways! Turn the flash/strobe power way down, it becomes fill flash. This means that the majority of the light in the image is coming from the ambient light. Turn the power up high, it typically overpowers the ambient light and the flash/strobe becomes the main light source. By figuring out how you want to light your subject ahead of time, you can plan accordingly and won't waste time fiddling with the light.



These photos were taking minutes apart from each other. The one on the left I was using the light as fill flash, so it was at a low power. For the one on the right, I increased the light power to create a more dramatic image.

3. Then pick the right modifier for the look you desire.

A 30x60 softbox is going to have a completely different look than a 22" gridded beauty dish. Typically, the larger the softbox, the softer the light will look. There many things to factor in (such as how close your light is to your subject, and the way you've positioned it) but this is a basic principle to remember.

large modifier = soft
small modifier = hard



For this image I used a 30x60 softbox on camera left. While the image is dramatic and has shadows, you can see that the shadows are soft and the light wraps around the edge of her face.

Here are a few more examples.

60" octobox, right side,
soft light,
shadow edges are reduced.



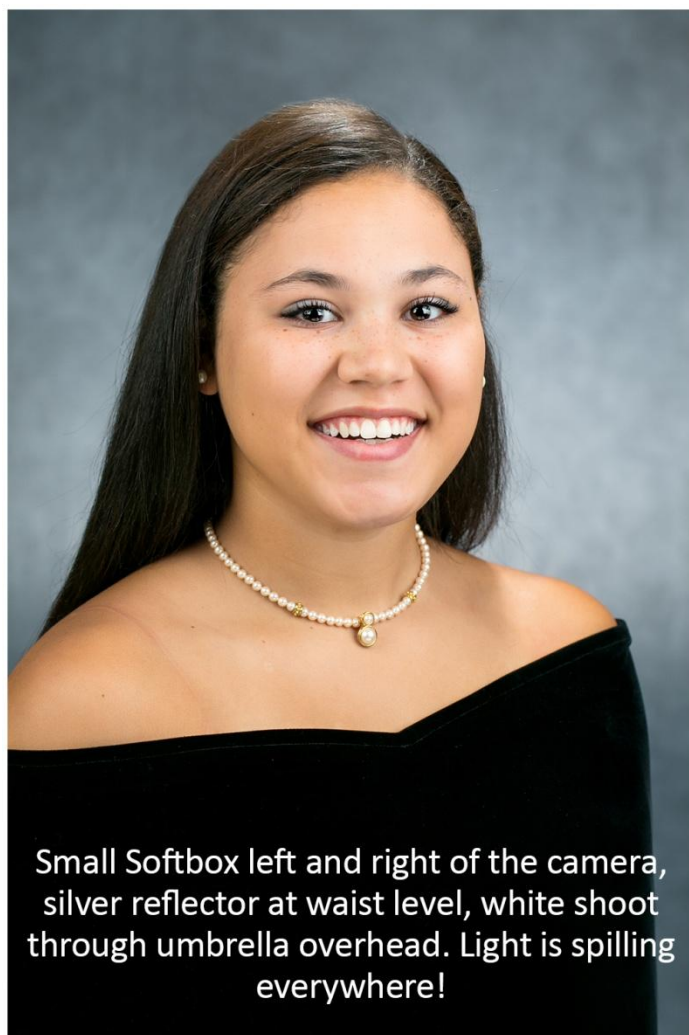
22" beauty dish, top right,
hard light, shadows are
more pronounced. Subject
face towards light, shadows
on side of face and under
chin.



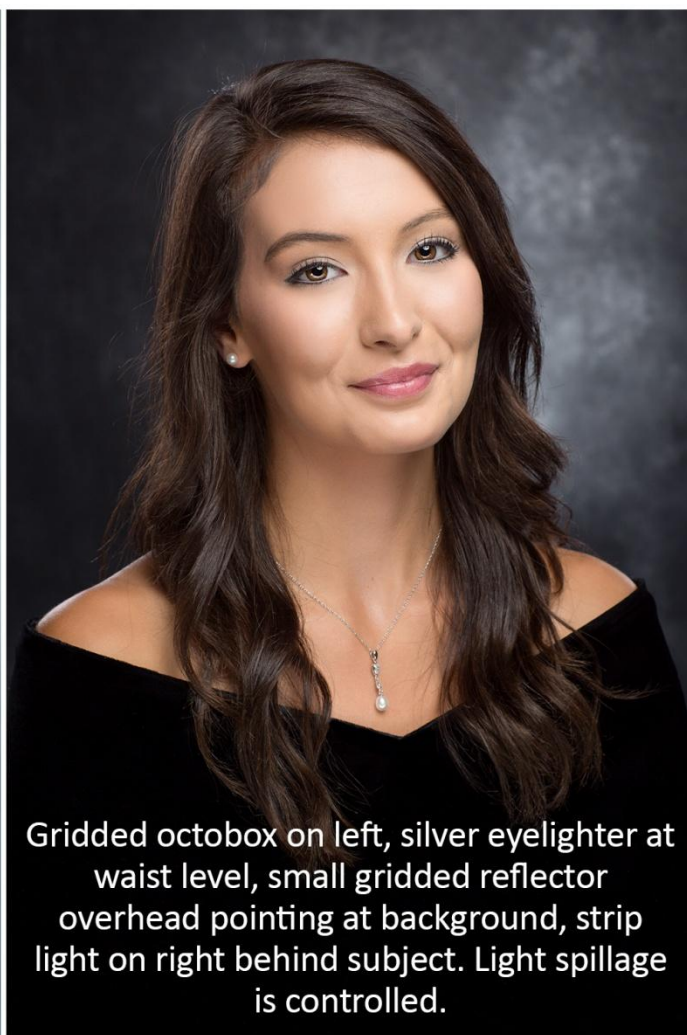
22" beauty dish, top right,
hard light, shadows are
more pronounced. Subject
face towards camera,
shadows beside nose.



Another thing to keep in mind is even if the modifiers are the same size, they are not necessarily equal. A shoot through umbrella will have way more spill than a gridded octobox or a beauty dish.



Small Softbox left and right of the camera, silver reflector at waist level, white shoot through umbrella overhead. Light is spilling everywhere!



Gridded octobox on left, silver eyelighter at waist level, small gridded reflector overhead pointing at background, strip light on right behind subject. Light spillage is controlled.

4. Invest in a Light Meter.

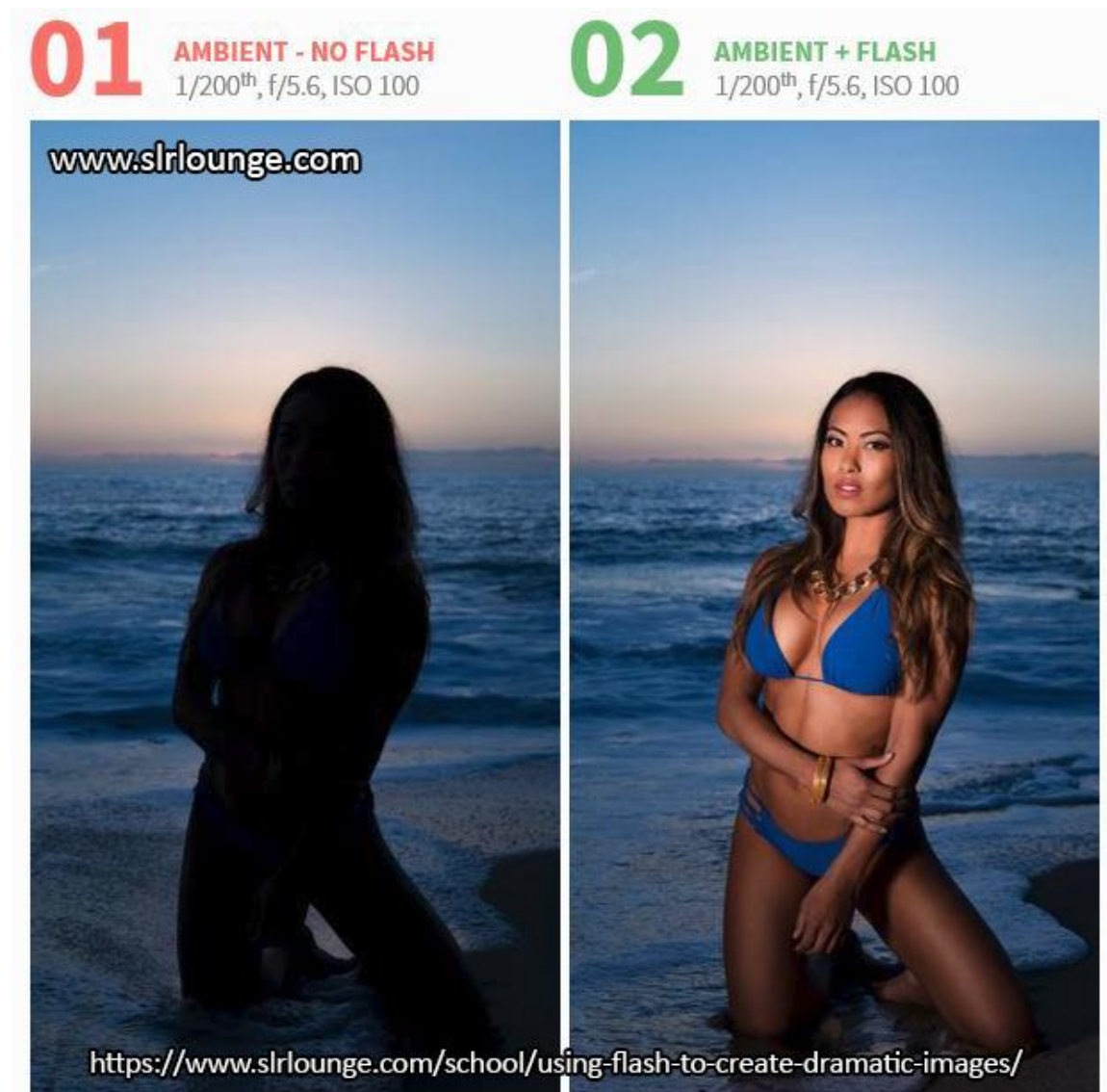
I used my lights for about two years without using my light meter. I would take a shot, look on the back of the camera and then make several adjustments to my camera settings and the settings on the light until everything looked about right. So much time I wasted! With a light meter, you push one button and it tells you exactly what your settings should be! It even tells you the percentage of light coming from the flash/strobe! (This goes hand in hand with tip #2)

5. Forget about the meter in your camera.

If you are using your flash/strobes in manual mode, the meter in your camera will be completely wrong. Just ignore it and trust either your light meter or your histogram.

Here is any easy was to get started. Turn your flash/strobe trigger off and expose for the background using the camera's metering system. When you have the background exposure that you want,

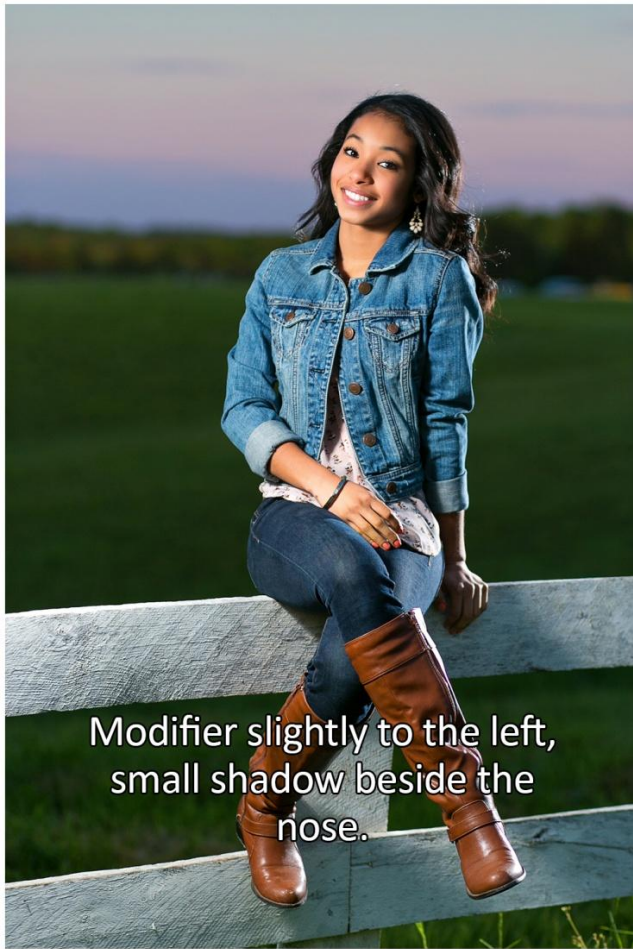
turn your flash/strobe trigger back on and then use the flash/strobe to illuminate your subject.



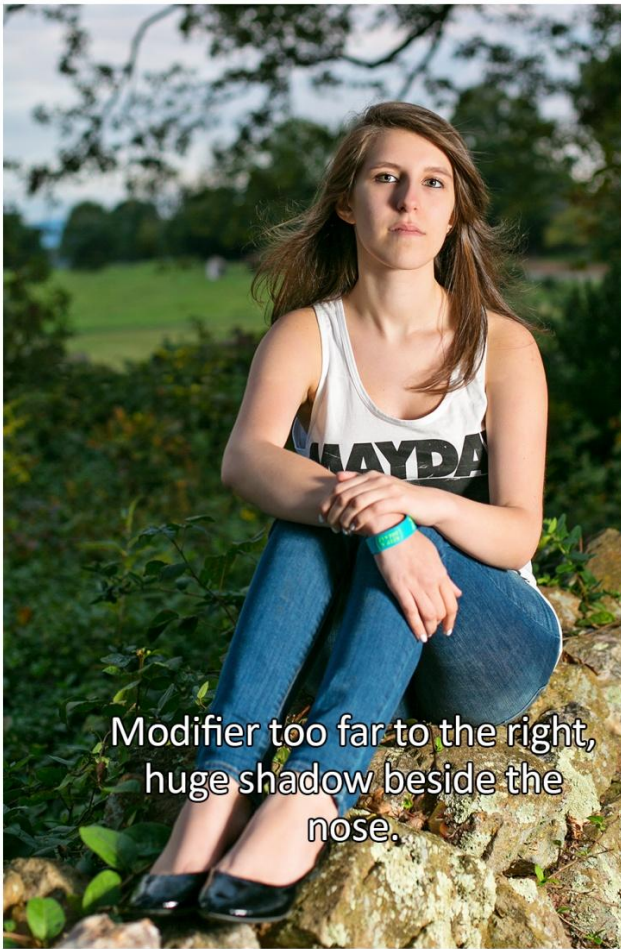
6. Watch your shadows.

Especially when using small light sources. Nothing ruins a great photo like having a unwanted huge nose shaped shadow on your subject's face. A good rule of thumb to avoid unwanted shadows is to position your flash/strobe 45 degrees above and about 45 degrees to the right (of left) of your subject.

Another way to avoid unwanted face shadows when using a small modifier is to have your subject point their nose to the middle of the light source. This will help keep the shadows to the sides of their face and under their chin. You could also use a reflector on the opposite side of the light to help fill in the shadows. Keep in mind, sometimes shadows are exactly what you want and are perfectly fine! Especially when you are going for a super dramatic look.



Modifier slightly to the left,
small shadow beside the
nose.



Modifier too far to the right,
huge shadow beside the
nose.



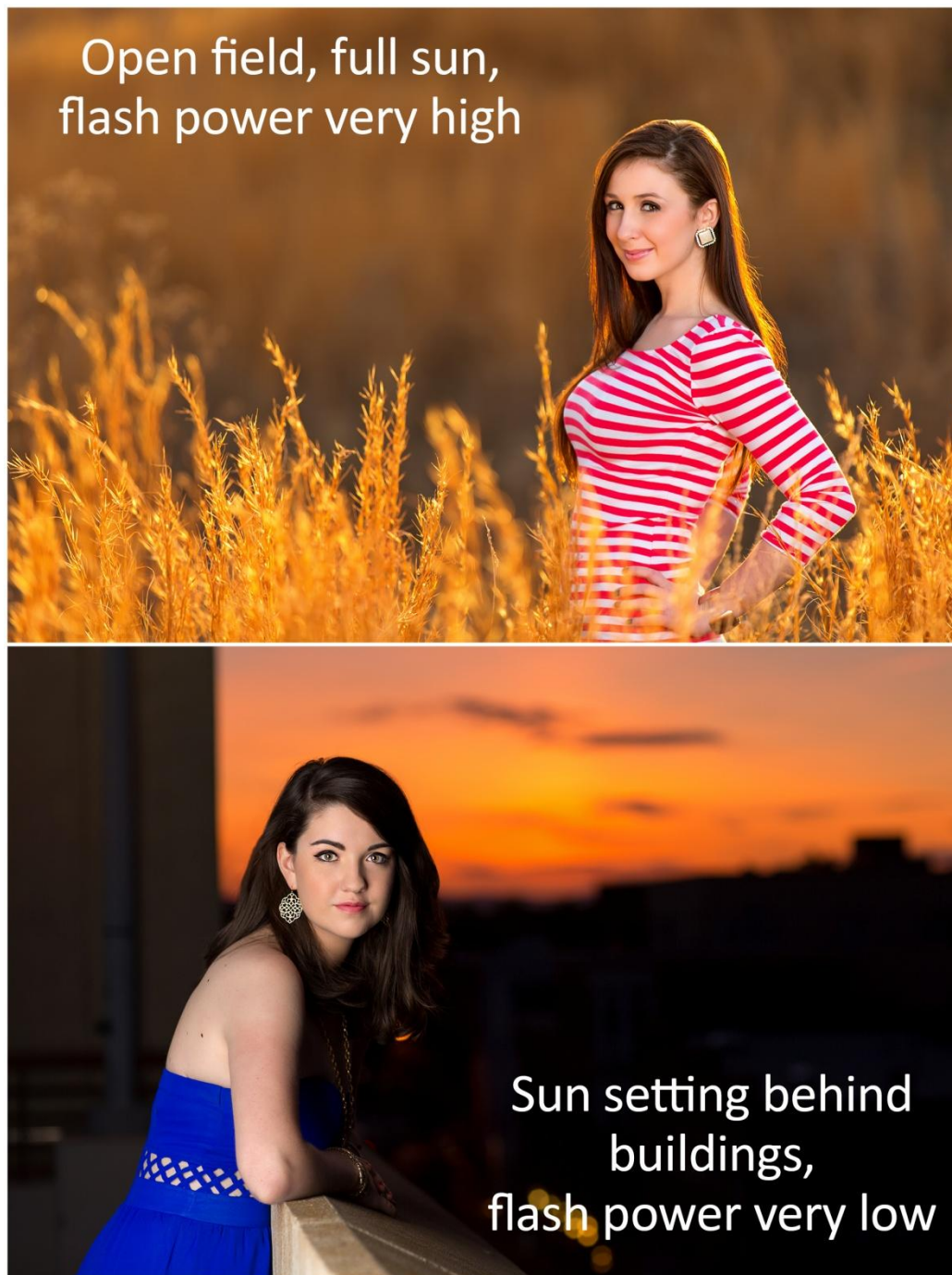
Modifier slightly on
the left, above subject.
Shadow on the side of
the face.



Modifier too far to the
left. Shadow beside
the nose and on the
side of the face.

7. Consider your surroundings

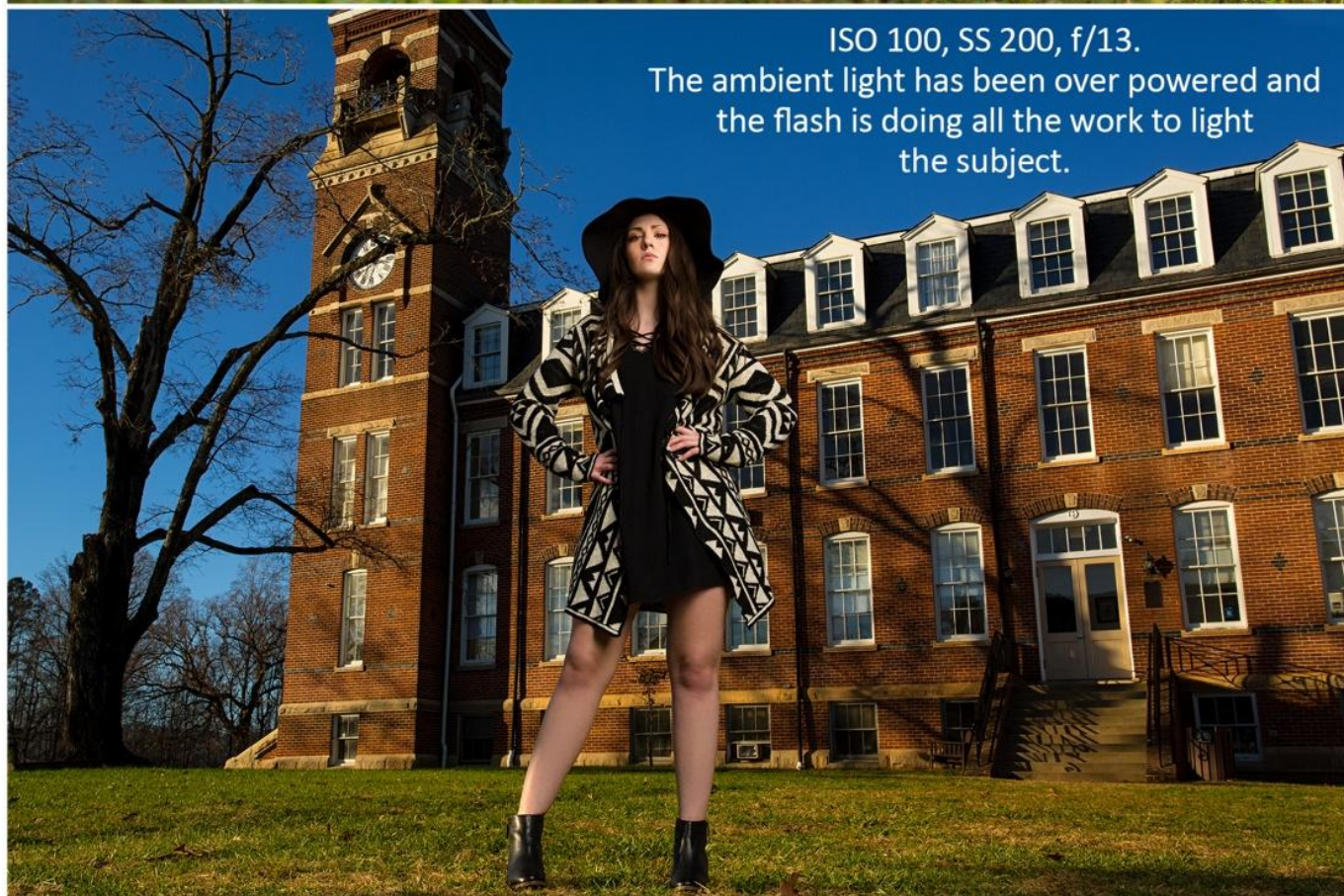
The location of your session plays a big part in how you will set your flash/strobe. If it's noon and your location doesn't have any shade, your settings will be completely different than late afternoon with the sun setting behind a grove of trees. Unless you are going for a super dramatic look, you typically want your flash/strobe power to match the ambient light.



8. Outside, aperture plays a bigger part than it does indoors.

When I'm shooting in the studio, I typically kill all the ambient light in the room by using a low ISO and a higher aperture. This allows me to keep everything in focus and freeze motion if necessary. Different looks are achieved by using different modifiers and light patterns.

Outside though, if you want many different looks, all you need to do is change your settings. You can also change modifiers but it's amazing the different ways you can make a photo look by shooting at a higher f-stop.



I balanced my flash with the ambient light to have a evenly lit portrait



By increasing the power of the flash, and shooting at a higher f-stop, I was able to reduce the amount of ambient light and create a more dramatic portrait.



ISO 100, SS 200, f/7.1

By increasing the flash power and the f-stop, the majority of the light is coming from the strobe.



ISO 200, SS 200, f/3.2

By keeping the flash power and the f/stop low, the strobe and the ambient light are balanced.





My go to lighting equipment:

In the studio, I always use one (occasionally two) Paul C Buff - Einsteins as the main light. I use Alien Bee 800s as the hair/side lights and an Alien Bee 400 as the background light. I also use Paul C Buff - trigger and receivers and softboxes.

I actually made a post that goes over everything that I use in the studio. Feel free to check it out [here](#)!

Outdoors, I've used everything from speedlites to Einsteins outside with battery packs. That was a lot to lug around so now, my outdoor setup is the Explor 600.

Light meter or not, with a little practice it only take a few seconds to get your exposure right. The battery is part of the unit and once it's charged, you can get around 500 full power flash/strobees before it runs out of juice. PLUS it allows you to use high speed sync which is a game changer if you want to shoot at noon at 2.8 or similar aperture. The only downside is it is a little heavy, just like any strobe/battery would be.



My modifier of choice depends on the situation but here are the ones I use most of the time.

Paul C Buff - 35" or 47" Octobox with grid

Paul C Buff - 30x60" softbox with grid

Fotodiox 12" x 56" gridded striplight

Paul C Buff - 7' silver reflector with honeycomb grids

**ePhoto 22" or StudioPRO 28" beauty dish with
honeycomb grid**

Lighting resources:

I have a few lighting tutorials on my website (more will be coming soon) [Ali Johnson Photography](http://AliJohnsonPhotography.com) and offer one-on-one lighting/editing classes.

Here are some additional

<https://www.slrlounge.com/>

<http://digital-photography-school.com/>

<http://blog.lindsayadlerphotography.com/> Lindsay Adler
is my hero and has some amazing tutorials!

<https://www.gavtrain.com> - Gaven Hoey inspires me on a
regular bases!

<https://www.youtube.com/user/adoramaTV>

I hope this has been helpful to you! Feel free to contact
me with any questions you have...I'm always here to help!

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