

FILL FLASH

Mark Greenland
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Preliminaries

1. Select background:
 - ⇒ avoid busy distracting background, especially cars and people;
 - ⇒ avoid 'mergers', eg horizon intersecting with subject's head;
 - ⇒ avoid extremely contrasty background;
 - ⇒ to enhance shallow DOF, give preference to a distant background.
2. Consider the ambient light which will fall on subject's face:
 - ⇒ brightness;
 - ⇒ evenness;
 - ⇒ colour;
 - ⇒ direction.
3. Set camera:
 - ⇒ manual or shutter priority is preferable;
 - ⇒ set shutter speed to camera's flash synchronization speed. If not known, set 1/125th sec.
 - ⇒ set lowest unextended ISO, usually 100 ISO;
 - ⇒ set white balance to sunlight to avoid a colour cast in the shadows;
 - ⇒ fit a hood to your lens.
4. Check that flash batteries are charged and have spares.
5. Set flash to TTL balanced fill flash or manual. If TTL, check the flash manual to see how to set exposure compensation (ie override the flash to

the degree you set) or (if the flash is in manual mode) check how to adjust its output manually. If your flash is a simple automatic and not adjustable, you need a new flash!

About Fill Flash

6. The idea is that the on camera flash 'fills' (ie lightens) the shadows on the subject's face.
7. The flash therefore is not the main light source and should not cast shadows: its function is only to modify the shadow cast by the key light. That light is usually the sun, and could be the indirect ambient light of the sun (eg when subject in shade), or direct sunlight. Fill flash is therefore usually used outdoors, but the principles hold good in the studio.
8. The benefits of fill flash are that it:
 - ⇒ brightens up the image;
 - ⇒ creates sparkle in subject's eyes;
 - ⇒ sharpens the image;
 - ⇒ permits use of the sun as a backlight.
9. The disadvantage of fill flash is that the camera's shutter speed is limited to the flash synchronization speed, which is often too slow to permit the wide apertures usually associated with portraiture, without a neutral density filter on the lens.
10. It is very easy to overdo fill flash. It's best when the fill flash does not draw attention to itself. It should be noticeable only to a photographer.
11. Fill flash works best when the flash is on camera, because the flash then fills the shadows seen by the camera. If you take the flash off the camera, you should consider whether you are really using the flash as a key light, and if so, whether to modify it as for any other key light.

Posing the Subject

12. The primary consideration is whether and where you want the key light (usually the sun) to illuminate the subject.
13. Some possibilities are:
 - ⇒ direct sun on back of subject's head and shoulders with face lit only by indirect sunlight. (In this situation, it is difficult to shade the lens glass from the direct sun but, as usual, it is highly beneficial to do so);
 - ⇒ direct sun on side of subject's face, but not on front of face;
 - ⇒ direct sun lighting front of face as far as the nose, with the other side in shadow. This is effective when the sun is low. When the sun is high, this set up may run into the problem which occurs when the subject looks straight towards the sun – the subject squints and finds the position unpleasant.
 - ⇒ place the subject in the shade, not illuminated at all by direct sunlight. In this case, the deeper the shade, the more fill light will be needed to even out the difference between the brightness of the subject and the background. The more fill light that is required, the more artificial the result.

Exposure

14. First, set the camera shutter speed to the camera flash synchronization speed.
15. Before switching on the flash, take an exposure reading of the scene to be photographed. Don't spot meter the sunlit parts of the subject.
16. As noted above, the greatest limitation of the fill flash procedure is that, because the shutter speed cannot be shorter than the camera's flash synchronization speed, the aperture is likely to be quite small, and

therefore shallow depth of field will probably not be possible without a neutral density filter or a polarizer (which will typically absorb two stops of light).

17. Set the aperture (if you're in manual mode on the camera) to give a good exposure of the scene. You may need to close the aperture down by up to two stops from the indicated exposure, to avoid burning out the sunlit parts of the subject, but do a few test shots and check the right hand end of the histogram, once the flash is operating.
18. If you're in an automatic or semi auto mode on the camera, you may need to override the auto exposure with the exposure compensation mechanism (usually marked +/-). Go to the minus side one stop at a time until you cease to burn out the highlights.
19. Next, mount the flash on the camera and turn it on.

Adjusting the Flash

20. If the flash is in manual mode, and you can adjust its output, simply experiment with the output until you reach a level of illumination of the shadows which allows a clear view of the eyes, without looking obviously flashed from the camera position.
21. If the flash is in any other mode, adjust the flash output (see its manual) until you get a satisfactory result on the face. This will vary from place to place and time to time.
22. At the Iluka sand dunes, half an hour before sunset with direct sunlight on half the subject's face, I found that I needed to adjust the camera's recommended exposure down (ie darker) by one and two thirds stops, to get both the background and the sunlit parts of the model within the histogram, and I had to adjust my flash (a Nikon SB800 set on TTL BL) up by two thirds of a stop. Of course, the result is a matter of personal preference.