

SIX FIGURE

photography

The Two Step Process For Making Flash Photography Easy

Using any type of flash; on-camera, off-camera, big strobes, or speedlights will become immeasurably easier to understand and use if you approach it with two simple steps.

1. Pre-visualization
2. There are TWO exposures to resolve when using flash

Pre-visualization

The first problem people face with flash is that you can't see the light until after the picture is taken. Photographers get scared by that, and often retreat to video lights (constant light) because we can see the changes live, and make adjustments.

Digital has spoiled us. We get immediate results as soon as we press the shutter, can shoot thousands of pictures before ever having to change a card or battery, and don't have to pay \$2.50 for every click. I bring this up because with film photography, you have to pre-visualize the end result of every photograph, and are given no result of how on or far off you were until long after the event.

Even with digital, you have to pre-visualize when using flash. If you know what you want your shot to look like before turning the flash on, you will be way ahead of the crowd, and well on your way to creating amazing images with flash.

Once you combine pre-visualization with the two exposure approach flash will be so much easier.

Two Exposures Need Resolved

First we need to define Ambient Light.

Ambient light: Any source of light that is already available. (9.9 times out of 10 it is continuous light.) Examples of Ambient light are candles, a lamp in a room, DJ lights, the sun, street lamps, up-lighting etc.

This is where people often get confused with flash photography, they try to think of all of the light in a scene at the same time; ambient & flash. It can be done, but is very hard to understand what is happening with your flash and results in a lot of guessing games, especially when starting out. You will get confused as to why it works sometimes, but fails others.

You must resolve your ambient exposure BEFORE even turning your flash on. Once your ambient exposure is set, leave it alone and then set your flash exposure by manually adjusting your flash.

Here is the step by step process for resolving two exposures without a light meter.

1. With your flash OFF, Set set your exposure for the desired look of the ambient light keeping you shutter speed at 100 (more on why 1/100 shutter speed later). This is EXPOSURE 1.
2. Turn your flash ON manual at 1/32 power.
3. Take a picture. If the subject that your flash is hitting is too dark, turn flash up (1/16). If too bright, turn flash down (1/64). This is EXPOSURE 2.
4. Repeat step 3 until the subject your flash is hitting is properly exposed.

This technique is the same for on-camera flash, off-camera flash, bounce flash, etc.

Pre-visualization / Resolving Two Exposure Example

Pre-visualization: I want to create a moody dramatic image where the sky is deep in color, and there is a small glow of light behind the couple.

In order to do this, I need to resolve the first exposure, the ambient light. I pre-visualized a moodier image so I want the sky to be underexposed.

With my flash OFF and keeping my shutter speed at 1/100, I set my ISO and aperture to underexpose the sky. My settings are now

Shutter Speed - 1/100 (more on why this is below)

ISO - 100 (keeping it low to underexpose the sky)

Aperture - 5.6 (a little bit higher aperture was needed to get the sky to give me the desired moody look I wanted)

Now with ambient light looking just how I want it, I turn my flash ON.

Keeping my flash on manual keeps ME in control of what the light is doing. If you are just starting out, I highly encourage you to avoid TTL until you fully understand your flash on manual. Otherwise you won't understand what to do when it doesn't look how you want it to.

I put my flash on a stand behind the couple.

I always start out at 1/32 power on my flash because it is a middle of the road power setting that I can either go up from, or down from.

I take a picture, but the FLASH exposure looks too dim. Don't touch the camera settings to change this. Instead power up your flash.

I power up to 1/16 power and take another shot. BOOM! perfect! (the ambient exposure will not change, assuming the ambient light is the same)

The more you practice this the faster you will get. As long as you pre-visualize, the steps of setting your exposure can happen crazy fast without a bunch of guesswork.

I am at the point where my ambient exposure is resolved as the couple is walking to their location and the flash exposure is resolved as I am walking back from setting my flash on a stand to the location where I will be shooting from.

Why is my shutter speed at 1/100?

Fun fact: Your Shutter Speed doesn't affect your flash exposure. (as long as it is below your max sync speed.) A flash happens in... well... a flash. Crazy fast. So if you shutter speed is 1/2 a second or 1/200th of a second it won't affect your FLASH EXPOSURE because the flash is lighting your subject for an instant.

For the purpose of this article, just know that if you make your shutter faster than 1/200th of a second you exceed your max sync speed and your shutter closes before the flash has gotten a chance to hit the sensor.

Alright, so we know that the max sync speed on most professional cameras is 1/200. So in order to shoot with a flash, you must be no faster than 1/200. The reason for going 1/100 of a second is the same for why we start our flash at 1/32 power on manual. You are able to adjust the specific exposure separately up or down from that point.

Again, your shutter speed will only affect your AMBIENT EXPOSURE. And your Flash power will only affect your FLASH EXPOSURE.

So if you have everything set up and you're shooting at 1/100 of a second for while, but decide you want to try a more dramatic look to the ambient light, simply turn your shutter speed up. Doing so will bring the ambient exposure down, while not affecting your flash exposure.

This is great for sunset shoots where the ambient light keeps changing. As the sky gets darker, you can drop your shutter speed down to compensate and not have to worry about your changing your flash power because your ambient exposure is once again, independent of your flash exposure.