10-Min. Guide to Off-Camera Flash

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HOW TO CREATE
PROFESSIONAL PORTRAITS
WITH REMOTE FLASH SETUPS

USE SIMPLE, AFFORDABLE GEAR • APPLY ONE EASY TECHNIQUE

10-Minute Guide to Off-Camera Flash

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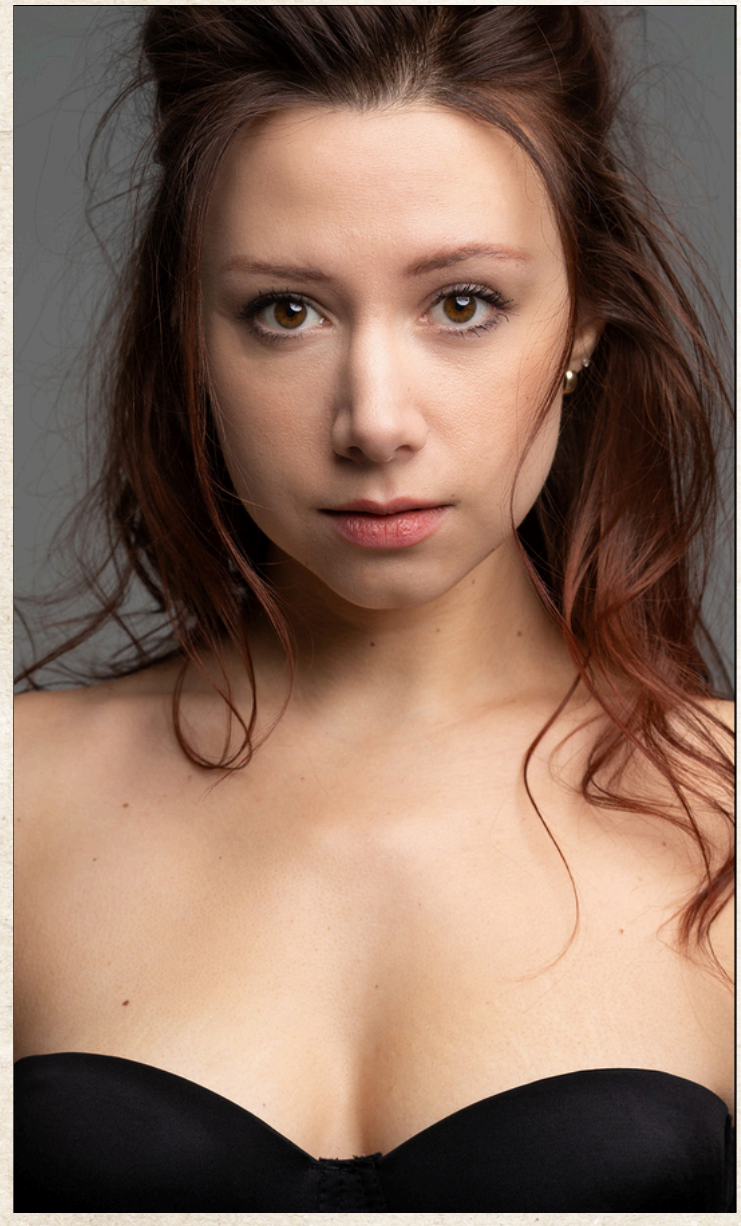
Introduction

Off-camera flash doesn't have to be complicated. If you've tried working with flash before and felt like it only made things harder, or if you've seen other photographers' portraits and wondered, "Why don't mine look like that?," this guide is for you.

Inside, you'll learn a simple lighting setup with a basic flash. It's something you can use almost anywhere, and it will help you start getting better results right away.

There's plenty of advice out there about flash, but it doesn't need to feel overwhelming. My goal here is to make things simple: affordable gear, repeatable steps, and a system that actually works.





These images *were taken with the techniques shown in this guide.*

Gear List

You'll only need one flash and a few other items to get started with your first off-camera flash lighting setup. With this setup you'll be ready to learn one-light portraiture and practice basic lighting techniques.

Here's what you'll need:

- Light Stand
- Flash Bracket
- Umbrella
- Flash Trigger
- Flash

Let's talk about what each of these is for.

Light Stand

A lightweight, portable light stand will work fine indoors or on location. I usually avoid the heavy-duty stands unless I'm in the studio.

Look for something that extends to about 8 feet and can hold the weight of your flash and umbrella without wobbling (see Figure 1.1).



Figure 1.1. *Light stand.*

Flash Bracket

To aim your flash properly, you'll need a way to tilt and swivel it. A popular option is the S-type bracket (Figure 1.2).

It grips your flash securely, swivels easily, and gives you the flexibility to use umbrellas or even softboxes.



Figure 1.2. *Godox S-type flash holder and swivel. This unit features a versatile Bowens mount.*

Umbrella

A basic “shoot-through” umbrella as shown in Figure 1.3, will give you soft, flattering light, and it sets up in seconds. You’ll get more control with other modifiers (like softboxes) later, but umbrellas are the best bang-for-the-buck option when you’re learning.



Figure 1.3. *Umbrella shown in the shoot-through orientation. Rather than have the umbrella bounce/reflect light from the flash onto the subject, the top of the umbrella is directed toward the subject providing a kind of “open softbox” effect.*

Flash Trigger

You need a way to fire the flash remotely. That’s where a wireless trigger comes in (Figure 1.4). Most modern flash units come with built-in radio receivers, so it’s as simple as pairing the trigger with your flash.

Flash Unit

A basic speedlight (Figure 1.5) with TTL and Manual modes is perfect for learning off-camera flash. You’ll be able to control the power of your light either with TTL (automatic flash output) or by adjusting the power manually.



Figure 1.5. *Shoe mount flash units.*



Figure 1.4. *Third-party radio flash trigger compatible with my camera’s brand of TTL. This transmits signals to compatible remote flash units in either manual or TTL modes.*

Off-Camera Flash Setups

Let's take what we've learned so far and setup a radio-triggered flash with a modifier to create beautiful one-light portraits!

SETTING UP YOUR REMOTE FLASH

Make sure you've read your flash and trigger manuals and are familiar with their operation. Follow these steps to put your light stand setup together.

1. Setup your light stand. Extend the stand in front of you so that the top of the stand is about chest level.

2. Mount the S-type flash holder/bracket to the stand. Fit the bottom of the bracket onto the top stud of the stand. The stud should slip into the bottom hole of the bracket. Tighten the knob on the bottom of the bracket (Figure 2.1) to secure it to the stand.

3. Mount the flash to the bracket. Place the head of the flash into the clamping area and turn the knob at the top to secure the flash.

4. Place the umbrella. Open the umbrella and slide the umbrella shaft through the shaft hole on the bracket as shown. The flash head should be pointed into the open side of the umbrella. Turn the umbrella shaft secure knob to secure the umbrella shaft in place. Note that other types of modifiers (with Bowens mounts) can be attached to this bracket via the Bowens mount.



Figure 2.1 *Close-up view of light stand setup. This flash has a built-in radio receiver so an external radio receiver is not necessary.*

6. Connect the flash trigger transmitter to the camera. The transmitter should be set to the same radio channel as the receiving unit. When you click the shutter, the transmitter signals the remote receiver (external or built-in to the flash) which fires the flash unit.

If you are using a softbox modifier or any other type of gear that is different from the setups described here, just follow the directions in your gear's manual to set it up.

LIGHTING PLACEMENT

Now that your light stand and modifier are set up and your flash is synched to the camera, you're ready to place your light for your portrait. The following examples demonstrate variations on a lighting placement technique that works every time.

The light is positioned roughly 45 degrees in front of and to one side of the subject, and down about 45 degrees from above their head (see Figure 2.2 and Illustrations 2.3 and 2.4). The actual angle you'll use will vary, so this is only a reference point to start from.

As you get more comfortable with off-camera flash, try experimenting with:

• Different camera exposure adjustments

• Flash power adjustments

• Distances between light and subject (double and triple the distance)

• Distances between subject and background



Figure 2.2. *Flash and softbox modifier.*

Settings

The following settings should be good starting points for indoor flash portraiture. Once you zero in on the actual settings that work best for your gear, stick to them for a while as you learn to position the light and your subject for the best results.

Flash Mode: TTL (remote/slave mode)

Camera Settings: Manual Mode, ISO 200, f/8, use your camera's flash sync speed.



Figure 2.3. *Light position, front view.*

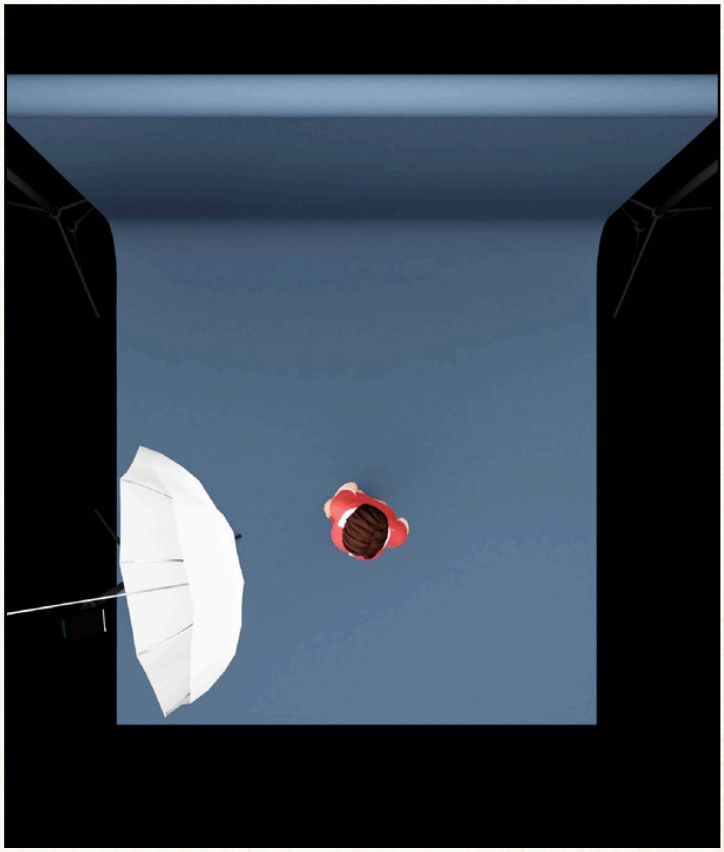


Figure 2.4. *Light position, top view.*

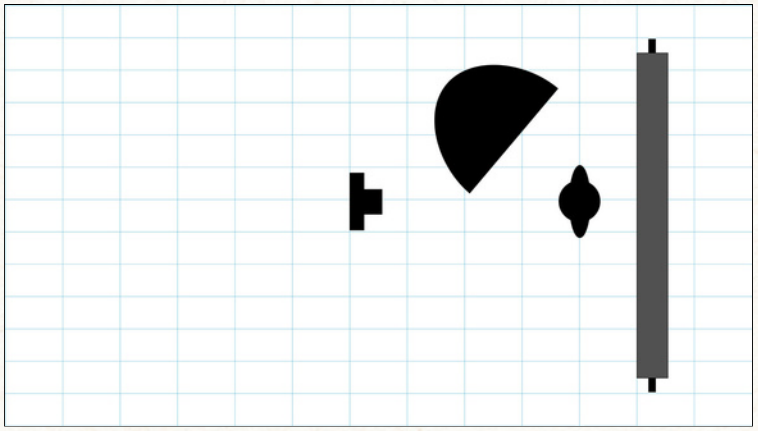
Take a test shot to ensure your subject is properly exposed. If they are too dark, add more flash power with your Flash Exposure Compensation (FEC) setting, if using flash TTL. If they are too bright, dial in less flash power with FEC.

Eventually, you'll learn to take full control of your flash exposure with a combination of manual flash and manual camera settings instead of relying on TTL.

Our set of indoor examples (following pages, Figures 2.5 - 2.8) feature a no-frills one-light setup using a standard softbox. The main point of these examples is to show the effect of changing the distances between the light and background/subject. Once the distance between the light and subject are set up for a good exposure, we can just increase the distance from the background to affect its visibility which can change the look of the image dramatically.

With more training you'll be able to create polished and sophisticated lighting for your portraits using one or more lights.

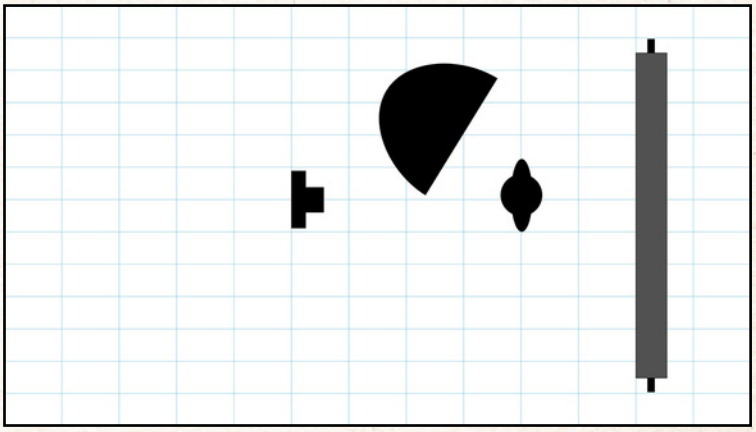




Distance, subject to background: 18”/46 cm
Distance, light to subject: 30”/75 cm
Flash Mode: TTL
Camera Settings: ISO 200, f/8, 1/250
Lens Used: 85mm

Figure 2.5. *Background clearly visible.*

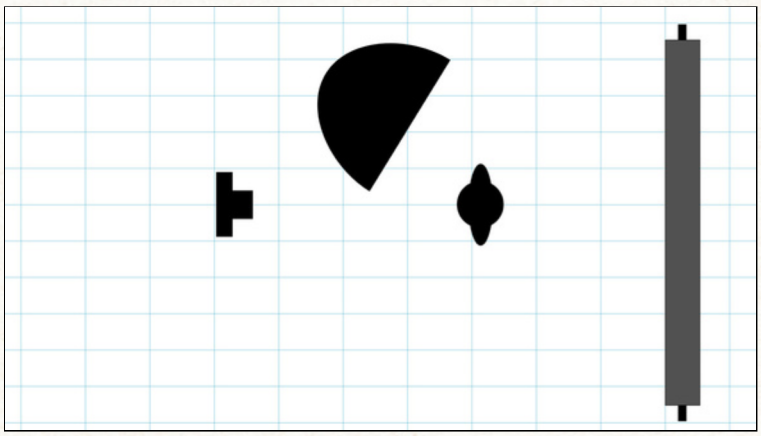




Distance, subject to background: 3’/1 m
Distance, light to subject: 30”/75 cm
Flash Mode: TTL
Camera Settings: ISO 200, f/8, 1/250
Lens Used: 85mm

Figure 2.6. *Background becomes very dark as distance increases.*

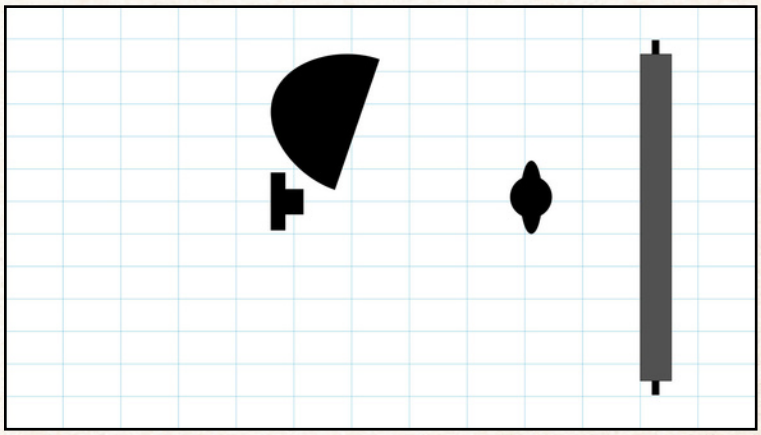




Distance, subject to background: 5’/1.5 m
Distance, light to subject: 30”
Flash Mode: TTL
Camera Settings: ISO 200, f/8, 1/250
Lens Used: 85mm

Figure 2.7. *At 5’ (1.5 m) background is almost completely black.*





Distance, subject to background: 3’/1 m
Distance, light to subject: 6’/2 m
Flash Mode: TTL
Camera Settings: ISO 200, f/8, 1/250
Lens Used: 85mm

Figure 2.8. *As the light is moved farther from the subject and background, both start to receive relatively the same exposure. Contrast is increased.*

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