

Light

Light is to the photographer what words are to the writer. Light illuminates, but light is also darkness and shadows are as important as highlights. Light isolates, blends, emphasizes, de-emphasizes, reveals or reduces shape, enhances or hides texture, creates atmosphere and mood, and can direct or distract the viewer. Whereas a feature writer listens to his subject, intent on finding the salient quote, the photographer looks at her subject, intent on finding the most appropriate light. If you learn to see what light does to your subject, you will have almost limitless control over the image.

THE THREE CHARACTERISTICS OF LIGHT

1. Intensity

- a. Brightness
- b. Does not directly influence quality and direction

2. Quality

- a. **Hard light** — point sources; the sun, light bulb, flash
 1. Creates a sharp line between highlights and shadows
 2. Emphasizes texture and specular reflections
- b. **Soft light**
 1. Comes from broad sources; sky, rainy day, skylight, fluorescent panels
 2. Subtle lines between shadow and highlights
- c. **Important:** The larger the light source the softer the light. The closer the light source the larger it becomes in relation to the subject, therefore the softer the light.

3. Direction

- a. Emphasizes the shape and texture of the subject
- b. Discover the direction of the light by looking at the shadows, which always point away from the direction the light is coming from.
- c. Directions
 1. **Front lighting** — flat no shadows
 2. **Side lighting** — lights half the face — also called “hatchet” lighting.
 - a. **Rembrandt** or classic lighting — a less extreme form of side lighting where light comes from a position high and from the side, creating a triangle of light on the shadow side of the face.
 3. **Back lighting** — light coming from behind; creates “rim” lighting around a subject

KINDS OF LIGHT

- a. **Natural light** — comes primarily from the sun
 1. Morning/ Evening light — softer quality, longer shadows, sun at a lower angle
 2. Overcast lighting can be easier to shoot in since there are less shadows to contend with, but you don’t get as much intensity and texture.
 3. Avoid shooting humans at midday in sunlight when the light is right above your subject — it creates shadows that rarely produce complimentary results.
- b. **Available light** — Human-made light; examples include fluorescent light, tungsten light and stadium lights; it can be hard or soft and it can come from any direction.
- c. **Artificial light** — Light which a photographer can control, such as studio lights or electronic flash.

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TYPES OF LIGHT

- a. **Main light** — the light that seems to illuminate the scene, there is always a main light or you have no light.
 1. Outdoors this could be the sun or light from the sun. In the studio it is the brightest light.
- b. **Fill light** — Illuminates shadows; secondary light, there is always a fill light but it might be so low the film does not record it.
 1. Outdoors, fill light comes from the sky, but it can be reflected into the shadows by other objects — walls, floors, pavement; you have to become an observer of walls, floors, boards, shirts and their reflecting quality.
 2. In the studio the fill light is a secondary lamp placed near the camera so it will light the shadows seen by the lens. You may not be aware of the fill light in the picture, and that is as it should be.
- c. **Accent light** — adds extra highlights to the scene; outlines head against dark background or highlights the head. In the studio this could be a hair light or back light.

USING LIGHT TO MAKE A STATEMENT

- a. **High key lighting** — scene is full of light tones, bright highlights, and minimal shadows; suggests feelings of heat, warmth
- b. **Low key lighting** — dark, minimal light; suggests mystery or suspense
- c. Other aims or objectives of lighting
 - To enhance mood, atmosphere and drama
 - To separate planes
 - To imply depth
 - To reveal character and texture
 - To complement composition
 - To direct attention toward certain elements in the picture
 - To convey time of day or year
 - **All of the characteristics** of light contribute to creating highlights and shadows in your photograph and these two elements are the major way of communicating shape, texture and surface information to your reader. Whatever you do, **make a statement with light! Control it, don't let it control you!**

You should be building a visual library of scenes in your head and on paper — noting pictures with light that pleases you. Ask yourself, why does this picture stand out? Then ask, how did the photographer do that? You should go to bed at night and ask yourself the question, what have I added to my visual library today? And then wake up in the morning prepared to put it into action. In this way you move from the realm of picture taker to picture maker— you are becoming visually literate.