# Portraits and Still Life

We already have control over the shutter speed, the depth of field and the sensitivity of the sensor within the camera, now we will manage the amount and the type of light illuminating the subject. Looking at creating portraits and still life are quite formal topics but studying them will help you to take greater control over the way your subject is presented in a photograph.

Off-Camera Flash

When in full auto mode the flash will pop up in low light conditions to illuminate a subject when the light isn't strong enough. However, in most cases, the pop-up flash on top of a camera is in precisely the wrong place to take a flattering picture. With a light source so close to the lens all the shadows will be thrown behind the subject and the facing side will look pale and lifeless.

One way to combat this is to move the flash off the camera. You can buy an inexpensive flash gun and an extension lead (of course, you can also buy expensive systems as well) which will allow you to experiment with flash photography for portraits and still life.
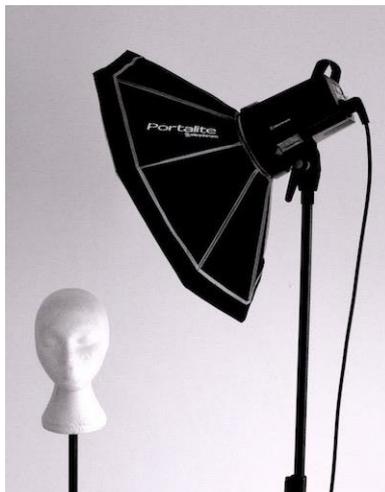
Controlling the Light

A studio flash head like the one shown here in the photograph is a reliable light source in controlled situations. The umbrella-like structure fixed to the front is called a *softbox*. The light from the flash tube is reflected off the shiny inner surface of the umbrella and then out through either one or two layers of cloth. This gives a diffuse light which doesn't produce harsh, unflattering shadows on and around the subject.

The softbox is only one type of modifier which can be used to control the light in a specific way. *Snoots* and *honeycomb grids* do the opposite by fixing the light to a single direction.

Flash and Shutter Speed

When using flash you concentrate the light on the main subject of the picture. If you look at the diagram the person has been illuminated by an off-camera flash. The brightness of the person is determined by the strength of the flash and where it has been placed. But look at the background, the tree and the hill are slightly less exposed. The flash hasn't reached them.

So you can use the shutter speed to manage the background and the flash settings to control the exposure of the main subject of the photograph *(more on this below)*.
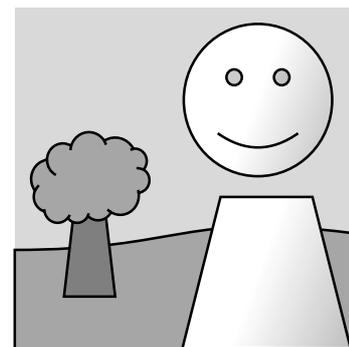
Reflectors

When you bounce the light off a reflector (but not a mirror) you get a diffuse, soft light that adds subtlety to your picture. Reflectors can be made from all sorts of materials ... white sheets, metal foil, a wall ... and they can be used with natural light, continuous artificial light and with flash.

The photograph on the left was taken using a studio flash with a softbox fitted to the front. The flash unit was higher than the model and a little in front so that shadows were created on the right-hand side of the model's face (notice the small patch of light on the right cheek).

The photograph on the right has exactly the same setup but a large reflector has been placed low down to the model's right in order to

bounce the light from the flash back up at the model and reduce the shadows on the face.

As with many things in photography something that seems like a subtle change in front of the camera is able to produce profound effects in the emotional quality of the final image. In this case, the face on the left is more moody whereas the right-hand side one would be more flattering as a conventional portrait. Both setups are valid, it just depends on the mood that you as the photographer are trying to convey.

Incidentally, these images were taken against a white wall. The shutter speed of 1/100 second and an aperture of f/11 and ISO 100 mean that the wall is underexposed and appears dark grey here yet the head, which is illuminated by the flash, is correctly exposed.

Measuring Light

Your camera contains a lightmeter which it uses to judge the most appropriate shutter speed and aperture when you are in the automatic modes. Although sometimes it is useful to use a handheld lightmeter.

A simple lightmeter can be used in two ways ... if held near the camera it will measure the amount of *reflected light* bouncing off the subject and in through the lens. If it is held near the subject, however, it will measure the amount of *incident light* hitting the surface of the subject. The lightmeter can then suggest a suitable shutter speed and aperture for a given ISO value.