

One Light Portraits: Simple Elegance



In this case, a reflector was used at camera left, but a neutral colored wall would work just as well. The flash bounces off the reflector, the rear wall picks up some light, and the ceiling picks up some more, illuminating the top of the hair.

Everyone who ever picks up a camera at one point or another finds themselves pointing it at another person. But unless you walk around with a lighting kit in your back pocket, you have to make do with what you have. If you're lucky that means you have a speedlite in your bag. If not, there are other ways to light your subjects and get a pleasing portrait.

Let's start with the best case scenario- you have a speedlite on your camera with a swivel head. This gives you the flexibility of TTL exposure, as well as the ability to bounce the flash and avoid the ugliness of direct flash. Bouncing flash simply means that the flash head is aimed at a surface and the light is reflected back onto your subject. This softens the light coming from the flash head, and makes it a much more pleasing light source. The ability to bounce the flash is huge, because a variety of looks can be achieved simply by repositioning the flash head and the surface the light is bouncing off of. Walls and ceilings are generally pretty easy to bounce off of, but something smaller, such as a reflector, or a piece of white oak tag will work equally well. The important thing about the surface being used for bouncing is that the color be neutral, such as white or gray.

Positioning the subject in a corner of the room will allow you to use one light to create multiple light sources. The flash can be aimed at the wall to the side, and angled up to the ceiling to provide a hair light. In addition, the wall being used as the background will provide some back lighting. This will create soft shadows on the unlit side of your subject. It's important to be sure your subject's face is turned towards the bouncing surface so they are properly illuminated by the light.



Placing a reflector at waist level and bouncing the flash into the ceiling creates a soft glamor lighting effect. It's actually a double bounce: once off the ceiling, and then off the reflector.

Another variation on this setup that works well for women and creates a glamor lighting look, is to place a reflector at your subject's waist. Bounce the flash directly off the ceiling and have the reflector kick light back up into the subject's face.

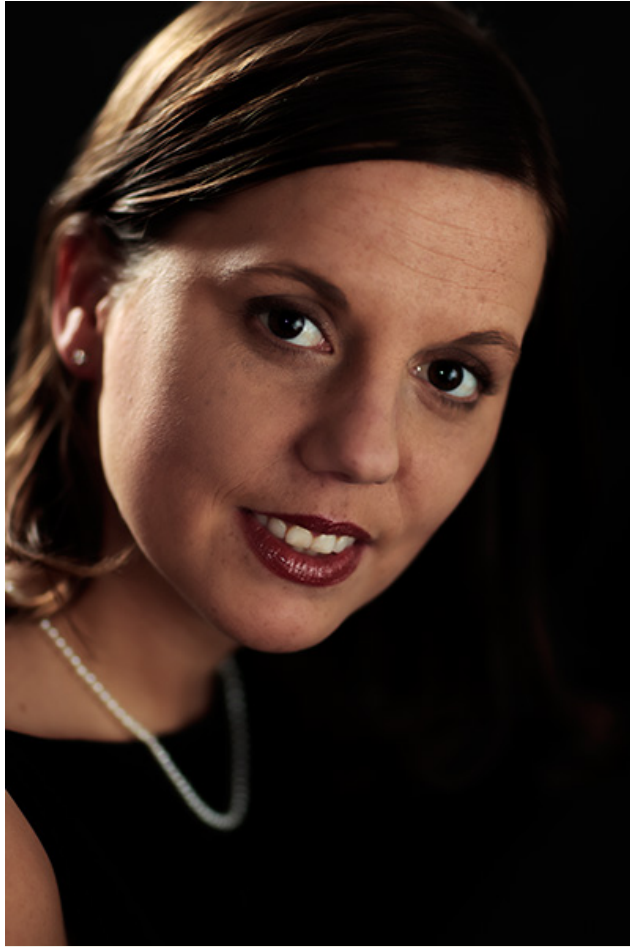


Positioning the softbox to camera left created a soft light that flattered Mary's facial structure. I positioned her in the shade of a tree, so the flash was sure to be the main light on her, while the background was lit by sunlight.

The next step with a flash is to get it off camera. All of the major SLR makers offer some sort of wireless flash control. Again, a bare flash tends to not be the best light source. Flash in general is a harsh, unflattering light source. To soften the light, a modifier is needed.

There are all kinds of modifiers available on the market. Softboxes are great for portraits because the light is softened, directional, and there is no spill. Umbrellas are great for softening and directing the light, but you get more spill, meaning it's harder to control what the light does and does not hit. The basic rule of thumb is, the larger the light source, the softer the light. So a larger soft box will nicely soften the light and wrap it around your subject, creating soft shadows as well.

The important thing when lighting with a softbox is that the light must hit the mask of the face, either from the softbox or via a reflector. If the face is in shadow, or if features of the face cast unflattering shadows, the portrait is going to be unsuccessful. Generally, positioning the light slightly above and off to the side of the subject will produce the best light.



A softbox positioned behind and to the side of the subject, while a reflector is positioned directly opposite to create a two-light effect.

If you happen to be outdoors, the available daylight works wonders for filling the background as you mix available light with flash. Position your subject in shade, and light them with a flash and modifier of choice, such as a softbox. Allow the available light to fill the background, and even create a hairlight. Indoors, you can create dramatic low-key lighting using one light in a softbox. Add a reflector, and now you have a two light setup. The softbox as the main light can be used as a rim light or hair light, and position the reflector so that it bounces light back into your subject's face. You're simply playing angles here, so watch where the light hits and bounce it back to your subject's face.



This portrait was made using a household lamp with a 75 watt bulb, with a sheer curtain to soften the light. It's important when using a household lamp to adjust your white balance properly, as the bulbs can range in color from more greenish to yellow.

Now, what if you're caught without a flash? Simple. Any light source will do. With today's DSLRs, higher ISO's mean greater flexibility in terms of light. A simple household lamp with a shade can even be a good portrait light. The important thing again is to watch how the light is falling on your subject. You may need to manipulate the lamp's position, or the subject's position in relation to the lamp. If the shade dims the light too much, remove the shade, and find another way to modify the light. It could be as simple as rigging a sheer curtain in front of the lamp to create a scrim.

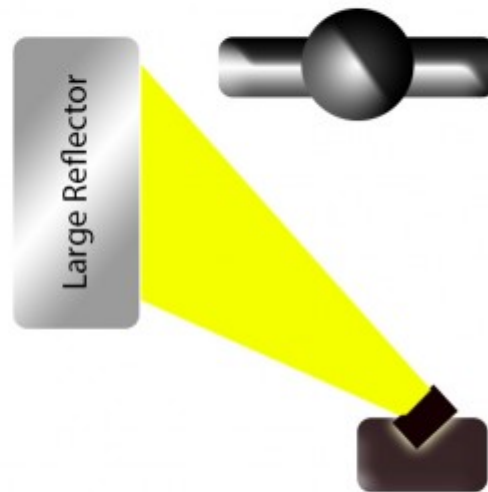


A single softbox will create more dramatic lighting. In this case, a large, 50 inch softbox was used creating a soft, dramatic light.

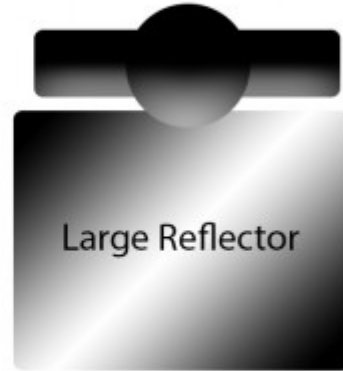
The bottom line is, no matter what, as long as you have light, you have the ability to make a great photo. The key is simply being able to see the light, play the angles, and think outside the box when necessary.

One Light Portraits Part 2: The Diagrams

A lot of you have asked for lighting diagrams from my last post on [One Light Portraits](#), so here they are- the finished shot, as well as the arrangement of lights, reflectors, and camera position. Enjoy!



For this shot, the flash is on-camera, and bounced into a reflector at camera left.



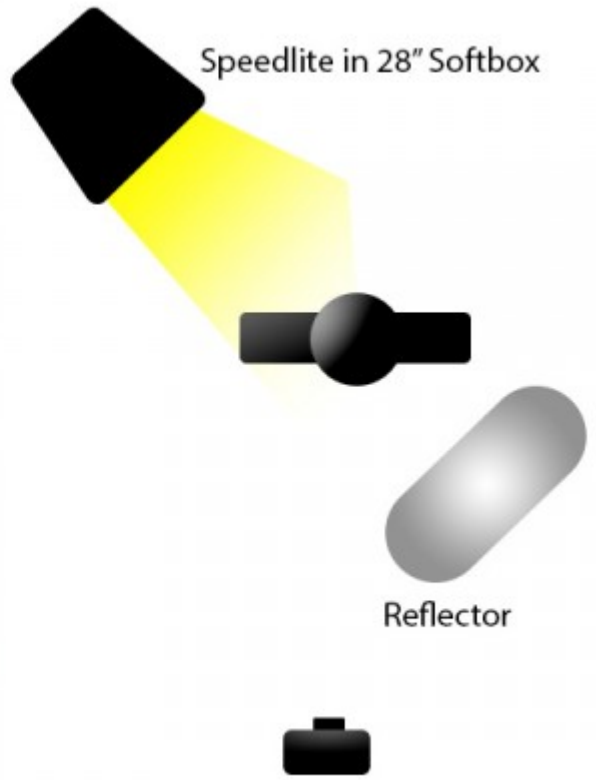
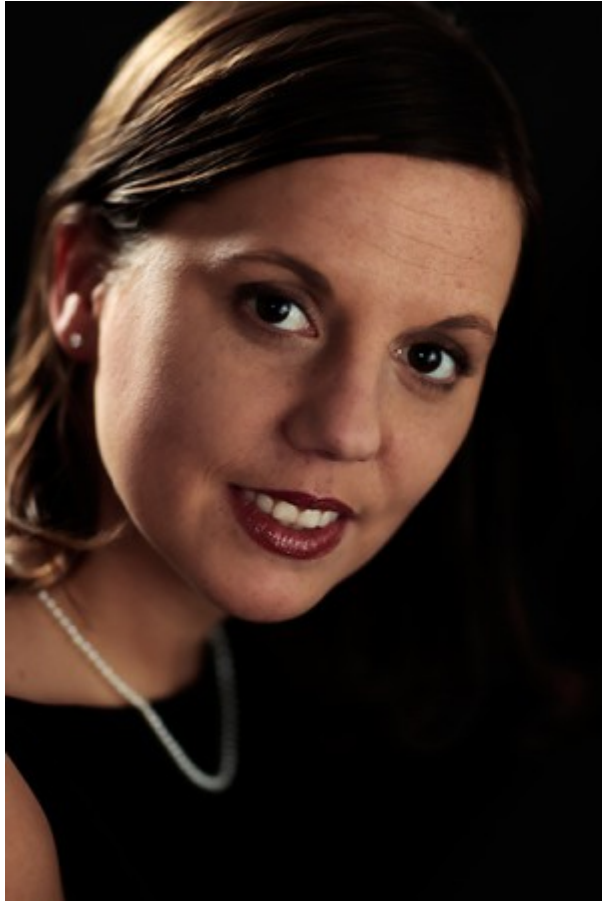
Flash bounced straight into the ceiling.

This is a variation on the previous shot. This time, the reflector is placed at the model's waist, facing up. The flash is bounced at the ceiling, and the reflector then reflects that light up into the model's face.



Speedlite in 28° Softbox

For this shot, a speedlite in a softbox was used. We are outdoors, and our subject is positioned under a tree for shade. The softbox then becomes the main light on our subject, and the daylight fills the background.



In this shot, a softbox is set up behind the subject, while a reflector is set up directly opposite to bounce light into the face. In this case, the silver side of the reflector was used.



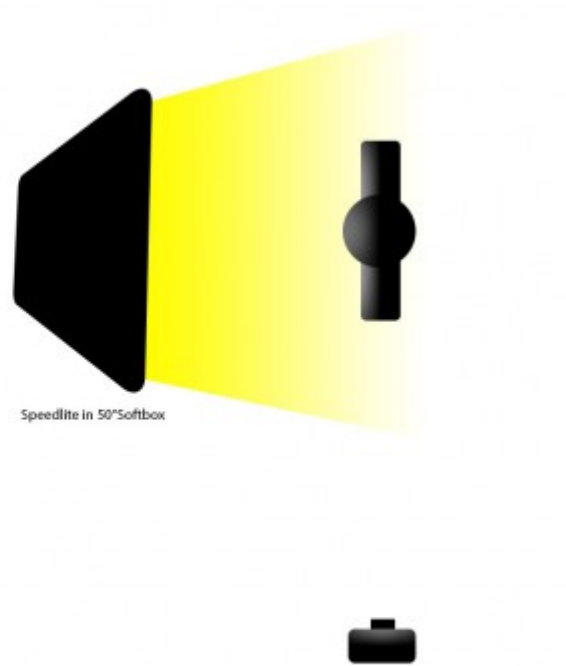
Household Bulb



Sheet or sheer curtain
for scrim



A household bulb can make a perfectly acceptable light source when nothing else is available. In this case, a household lamp was used, with the shade removed. To soften the light, a white sheet was used as a scrim to allow light to pass through. A higher ISO- ISO 2500 - was used. Keep in mind your white balance must be adjusted for the yellowish cast a household bulb creates.



This shot uses one large soft box- 50 inches- to create a soft light.