



THE TWO KINDS OF LIGHT IN A FLASH PHOTOGRAPH

When you are starting out as a Speedlitter, it is important to understand that there are two types of light in your flash photographs: ambient and flash. As we will discuss again and again throughout the *Handbook*, if you think about and manage the ambient light separately from the flash, you will have more creative control.

Ambient Light—The Light That Is Already There

Ambient light is the light that is already there—from the sun, room lights, etc. In many of your flash photographs, the background will be lit only with ambient light.

Often, there is nothing you can do to adjust the ambient light directly. However, as you will learn later in this chapter, shutter speed allows you to control how the camera records ambient light independently of how it records the light from your flash.

Flash—The Light You Create

In the vast majority of your flash photos, you will use the Speedlite to illuminate your subject in some way—either as the main light, as a light that makes it easier to see into shadowed areas, or as a light that creates an edge of highlight that separates your subject from a dark background.

If your subject is close to a background, then your flash will light your subject and the background. If your subject is separated from the background, then the flash that flies past the subject may not be recorded by the camera.

Figure 0.10 As shot, this photo of my son Vin has both ambient light and flash.

Figure 0.11 This is the portion of the photo that is lit by ambient light. If the background is not close to the subject, it is only lit by ambient light.

Figure 0.12 This is the portion of the photo that is lit by flash. The flash that flies past Vin, has nothing to bounce off—so it does not return to the camera.

MANAGE THE AMBIENT LIGHT FIRST

As a Speedlitter, I want you to think about and manage ambient light before you turn your flash on. This way, you can toggle between two shots on your camera—one lit with ambient only and one lit with ambient+flash—to see exactly what the flash is contributing to the shot.

You Can't Dim The Sun...Or Can You?

Typically, ambient light cannot be changed or modified to any great extent. For instance, there is no dimmer switch for the sun.

That said, you don't have to accept ambient light as it comes from the source. Here's an essential truth about Speedliting:

Even though you may not be able to control an ambient light source directly, you can use your camera's shutter speed to control how bright or dark it appears in the photograph.

Take a look at Figure 0.13 and then another look at Figure 0.10. Figure 0.13 is an ambient-only study shot I did at the beginning of the shoot. There is no flash in this shot. Notice how the sky lacks drama. Notice also how the details in the field draw your eye away from Vin. To create the dramatic ambient light in Figure 0.10, I increased the shutter speed from $\frac{1}{200}$ " to $\frac{1}{3200}$ ", a change of minus 4-stops.



Figure 0.13 I start my shoots with a series of ambient-only study shots. Then I change the shutter speed to adjust the appearance of the ambient light.

How To Get The Ambient Light You Want

For reasons that we will go deep into later, know that the camera meters the world differently than you see it. Further, the camera has no idea what is actually in front of the lens. Nor does it have any idea about your visual intentions. I often disagree with how the camera wants to expose the scene. Feel free to be disagreeable, too, and make the ambient light appear brighter or dimmer.

If the scene is brightly lit, often I will underexpose the ambient—making the portion of the picture not lit by the Speedlite a bit dark—because I want to direct the viewer's eye to the subject.

If the scene is dimly lit, I might want to brighten the ambient light by using a slower shutter speed. (Note: A camera operating in Aperture-Priority Av mode will typically overexpose the background by using a long exposure to gather what it thinks is enough ambient light.)

The first thing that I want to know when I'm making a new photograph is how the camera sees the ambient light. Further, I want to settle on an ambient exposure before I start dealing with flash.

Before turning the Speedlite on, I will do the following:

1. Set my camera's mode into M (Manual).
2. Dial in the aperture I need based on the depth of field that I want (see *Chapter 2: Exposure Exposed* for details).
3. Adjust the shutter speed until the needle in the center of the viewfinder is centered.
4. Fire off a test shot.
5. Dial the shutter speed one whole stop faster to dim the ambient (i.e. $\frac{1}{60}$ " > $\frac{1}{125}$ ") or one whole stop slower to brighten the ambient (i.e. $\frac{1}{60}$ " > $\frac{1}{30}$ ") and take another test shot.
6. Repeat steps 4 and 5 a few more times so that I have a wide range of exposures.
7. Select the test shot I like best and set that shutter speed.