Ed Verosky's Mini-Guide to

FLASH

Off-Camera

The Benefits of Off-Camera Flash

Using flash units on-, or off-camera is something everyone seems to be interested in. The reason is that with a little understanding, it's pretty easy to get professional-level results with the kind of flash units that were designed to slip into the hot shoe on your camera. As a matter of fact, you can get the look of real studio portraiture with your Canon or Nikon flash units (or any good flash), you just have to know how.

Figure 1: *Off-camera flash with PocketWizard radio receiver.*

Big Studio Lights, Not Always The Best Option

Regular studio strobes like the AC-powered monoblocks and pack/head systems are great for studio work. They provide high output, modeling lamps, good recycling time, and allow you to use a number of accessories and modifiers. If you have a little help to transport the gear from one place to the other, you can also use them on location, provided you have some external power source (large battery packs, generators, AC power, etc.). They aren't cheap, but great to work with if you have the budget and they fit your needs.

The Advantages of Small Flash Units

When I started shooting editorial work, I didn't have any assistants to help me carry a bunch of studio lighting gear around with me from shoot to shoot. And frankly, I didn't always have the time and energy to drag my lights to regular portrait sessions either. I needed some way to get good lighting for my shots, without having to deal with the weight and bulk of big lights. After a little experimentation with Canon and Nikon flash units, I realized I could get just what I needed with a couple of these placed in off-camera positions around my subject.

This isn't really anything new, but coming from a more traditional lighting background, it was new to me. I have to admit I was a little reluctant to believe professional lighting results were possible without my big lights, and I wondered what clients and editorial
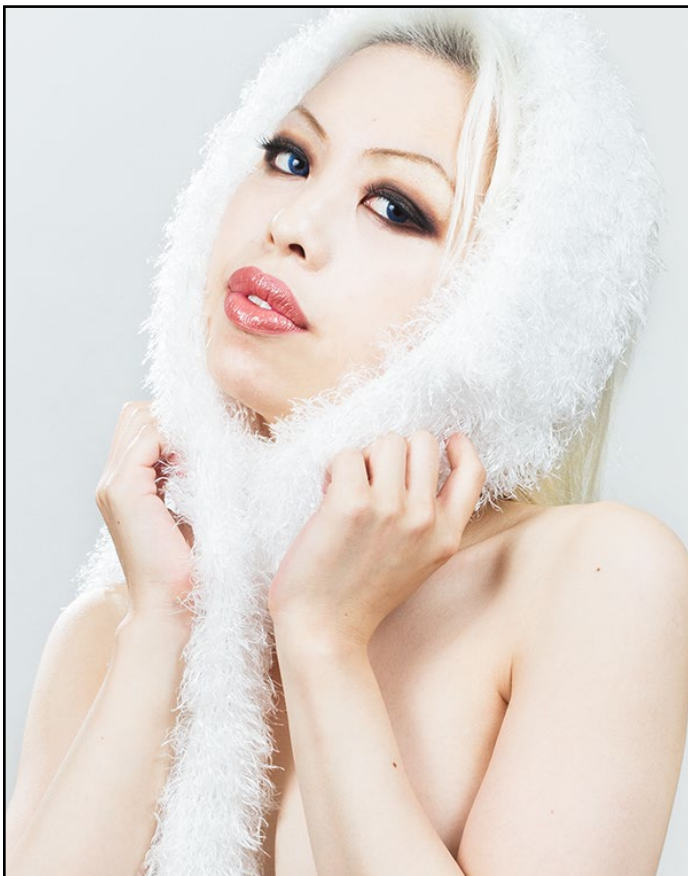

Figure 2: *A cross lighting pattern using two lights.*

Figure 3: *A single light classic portrait.*

subjects would say when I showed up with my little flash units. But no one ever really seemed to notice. As long as it seemed like I was comfortable with my tools, and they were confident that I would get the results we were all looking for, it didn't matter. Light is light, and good photos are good photos.

Figure 4: *One-light portability, studio-quality results.*

Setup and breakdown was so easy with my flash configuration it pretty much became my go-to lighting for most of my work. It's powerful enough for most jobs, no dependency on external power supplies or packs, small enough to use anywhere, easy to carry around…it's been great!

The setup I use is simple. It consists of a basic compact light stand, umbrella adapter, shoot-through umbrella, radio trigger, and some connectors. Two of these rigs go with me everywhere. Most of it stays assembled and ready to go–I just take the flash units off if I need to take them with me for on-camera work.

In this guide, I want to show you how to put together a little setup like this for your own purposes. You can use your system's automatic flash exposure features (E-TTL II, i-TTL, etc.) if you're not yet comfortable with manual camera and flash settings. But eventually you might want to learn more advanced techniques using manual in order to achieve any creative result you can envision. So, follow along with this guide and get a basic off-camera setup going. Check out the resources at the end of the book and continue reading my newsletter and blog for more free tutorials!

What You'll Need

There are many ways to put together an off-camera flash light stand. Here are some of the items I've used to setup my low-budget lighting stands. You can find them by doing a search at your favorite on-line photo equipment supplier:

- **Light Stand:** Impact Air-cushioned Light Stand (Black, 8')
- **Swivel Bracket:** Manfrotto 026 Swivel Umbrella Adapter (Lite-Tite)
- **Swivel Bracket:** Impact Umbrella Bracket
- **Cold Shoe Mount:** Vello Universal Accessory Shoe Mount
- **Translucent Umbrella:** Impact White Translucent Umbrella (43")
- **Hot Shoe Adapter for PocketWizard:** Impact Phono Plug to PocketWizard
- **Softbox Kit:** Lastolite Ezybox Hot Shoe Softbox Kit - 24x24"

Figure 5: *Top left to bottom right: Light stand, Manfrotto umbrella adapter, cold shoe mount, umbrella, softbox, Impact umbrella adapter, hot shoe to PocketWizard adapter.*

Putting it Together

Keep in mind there are several ways to get a flash on a stand, with or without an umbrella modifier, and using the products and pieces I've mentioned in this guide, or items you might find elsewhere. This is just one example of what you might want to try. Keep in mind when assembling the pieces that the angle adjustment knob or lever should be on the right-hand side as the cold shoe mount, flash, umbrella, and any additional attachments face away from you. This will keep everything oriented correctly.

1) Attach the umbrella adapter (swivel bracket) to the light stand. The end with the hole for the umbrella is on top. Place the adapter so that it fits over the stud on the light stand. Tighten the knob so that the umbrella adapter is securely mounted to the stud. If the umbrella adapter you're using doesn't already have a cold shoe attached to the top, you'll have to place one there yourself (otherwise, skip to step 3).

2) Attach the cold shoe to the umbrella adapter. The cold shoe adapter shown here has standard 1/4"-20 mounting thread on the bot-

Figure 6: *Attach the umbrella adapter to the light stand. Note the angle adjustment lever is on the right-hand side.*

tom. You can screw a stud/spigot into it to provide a way to mount it to the top of the umbrella adapter. Place the stud into the top hole of the umbrella adapter, and tighten the knob to secure the cold shoe.

3) If you are using an additional adapter: If you are using an adapter to trigger your flash unit from the base, such as the hot shoe adapter cord shown here (for use with a PocketWizard trigger receiver), then attach it to the cold shoe. It might be possible to avoid using the cold shoe in this case if the adapter has a mounting thread that can fit onto the stud. However, I'm more comfortable securing any adapters to the cold shoe.

Figure 7: *Screw the stud (this one comes with the Manfrotto brand umbrella adapter) to the cold shoe and attach it to the umbrella adapter.*

Figure 8: *In some configurations, a hot shoe to PocketWizard adapter is also attached.*

4) Attach your flash unit. Secure the flash to the hot shoe adapter (if used) or to the cold shoe, depending on your setup. If using a PocketWizard setup as shown here, attach the adapter cord plug to the appropriate socket of the PocketWizard.

5) Attach the umbrella. Slide the shaft of the umbrella into the hole of the umbrella adapter and tighten the knob to secure it. Again, make sure the angle adjusting knob or lever of the umbrella adapter is on the right-hand side as the flash is pointed away from you. The angle of the hole that holds the umbrella in place is setup so that it only works properly this way. Your flash will not be angled correctly into the umbrella otherwise.

Figure 9: *Attach the flash unit to the stand. PocketWizard adapter shown here.*

Figure 10: *Attach the umbrella.*

Using Your Lighting Kit

Later in this guide, I'm going to talk about using not one but two light stands to create sophisticated portraits. But whether you're using one or more lights, with or without ambient lighting, the main light is what you need to get right. It's the foundation lighting of the portrait.

The idea is to position your main light at a standard 45/45 orientation to your subject's face, which is my starting point for most of my off-camera flash portraits. That is, the light should be about 45 degrees to either her right, or left, and angled down

Figure11: *Main light in classic 45/45 position to the subject.*

about 45 degrees from above. How do you determine the proper settings, distances, and specific positions of the second light? It's not a perfect science, so don't worry about it. If you're shooting with automatic flash like Canon's E-TTL II or Nikon's CLS and i-TTL, you can get good results most of the time. Otherwise, you can use manual flash for more control. As for placement, I generally start with the main light about 3 ft. away from the subject.

If I'm using a second light, acting as my rim light or kicker, it's set about 6 ft. away from the main focus of the subject where my main light is doing most of the work. See *Two Lights, Many Options* later in this guide for more on using two or more lights.

Figure 12: *Main light in 45/45 position, second light doing double duty as background illumination and hair light.*

Naturally, you'll want to vary the position of your lights for different effects, or use just one light for more dramatic effects. Sometimes, I'll even use that second light to hit a light-colored surface behind my subject for a nice high-key or wrap-around effect. With this as your starting point, you'll learn to achieve almost any look you want with two simple off-camera flash units!

Softbox Alternative

While an umbrella can be used in the bounce-out position, where the inside of the umbrella reflects light back toward the subject, I generally prefer the shoot-through configuration; the top of the umbrella points toward the subject acting as a diffuser for the flash. There is a side-effect when standard translucent umbrellas are used this way; much of the light also bounces out of the umbrella into the room. This can be a good thing, if you want more diffused light bouncing around. But not so good if you're trying to get a more controlled effect as you would with an enclosed softbox.

Another problem arises in outdoor use where an umbrella can easily catch the wind and take your whole light stand down with it. For these reasons, it might be a good idea to look into a softbox solution.

Figure 13: *Lastolite Ezybox Hot Shoe Softbox used outdoors for this portrait. Light mounted to monopod and held by assistant.*

Using a Softbox

The Lastolite Ezybox Hot Shoe Softbox shown on the next page comes with a mounting kit that allows you to setup a flash unit outside the box for easy access and optical wireless transmission.

Some softboxes allow you to place the flash unit inside the box, but then optical wireless wouldn't work (although radio transmission would). You can mount this softbox onto a light stand/swivel

Figure 14: *Lastolite Ezybox Hot Shoe Softbox with flash mounting kit (right) and attached flash.*

bracket which gives you the ability to adjust the angle and direction of light. In the photo below, the softbox is actually mounted to a monopod, which is great for outdoor use when you've got an assistant who can hold the setup for you. This will give you a lot of flexibility when it comes to positioning the softbox, and guarantees the whole thing, including the flash, won't come crashing to the ground with a gust of wind.

Two Lights, Many Options

With one light stand setup (either softbox or shoot-through umbrella) you'll be able to create some amazing and potentially classic-style and dramatic portraits. If you're using no other light in the environment, and a fast shutter speed, you can vary the amount of illumination visible on your background by changing the distance between the light and your subject and background. If you're using the environment as back-ground, and there are ambient light sources in the room, a slower shutter speed will help you record those lights in the exposure. You can learn more about topics like incorporating ambient light into your lighting mix in my ebook, **100% Reliable Flash Photography**.

Now, if you bring in another light on a stand, you can use it with or without a modifier as a fill light or rim light source. Fill lighting is good for lowering the contrast created by using only one light. Rim lighting is another great use of a second light to enhance your portraits. This bright light placed somewhat to one side and behind your subject can help create everything from a barely noticeable highlight, to a defining rim light (kicker), to a strong secondary light which can pass as window light in some cases. One important thing a second light does when used this way is visually separate the subject from the background. This can create a slick and polished look when used effectively.

The example that follows is borrowed from one of my previous newsletters to com-plete the point:

The idea for this image was to create a sense of environment for the portrait. The actual room was rather dark, except for a bit of late afternoon light coming through the linen screen over the window on the far end in the background. However, I wanted to make it look like there were more windows and light coming in.

There were three light sources to deal with. First, I placed the main light (position A in the diagram, next page) at about 45 degrees off the camera axis to the model's right, my left. This is a Speedlite 580EX II on a light stand modified with a shoot-through translu-

Figure 15: *Two-light setup creating a look of window light coming in from the right.*

cent white umbrella. I used manual settings on my camera and on the flash units for maximum control. *Something you can learn to do through my ebooks and other resources.*

I wanted a nice shallow depth of field, so I was shooting with my 85mm lens at f/2.8, and for reasons I'll explain below, I used an ISO of 800 and a shutter speed of 1/125. I did a couple of quick test shots to make sure I had the right power setting for this light at this f-stop and ISO combination.

Next, I placed another Speedlite 580EX II flash unit just opposite (position B) behind the model and pointed directly at her. This unit had no umbrella modifier attached. This would provide a nice highlight to give the appearance of bright daylight coming in through a window. Note that this flash was flagged (its light partially blocked with
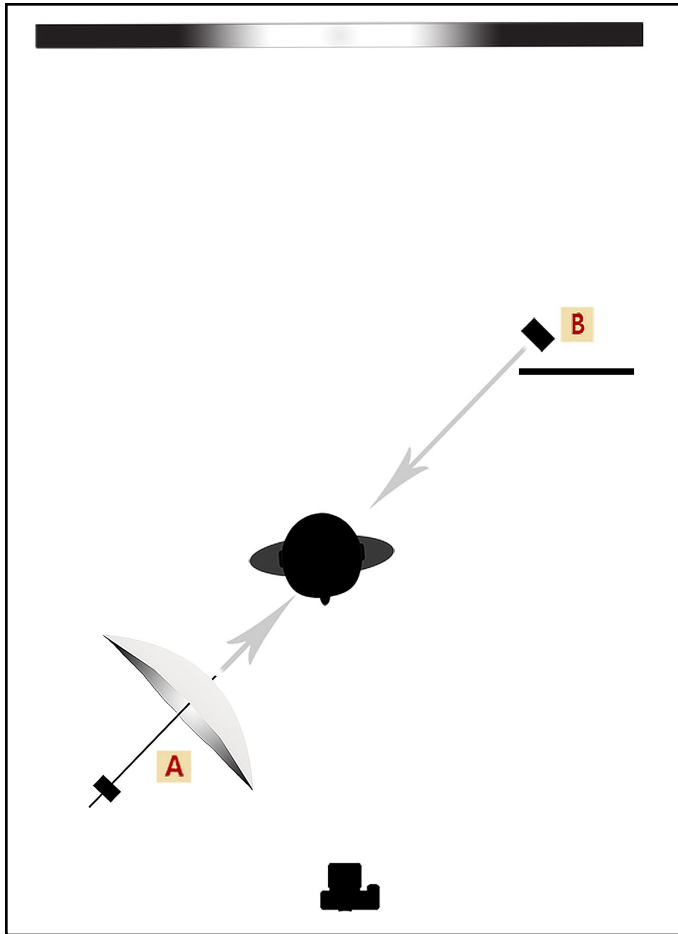
Figure 16: *Diagram showing main light (A) and back/rim light (b). Window light is opposite the camera.*

a piece of black material, indicated by the black line) so it wouldn't flare into the lens. Again, a couple of quick test shots and light output adjustments to make sure I was getting the right amount of light for this one.

Now, normally, when shooting with flash I set my shutter speed to 1/250 and my ISO to a much lower sensitivity (normally 100). However, this would have rendered the window light in the background dark. It was just not enough light to register at those settings. Even at an f-stop of 2.8 I still needed to boost my ISO to give the window light a chance to register in the exposure.

1/250 was still not quite cutting it, so I still needed to adjust the shutter speed to bring out the ambient light (window in the background). Changing the shutter speed to slower settings has no real effect on how the flash affects the exposure, but it does affect how the constant light does. Dropping the speed to 1/125 gave me the amount of window light I was looking for, plus it was reasonably fast to avoid any potential blur created by camera shake or the subject's movements.

I often use this and other methods of cross lighting to create nice effects for my portraiture. Naturally, you can even go beyond the two-light setup and use additional lights for fill, background, hair light, and side lighting effects. There's no end to what you can do with your portraiture once you open up the options with off-camera flash.

Additional Resources

Where do you go from here? There are plenty of resources available on the internet and in bookstores, but this is a good place to start. I'm constantly on the lookout for the best and most affordable books and courses to help you learn the right way. I not only create premium content ebooks, but also plenty of free video tutorials, podcasts, blog content, and newsletters to help you go farther with your photography. You can even stay in touch with me via my popular **Facebook group**.

Here are some additional resources to get you started.

And keep learning by reading the newsletter!

- **Video: Off-Camera Lighting for Small Flash Units**
- **Video: One-Light Portrait Setup**
- **Blog Post: Simple Headshot - Two Lights and a Backdrop**
- **Podcast: Off-Camera Flash for Beginners**
- **Newsletter: Sign-up and Start Learning Now!**