

Natural Light Photography | Module 4—Control the Light

Video 04-01 Control the Light

Photography is all about controlling the light. You can use a light modifier, such as a scrim, to control the light. A scrim is a device intended to reflect or diffuse the light. It's usually a fabric, such as rip-stop nylon, but anything can work—a sheet, a light gray bathrobe, etc. (Next lesson will show me using common items in a home to reflect or diffuse light.)

This photo shows me using a scrim to modify the light on a beach.



Here's another photo where I'm using a scrim to modify the light. If you look at my face you can see shadow and diffuse value. It's a little harder to see specular highlights, but if you get a little closer you can see it.

The scrim acts as a light modifier creating a large light source. I've put the sun behind my large light source.



Without the scrim modifying the light, here's how the photo would look. It has much more contrast of light and shadow.



In the first photo by the wall, the scrim diffused the light. Don't confuse diffusing the light with diffused value, which is the original or true color of an object or person. Diffusing the light means we're breaking it up. The sun hits the scrim, making the scrim the light source. The scrim scatters the light in a non-directional way.

Since the fabric blocked the light, the wall also received less light. The scrim reduces the amount of sunlight that gets through, so you have to compensate by opening your exposure (letting more light in through your camera), which means the background looks lighter.

Backlight

In this photo I'm backlit. I have the scrim leaning against the wall. The sun hits the wall and reflector, which kicks light back into my face. You can see a little bit of specular highlights in my glasses.



Working With The Sun

We're on the beach now in the late afternoon sun. In this photo, the light is fairly intense. It's coming from behind and wrapping around to my left side a little, but most of me is in the shadow.



Taking the photo from a different direction, you get what I call the "ugly light." Not everyone agrees that this is ugly, but to me the light is harsh and accentuates wrinkles. I can tell you, though, that this kind of light will not sell family pictures. The soft light will. The soft light comes from a large light source, such as a soft, gentle, large sky, not the little light that accentuates squinting eyes.



Reduce Contrast With A Reflector

Here I've reduced the contrast using a reflector, but I'm still dealing with sunlight. Even though the reflector reduces the dark shadow on my right side, it's still not pleasing. To do this correctly I would have placed the reflector horizontally so the light would fill in more of the shadow in the front.



Diffusing the Light

Here I've placed the scrim between me and the light source to diffuse the light. That reduced the amount of light, so I had to open up my exposure to get enough light on my subject, which makes the background lighter. But now I have a large light source that's softer and more forgiving.

Most point and shoot cameras meter the light automatically, but you may need to focus on your subject, press the shutter halfway down, and then move your camera to compose your picture before pressing the shutter all the way down to take your photo.



Three Quarter Light

Here is three quarter side lighting. Look at the intensity. Look at the specular highlights on the glasses.

When we use the reflector, it becomes a main light. The right side of my face is more of the diffused value, or true color of my face, whereas the sun on the other side of my face is more specular, because it's brighter than the diffused value.



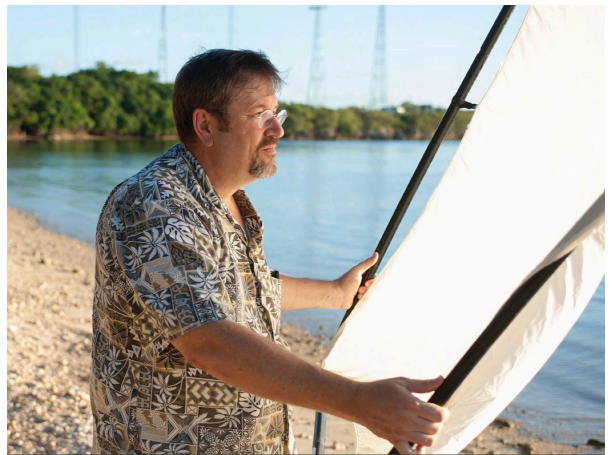
So if the scrim is acting as a main source of light and not a fill light, I might need to rotate the subject more to take advantage of that.

When I photograph people using this technique, I take the background into account. A light background with light skinned people, may make part of them disappear into the background. Same with dark-skinned or dark-haired people on a dark background.



Shooting Through The Scrim

Here the light is being diffused through the scrim, and I'm shooting my subject from the side. By this time, the sun is lower on the horizon. It's still above the subject, but we're getting reflection off the water and sand as well.



Portrait Principles

I do most of my photography at Sunset.

- I shoot with the sun, but I shoot as the sun drops behind a cloud
- I can create a “cloud” when I put a scrim between the sun and my subjects.
- You can also modify the sun by changing your location.
- You can also change your light modifier, e.g. what you're next to that reflects light, or the position of your scrim. Your camera isn't a modifier. A modifier is an element that affects your lighting, e.g. a tree, wall, sand, windows, etc.

The sun is the power plant. It may be the light source for your photo, but you don't want it to be the main light source. You want it to be the hair light coming from behind a subject, or the light that bounces off of a reflector.

It isn't that the sun is “too powerful.” It's that the sun is a small light source. It goes back to the light quality that I'm looking for. I don't want a small light source. The sun is a big light source if we're close to it in space, but it's small here on earth because look at its size compared to the rest of what we see around it.

Think of the tomato next to the window. The further away we got from the window, the smaller and brighter the light source became on the glass tomato.

When we took the tomato onto the beach, the sun looked like a small point of light. When the sun went behind the cloud, the whole sky became the light source, and it became a large light source.

I don't like a small light source. A large light source is more flattering on photos of people. It shows fewer wrinkles.

Young kids can get away with smaller light sources.

I also don't like to shoot beautiful women, because they're never happy with their photos. (Aside: Don't dump your self esteem issues on the photographer!) As a photographer I get a really good view of people and their self-esteem.

I prefer shooting character, and lines are character. It may not be beautiful to see an older wrinkled face, but there are stories that go with that face.

Sunset Photos

In this sunset photo, notice how bright it is. Notice the reflections off the water. We're seeing sunlight here.

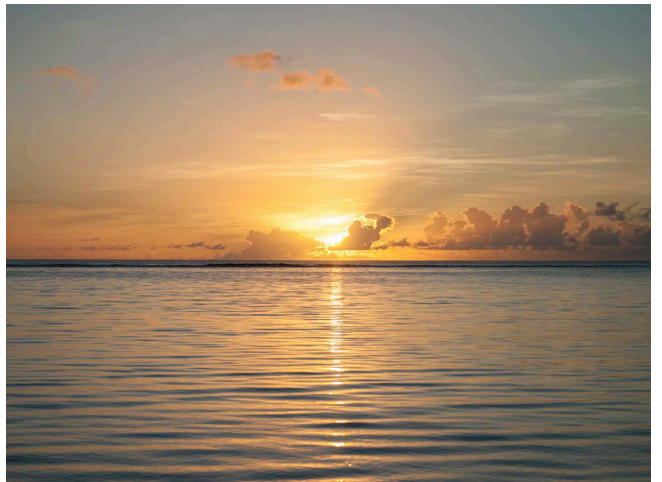


Here's how sunlight looks on me. You can see the yellow cast. This is not color corrected. I would normally use Photoshop to pull out some of the yellow and add some green to color correct it.

It's also intense. You can see the wrinkles and crow's feet around my eyes. Notice the shadows from the glass rims along the side of my face. Notice the specular highlights on the end of my nose and on my glasses and on the planes of my forehead and face. Notice the smile line. When I was younger they were dimples, but now they're lines. Hard light shows every crevice and imperfection.



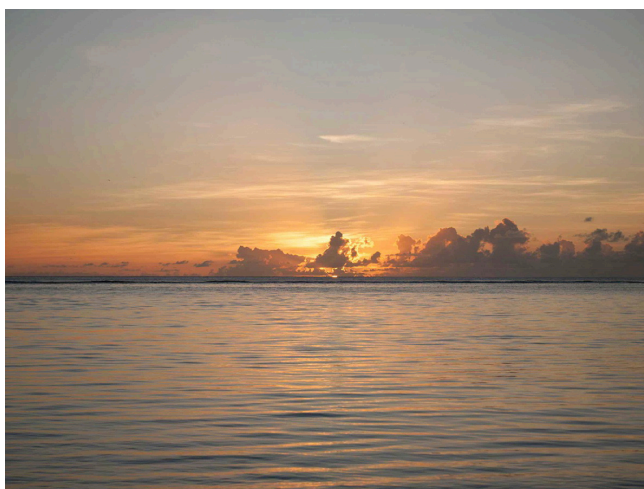
Here, the sun is beginning to go behind the clouds.



Here's the result on my photo. You can still see the lines, but the light is less intense.



Now the sun has gone behind the clouds.



Here's what my photo looks like now. Even the background has changed. The main thing it's done is reduce the contrast, and my flesh tones look more real because I don't have a color cast from the sun. This is the type of light I use for photographing families.

- Large light source
- Specular highlights aren't as intense
- Shadows aren't so pronounced



Assignment

- Photograph a subject with close cropping (so their head and shoulders fills most of the photo).
- Shoot with side light.
- Shoot with flat light.
- Shoot with 3/4 light.
- Shoot with backlight with a front fill. (I'm not looking for a silhouette—I want fill light.)
- Post in the gallery.

Lesson 4-2 Ordinario Studio

You can create a studio anywhere as long as the light is good. The photos of the Ordinario family, shown in the video, were shot in a construction site. I used my scrim to fill in some light. Sometimes I use the scrim to block light on the other side. I like the light ratio to be 1 to 3, with 1 being the diffuse value, and 3 being 1/3 the amount of light of the diffuse value.

I see things two dimensionally through the photo lens. Don't worry about extraneous stuff around you.



Lesson 4-3 Linda's Musings

This lesson with Del on controlling the light has definitely expanded my thinking, though, in theory, I did know a little about light reflection. I've had a piece of white art board hanging around for years that I occasionally used as a reflector, but mostly I used it to photograph objects that I wanted to select from the background to use on my scrapbook pages—like jewelry from my mother-in-law's collection.

I also have a white sheet to use in my photography, but I always used it as a background. I never thought to use it as a reflector or to diffuse the light.

After learning more about controlling the light, I've kept my eyes open for possible reflectors and diffusers. I have a white throw on one of my chairs that would do well if I needed more light in the living room.

When my friend and colleague, Jen White, came to visit, I took her around Portland to view the sites. One of our famous views is of the Columbia River Gorge from Crown Point.

When I took Jen's photo with the Gorge in the background, she was in full sun, which accentuated the shadows and made her eyes squinty, even behind the sun glasses.

Since I had just recorded the Natural Light Photography class with Del, I thought to look in the trunk of the car to see if I had anything I could use to diffuse the light, and I found two sheets of white tissue paper.

I had my husband to hold up one of the semi-transparent tissue papers so it diffused the light over Jen's face. The tissue wasn't very large, but it was all we had, and it really did make a difference.



Seeing how Del used his scrim made me wonder if I should look into making a scrim or purchasing one. When I researched online, I saw that there were some good options that were quite inexpensive, so I decided to purchase two sizes.

The brand I purchased was Fotodiox, but there are many other styles available. This comes with a carrying case that is about a foot wide. The price for this scrim, as of this video, was under \$20.

When you zip open the case and pull out the scrim, it pops open into a 32 inch in diameter reflector with four colors: white, gold, silver, and black. The zippered cover is reversible, so that's how you get the four colors for one scrim.



The inside circle with the flexible frame is semi-transparent material, which acts as a diffuser.

To store the scrim, you put the diffuser inside the cover and zip it up. Then you twist the frame to fold it, so it fits nicely into its case. I like the small size because I can easily transport this.

The second size I got was an oval 4 feet wide by 6 feet tall, but it still folds down into a manageable size. This set, also with 5 possible styles, was just under \$40, as of this recording.

Of course, my cats were very interested in this new item, but then, they're curious about everything. I took one photo without the reflector and one with the reflector, which added a nice fill light



Crown Point Photo Shoot

Next I thought I would try out the scrims at the same lookout point where I took photos of Jen White. My family very kindly agreed to participate, so we drove up close to sunset on an atypical cloudless day in Oregon. Charlie held the scrim while I took the photos. Only one problem. I had removed my memory card to download photos, and I forgot to put it back in. All we had was Charlie's iPhone, so that's what I used.



Here's are the resulting unedited and edited versions of the photo.



To give you an idea of how bright the sun was, here's my daughter Allison in direct sunlight without the scrim.



Using a scrim, here are the unedited and edited versions of the photo:

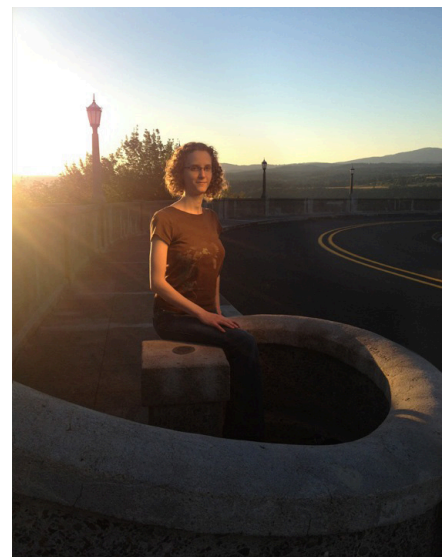


I then took Allison to the opposite side of the look out so I could get a backlit photo. It would have been better if the sun had been a little lower, but I wasn't willing to wait around for another 25 minutes. The rays of the sun were interesting, but I definitely needed some fill light. Here are the photos without and with fill light.



The second photo was also edited in Photoshop. It's rare that a photo doesn't need some processing in Photoshop or Photoshop Elements, so that's a good skill to learn. Let me show you one more example.

I took another view of Allison without any fill light. Then I had Charlie hold up the gold reflector. He had to get close enough for it to make a difference, so now he's in the photo. I placed this photo over the original photo and lined them up. Then I added a layer mask and masked away Charlie.



Then I worked with the photo in Photoshop. Here I played with some of the colors.



And here I made a more dramatic, almost monochromatic rendition of the photo.

Controlling the light—that's what this lesson is all about. It does take practice to get the hang of it, though, and I found it was hard to take the photo and hold the reflector at the same time, so it helps to have someone else hold the scrim while you shoot the photos.



Lesson 4-4 Shirt Scrim

In this class we're talking about natural lighting, but if you don't have natural lighting, here's a tip on creating your own lighting:

- Take the shades off of a couple of lamps.
- Use some sticks to create a cross bar.
- Hang a white shirt on the sticks to diffuse, or soften, the light.

