

Flash Tutorial II (part two, Fill Flash) (Rev.1)

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When taking pictures of people you will want them properly exposed but in daylight, if they face the sun they will invariably squint and the resulting expression will be less than ideal. Bummer!

But if you take the picture with the sun at their back and there is a lot of sky showing, your camera's light meter will usually expose for whatever there is most of in your frame and you will get a beautiful sky but the person's shaded face will invariably be underexposed. Bummer again!

Of course if you use spot metering and expose for the face you will get good facial exposure but the sky will be horribly blown out. Third bummer!

And if you just take a "regular TTL flash picture" the background may turn out very dark and it may seem that the picture was taken at night. What? Four bummers in a row?

*(drum roll) Ta-Da Enter **Fill flash**, the answer to beating all those bummers!*

Keep everything in the picture just as a normal daylight shot but fill a little light on the subject to get it "out of the shadows".

Fill flash can be used to effectively give proper exposure to the face and also keep the sky and background properly exposed.

With an on-camera flash the lighting may be flat but it will be preferable to the underexposed face.

Beware of lens flare when facing the sun. A good way to avoid lens flare is to place the sun directly behind the subject.

Of course if you are using a speedlight with an extension cord you can still hold it up and away from the camera and get a little modeling effect from the illumination.

(The settings called, fill flash, balanced flash and backlight flash mean the same thing. Different manufacturers sometimes use different terms. Use these setting with TTL exposure control.)

If your camera or speedlight has a TTL fill flash, backlight or balanced flash setting it will take care of the foreground and background for you automatically.

If you are using a speedlight for fill flash you will have to set the speedlight and the camera to the same settings regarding the background being properly exposed, or not.

Every serious photographer should have at least one speedlight.

If your flash does not have a fill flash setting you can do it manually.

To manually set your camera for fill-flash, set your camera's mode to manual exposure. and if you are using a speedlight you will also have to set it to M or GN.

For example, suppose the guide number for your built in flash is 35 and you are ten feet away from the person which is your subject.

Your f/ stop will be $35/10 = 3.5$, so set your aperture to f/3.5.

Now use the camera's light meter to determine what shutter speed at f/3.5 will give proper exposure for the overall picture. Select that shutter speed and take the picture.

Remember that it cannot exceed your camera's max. sync. shutter speed if you have a focal plane shutter.

1/60 sec @ f/3.5 may be a problem on a bright day so you can see that the low powered built in flash with a low GN has its limitations.

The result should be a properly exposed overall picture with enough fill flash to properly expose the person who would otherwise be in the shade. A real bummer beater!

If you are using a speedlight it will be much more powerful than the built in flash on your camera and your guide number will be in the order of 80 or even 110 so you will have a broader choice of shutter speed.

So with a speedlight GN of 110, at 10 feet, $110/10 = 11$ so you will set your aperture to f/11.

You can now choose a shutter speed which correspond to f/11 to properly expose the background.

And if you are striving for perfection you can always use your camera's "Flash Exposure Compensation" which will adjust the brightness of the light falling on your subject to your satisfaction. However, if you are in manual mode it will be easier to just change the aperture.

Be aware that flash pictures taken indoors will probably be somewhat overexposed compared to outdoors because of the effect of the light bouncing off interior surfaces and adding to the light falling on the subject. Use flash exposure compensation to fine tune the exposure.

Check your owner's manual to find out how to do this on your camera.

Beware, as with any exposure compensation that you set on your camera, it will not automatically go back to zero when you turn the camera off.

You must manually return it to zero.

If you forget to do so, all subsequent pictures will have that exposure compensation applied to them until it is manually re-zeroed.

Get into the habit of returning exposure compensation back to zero after every use.

If you consistently find that for the type of flash pictures that you regularly take, you always have to apply the same exposure compensation it would be easier to adjust the guide number for that type of situation.

You should also be aware that the colour temperature of electronic flash is approximately 6,000 degrees Kelvin, close to that of daylight, so do not use it as a fill light for a subject which is primarily lit by any light source of a significantly different colour temperature.

Assignment - Be sure that you completely understand how your shutter works with electronic flash. Fill light is usually used for backlit people but can be used for any subject which is backlit.

1. Take a head and shoulders picture of a person with the sun at their back.
2. Take the same picture but with manual fill flash as previously described, using either the on-camera flash or a speedlight.
3. Repeat 1. and 2. above but with the person further away showing the full body and perhaps something interesting in the background.
3. Enter all four of these pictures in the month end slide show.
4. For your own interest, also take these pictures using the automatic backlit feature of your flash. I think you will find that the modern flash equipment does a very good job.