Essential guide:
Studio flash, part 2

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Last month, we showed you what is possible with one just flash unit. Now it's the turn of two flashheads, plus there's a studio gear buyers' guide WORDS BY WILL CHEUNG PICTURES BY CHRIS ROUT

It's often said that two heads are better than one - and this applies to studio lighting as much as in life itself. Make no mistake, you can achieve a tremendous number of creative pictures with one flash unit, but having two opens many more doors. Now you're probably thinking that this is blindingly obvious - it is! - but having two heads instead of one can double your problems, so using them without much thought is a recipe for disastrous pictures. Good technique still rules OK, and that's what the first part of this Essential guide is all about.

There's one really good thing about having two flashheads from the very outset, and it's nothing to do with taking pictures. Buying one head and a few accessories means less initial outlay, but saving your pennies for a little longer to afford a two-head lighting outfit can mean that you save money in the longer term. The flash suppliers and retailers often bundle stuff together to give a cash saving, or you may find a free set of stands or reflectors thrown in. Offers are changing all the time so ask your dealer. Also check out our buyers' guide to studio kit, which starts on page 30.

Anyway, back to using two lights brilliantly. In this Essential guide photographer Chris Rout and model Lucy Kinninmonth demonstrate how you can get great results with little effort.

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Gear used:
Two heads, two white brollies – one shoot through, one solid

Two heads, one either side of the model at around 45° and slightly higher than head height, is a popular flash set-up. But just because many photographers go for this particular set-up doesn't mean that it will give great lighting, because it won't. What it does is provide good, reliable and safe lighting, the sort of effect you see in school pictures or those portraits that you see being offered every weekend in shopping centres up and down the country.

Going for a perfectly even effect where both lights give the same light output is fine, but you can get superior results with better modelling if one unit is set to deliver a greater output than the other. Careful light metering (see the panel opposite) is important to make sure of an attractive mix of the two units. You can also try using one white brolly and one silver – the silver brolly gives more 'kick' so the result is that the lighting is more contrasty.

Using just two units means that there's no spare light to turn the background white, hence the one you see here has an off-white look.

In terms of lighting unit height, the ideal position is just slightly higher than the model's head, and if you want more light under the chin prop up a reflector just out of frame.

Two lights fitted with brollies give attractive results. Here, the right-hand light was set to be one stop brighter than the left for a 1:2 ratio.

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Metering with two heads

Digital photographers can, in theory, do without a flashmeter: just take a picture and you can see instantly whether the exposure's right or not. What an image on the camera monitor doesn't show you is how accurately the lighting is balanced. You may be after a 1:2 lighting ratio (one side being one stop brighter than the other), and this is where a good flashmeter comes into its own.

First take a reading from one light, using your hand to shield the sensor from the other light (or switch it off), and take a reading. Let's say it's f/11. For a 1:2 ratio, you want the other light to give a reading of f/8. For a 1:4 lighting ratio it's f/5.6.

Take your next reading facing the other light, again shielding the sensor. If it's f/8 you're in business, although the odds are you may have to do some tweaking of the power control.

Reader profile:
Shirley Finlay

Photographing people and working in the studio is the aspect of photography I most enjoy, so after finishing my HND and in pursuit of a career in photography I decided to create my own studio. Deciding to site it at home came after looking at various options, market research, and discussing the matter with fellow photographers. Also, because I had the space it was the most cost-effective.

As for lights, ultimately reputation, quality and durability won the day and I went for Bowens Esprit Gemini lights. They are very easy to use, fully controllable over a five-stop range and adjustable in 1/3 stop increments. The range of accessories available is extensive and easily sourced. For example,

I bought accessories like the kit bags which are strong, padded and have wheels – great for transporting precious kit on location. The lights will run directly from the mains as well as from a self-contained Travel-Pak, again ideal for location work.

Concentrating on studio portraiture meant that softboxes were an obvious choice as they emit a soft diffused light for flattering results. Another accessory which works particularly well is the 75 softlight reflector, which produces a very natural soft, flattering light, ideal for photographing children, beauty, fashion or make-up work.

To see more of Shirley's work, visit www.rossbayphotography.co.uk.

Shirley Finlay recently completed an HND in Photography and, as she enjoys photographing people in a studio environment, she decided to set up her own portrait studio at home.

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Gear used:
Two heads, one softbox,
one light on backdrop

In this technique, we move away from brollies, trading one in for a softbox, an Elinchrom model in this case.

With two heads, one fitted with a softbox, you can get excellent quality light on your subject and that leaves one head to aim at the background. The background head doesn't need to be fitted with a special reflector – all you need is a simple reflector that helps control light – such reflectors are often called spill kills.

Keep light off a white background and the result can be a little grey, as you saw on the previous pages. However, throw some light onto it and it will stay a lovely white. The important thing here is that the background receives sufficient light to make it white and you should check this with a flashmeter.

Meter for the subject first as normal, then take an incident meter reading with the meter held close to the background itself. This reading should be around one stop brighter than the subject's reading.

It's worth trying different positions for your background light. Move it close to the background surface and you get a tight white spot with a fairly sharp graduation to grey in the corners. Moving the unit further away will give a softer effect with a wider spread of light. The beauty of a white backdrop is its flexibility – you can use it white, grey, or any colour you desire by using lighting gels. Such filter gels are inexpensive and massively expand the creative potential of a white roll. Try filter gels from Lee Filters or Jessops.

A softbox from above and a light aimed at the white backdrop gave this result. The light is nicely directional but without being over harsh.

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Colouring a background

You can probably buy a filter gel holder for your flashhead or just tape it on with gaffer tape. But remember flash units get hot, so if you go for the rough-and-ready approach, do take care.
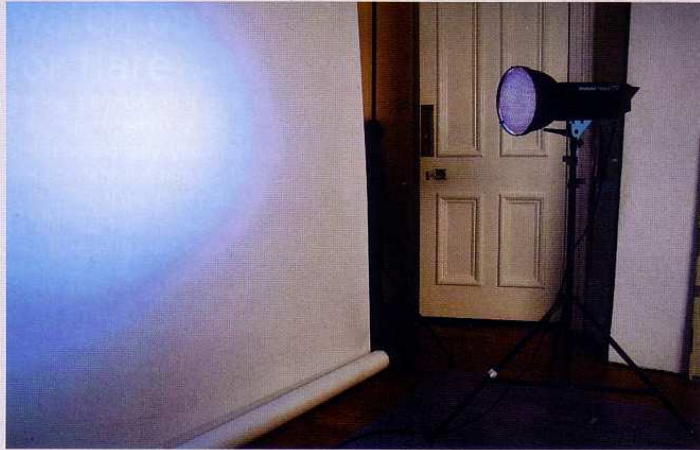
Lighting gel filters are available in a wide range of colours. Again, a quick warning here because of the heat involved: only use filters designed for lighting. Check out Lee Filters and Jessops (www.leefilters.com; www.jessops.com).

Colour choice is obviously a matter of taste, but as a starting point go for neutral colours for portraits. Bright colours, such as yellows and oranges, are best avoided, except for still-life shots.

In terms of metering and light positioning, the techniques are more or less the same as for a white backdrop. However, you can vary the depth of colour by turning up the output for a lighter effect, and turning it down if you want a more saturated background.

Blue's a nice neutral colour: garish hues are best avoided for most work.

For this shot, we slipped in a third light that was sat on the floor with a shoot-through brolly fitted. A reflector could have done a similar, but less obvious, job.

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Gear used:
Two heads, one softbox, one hairlight

Using a backlight to bring out a model's wonderful hair is a technique worth trying. Backlighting is not a technique you might use for every shoot, but with the right subject it can look excellent. It lifts the subject from the background giving a three-dimensional effect, and makes more of the subject's hair.

You do, of course, need a model with a decent head of hair. It doesn't often look great with short hair, which rules out most men, for example.

So assuming you have a suitable subject in front of your camera, you've the option of placing a light unit directly behind the model's head or going for a light coming in from one side.

Direct backlighting works really well if you have lots of hair to play with, and the effect can look great. It's easy too, but watch out for lens flare and don't use too much light because the effect can be overdone giving very high, unmanageable contrast.

After you've metered for the subject, walk round to the back of the model and take an incident reading from the back of their head. Half-a-stop brighter is a good starting point to give the model's head a lift.

Full-on backlighting might not suit your subject, so try moving the light unit to one side so that it's out of shot and raise it higher so that it aims downwards. While you are adjusting the light, do keep returning to the camera position and check the effect. You want the light to lift the hair while avoiding flare and too much light striking the subject's cheek. Light output also needs to be powerful enough to light the hair so you get some separation from the background.

It's worth trying different reflectors too. A spill kill might be too harsh, but fitting a honeycomb or grid to soften the effect can work really well. Such devices also help focus the light output and so avoid any risk of flare.

Lucy's hair stands out nicely from the background with the use of a hairlight. Gentle hairlighting is fine but don't overdo it.
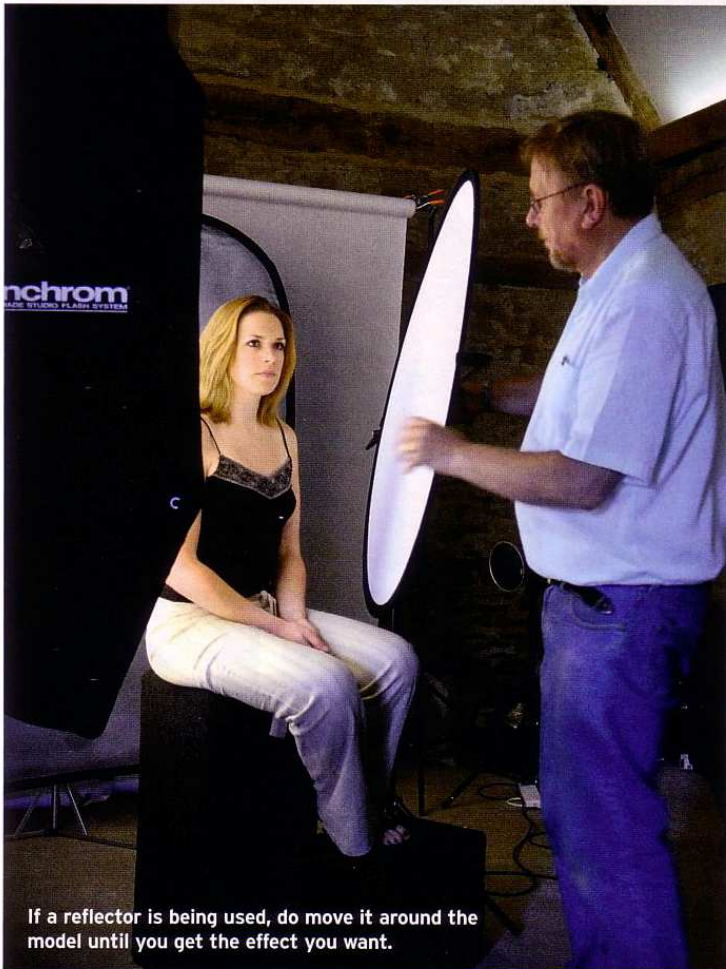
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Watch out for flare

Aiming a lighting unit back towards the camera can cause lens flare. Shooting digitally, you may notice immediately, but film users might not.

To avoid flare, firstly fit a spill kill to limit the light spread, and then take care with light positioning and check through the camera viewfinder to ensure there's nothing horrible going on. Needless to say, a clean lens or filter and the use of a suitable hood are essential.

You need to be extra careful if the light unit is directly behind the model's head.

Metering for hairlight

Careful metering is needed if you want a hairlight that has a beneficial effect but without being too strong. The amount of light needed and where the unit is actually placed can also depend on the model's hair.

First, take an incident meter reading as usual to give an aperture for the whole scene.

Now take a meter reading from the hairlight with the incident diffuser aimed back towards the light unit. If this technique is new to you, it's best to start with a subtle effect and see whether you like it. A reading that's about half-a-stop stronger than the front light is a good starting point if your model has hair like Lucy's here. If the hair's dark and bushy, you may want more light.

If the lighting unit is directly behind the model's head, you may find that a whole extra stop is needed so be prepared to play.

If a reflector is being used, do move it around the model until you get the effect you want.
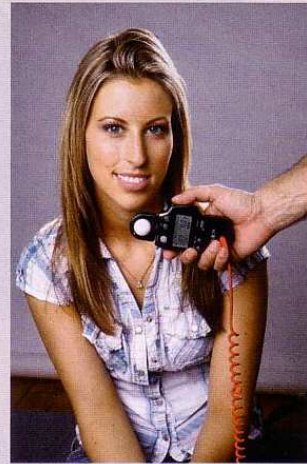
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Essential guide: How to (and how not to!) pose a model

Work with a professional model and they will drop into elegant, natural poses to order and you can shoot away with very little instruction from you. That's what they are paid to do.

But put almost anyone else in front of a camera and the odds are they will be uncomfortable and not know where to put their hands, for example. Inexperienced 'models' will need direction, advice and encouragement.

Naff posing is really easy and while you'll still see cheesy glamour shots, send them in to us and you'll get the pictures back by return of post.

The best poses are those that are natural. If you get the chance, watch your sitter before the session and see how they use their hands and watch for any mannerisms that you may be able to exploit during the session itself.

To be honest, the responsibility is yours so speak up and direct the sitter to get the shots you want. Whatever you do, don't clam up and hide behind the camera – many photographers do – but don't get bossy either. There's a happy balance of giving good, accurate, concise instructions and feedback.

If you want to do portraits seriously, put together a scrapbook of ideas and have it handy during a session. Here are a few ideas from Chris and Lucy of poses that work – and a few that don't.

Silence isn't golden

The last thing a person sitting in front of the camera wants to hear is, err, nothing. Some people can happily chat away about nothing, and if you're one of those, lucky you. But if you and idle chat are uncomfortable bedfellows, you will have to work harder. One tip, put some music on - not your favourite death metal, but something a bit more easy listening.

JUST DON'T POSES TO AVOID

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TRY OUT THESE
POSES