

## An intro to High Key Lighting

Please note that high key is **not** just photographing someone against an overexposed white background – a lot of people refer to blitzed-out white backgrounds as high key photography but it's only real high key if there are no dark tones, and the background doesn't even need to be white for a shot to be high key.

The technique is simple, but it doesn't suit every subject.

Like most effects, High Key comes in and out of fashion. It used to be almost the standard method of getting rid of skin imperfections but most people find it easier to carry out 'skin repairs' on the computer.

At its most basic, high key is deliberate overexposure of the skin tones, and the subject normally has a bias towards light tones (although I've seen some outstanding examples of high key lighting on African Americans too). This overexposure reduces/removes the skin imperfections and produces a dreamy, innocent look - but it only works well if the skin doesn't *look* overexposed. So to make everything else in the shot look 'normal' and the skin light, we need to make everything else darker so that it ends up looking normal in the finished result.

Eye makeup and lipstick therefore needs to be much darker than normal, otherwise the whole shot will look overexposed. The background can be either white or grey. If you want it to *appear* white then you just overexpose it.

How much you overexpose it depends on the type/quantity of lighting equipment you have and on how much space you have.

For example, if you happen to have 4 spare lighting heads fitted with background reflectors (special reflectors that provide very even lighting on the background) then the background only needs to be overexposed very slightly.



The advantage of using the minimum possible amount of overexposure is that light bounce (more of this later) can be a real problem – light will bounce from the background on to your subject and if there's too much of it then the bounced light will simply eat away at the edges of your subject and destroy the fine detail in the hair, around the shoulders etc.

Assuming that you only have 1 or maybe 2 lights available for the background, the lighting won't be as even as it really needs to be – some areas will be seriously overexposed and others will be underexposed. One popular way of 'curing' this problem is to put it right on the computer but that's a pretty unsatisfactory, and very time consuming way of dealing with a problem that can be easily avoided in the first place simply by getting the lighting right...

The lighting solution is simply to increase the level of light on the background until the darkest parts are slightly overexposed, and record as white. Of course, some parts of the background will be seriously overexposed and because of this some of the bounced light will reach the subject and cause its own problems. The only solution to this is to have plenty of space between your subject and the background, so that the light bouncing

from the background has lost nearly all its power by the time it reaches your subject. There really is no other solution – you MUST have EITHER very even lighting of the background OR plenty of space between subject and background.

There are commercial ‘solutions’ available, for example there’s a softbox arrangement that acts as a background... but although the lighting in the softbox can be pretty even, it can still cause flare and it can still degrade the edges of your subject – and anyway, these products are too small and too expensive in my opinion.

The lighting for high key is very simple - just use large diffused light sources very close to the subject to avoid harsh shadows and reflections on the skin. Avoiding reflections is essential because skin reflections will burn out with overexposure. The 'high key' lighting of family groups as practised in some modern commercial portraiture firms isn't really high key at all, but it uses general high key principles - there are normally 2 lights on the background, illuminating it evenly and causing enough overexposure for some light to bounce back on to the subjects, providing some controlled backlighting.

Then there are 2 more lights on the subject, usually a family group, and the lights are placed slightly above and to each side of the subjects.

This results in very flat lighting (which gives everyone a fat face!) but it has the advantage that nobody can accidentally create shadows on to anyone else, and the lack of shadows contributes to the high key effect. A useful side effect is that very little lighting skill is required – which also makes this technique popular with beginners.

### **Light spill from large light sources**

Obviously, high key lighting normally involves using large, diffused light sources such as softboxes, shoot through umbrellas or scrims and this can cause its own problems/

Softboxes are the most efficient large light sources (because all the light is travelling in just one direction, or at least in theory) but of course it doesn't just get to the subject and then stop – it goes past the subject and bounces off the background, it spreads out and bounces from the walls and ceiling too. In fact, there's a great deal of 'bounce' – at a distance of 12', a 3' x 3' softbox creates a beam of light 25' high and 25' wide!

So what happens to that bounced light?

It goes everywhere, or at least it does in a small studio.

For beginners who are just trying to get very soft lighting, this may seem to be an advantage of sorts – but once you've moved past the soft lighting stage and you want more controlled lighting, you'll want to control your lights – and you'll feel frustrated that whatever you do you'll find that bounced light has lowered the contrast, caused lens flare and stopped you from creating the shadows that are needed to shape faces and add interest..

So, what can you do about it?

Well, some people think that the answer is to put a honeycomb (grid) over the front of the softbox. These honeycombs are ridiculously expensive and you may want to think carefully before you spend your money.

What the honeycomb will do is to control the spread of light. If you get a fine one with a 20° angle then the spread of light from our 3' x 3' softbox at 12' will reduce from 25' to 8' – but it will also lose its wrap around qualities, the shadows will be much harsher and it will give an effect much more similar to a beauty dish than to a softbox. It will also

'lose' around 4 stops of lights so, for example, your 300 Joule flash head will only produce the equivalent of 16 Joules!

There are really just 4 possible answers that work.

1. Use a large studio. If you have a high ceiling and if the walls are distant, bounced light won't be a problem – but of course this 'solution' simply isn't practical for most people.
2. Paint the walls and ceiling black. White paint is the worst possible studio decoration because of the 'light bounce' problem. Black is the best. But studios with black walls and ceilings are depressing places to work in and anyway, it isn't a practical solution if your studio has to double as your living room...
3. Paint the ceiling black and have black drapes that can be pulled across the white walls when required. This is probably the ideal solution for high street portrait studios that need to look cheerful but which also need to work, but again it isn't practical if your studio is also your living room.
4. 4. Make do with what you've got, but gain control of bounced light by using flags. Flags are simply pieces of black painted card or board, or better still cinefoil. Place flags wherever they need to go to stop light bouncing around and ruining your shots. The look untidy and it takes time and a bit of thought, but it's the only way of controlling light spill in a small space with light coloured decoration. And it's cheap!

I mentioned shoot through umbrellas and silks too. The light spill from these is **far** worse than with softboxes and although you can use flags, in exactly the same way, it's a bit more difficult to control **all** of the light spill.

*Reflective umbrellas* are popular and the light spill they produce is about the same as from a softbox of similar size – but they can't produce soft light when required simply because they face the 'wrong way' and so can't be placed close enough to produce soft light.

Which leads me on to my final point about limiting light bounce and getting soft lighting...

The light needs to be close, or it won't be soft. It needs to be so close in fact that it will be physically in your way. Work around that, but don't move the light further away to make your life easier, unless your softbox is truly massive.

And, by having your softbox really close, the effect of the bounced light will be reduced. The reason for this is that the further the light has to travel, the more power it loses. If the light that reaches your subject only has say 3' to travel and the light that bounces off the nearest wall has 6' to travel then a lot of the power of the bounced light will be lost in travelling 6' to the wall and another 6' back again. And some of the light will be lost in reflection too, probably no more than about 70% will actually reflect from any surface except a mirror.

# Photolearn

[www.photolearn.co.uk](http://www.photolearn.co.uk)

Copyright: Garry Edwards & Commercial Photography. All rights reserved  
Photolearn is a subsidiary of Commercial Photography, 1A Mill Street, Bradford  
BD6 3BQ. Tel: 01274 60 88 22