Ringflash photography

Without a doubt, a ringflash is a terrific tool, especially for fashion and glamour photography, and it can be very useful for portrait photography too. But, like other bits of specialised kit such as fisheye lenses, ringflashes need to be used sparingly and only when they produce the effect that suits the subject.

Because the light surrounds the lens it gives the photographer an amazing light quality that can’t be emulated by any other kind of light.

When used close to a background it will give you a nice halo around the model and when used indoors it will give an almost shadowless look, and the shadows that are there all radiate outwards.

1. Their power output is extremely low, only if the camera is set to a very high ISO. The larger the ringflash, and the closer it is to the subject, the softer the light will be and the more obvious the ‘ringflash effect’ will be – as with any other light, when used at a distance it becomes small in relative terms and just produces a hard light.

2. They are physically very small, and at normal distances they are just too small to produce the expected result. Work anything more distant.
And many of the small Ringflashes aren't truly ringflashes at all in that the flash tube isn't circular – they simply have 2 or more small flash heads covered by a diffuser. Whilst it's probably true to say that most professional fashion and glamour photographers have a ringflash in their toolkit, it's a professional model that usually costs an enormous amount of money and it plugs into an expensive flash generator. This one, by Bron, is an excellent piece of kit, but possibly overkill for most people.

But things change, and I've been using the new Lencarta Ringflash which is a good compromise between the low-powered 'macro' types and the heavy duty pro models.

It's rated at 400 Joules (a very usable guide number of 99 at 100 ISO) and it runs off a shoulder-worn rechargeable battery. The only downside that I've found is that the recycling time is slow, which means that quick-fire sequences of shots just aren't possible.

Like all flashes (except for some of the hotshoe accessory ones) ringflashes have to be used in manual mode and the exposure is dependent on the distance from flash to subject. Now, this isn't a problem with 'normal' studio flash because we simply take a meter reading to get the right aperture and we're then free to move around the studio and shoot from wherever we want to – as long as the subject stays in the same place it doesn't matter where the shot is taken from.
But ringflashes work differently, because they’re normally attached to the camera and so if the photographer moves closer or further away then the exposure changes with the distance. This means EITHER that the shot needs to be re-metered with every change to distance or that the distance has to remain constant. This is what I normally do whenever possible, I simply use a zoom lens and take all or most of my shots from the same distance.

The whole point of using a ringflash is that it attaches to the camera, and the light completely surrounds the lens, producing the unique ‘ringflash effect’ – but they can also be used off camera, fitted to a lighting stand in the usual way, and they then become very similar to any other studio flash head.

**The ringflash effect**

As I mentioned above, the ‘ringflash effect’ is a halo that radiates outwards when the subject is placed against a wall or similar

Here’s a shot of Cathy, my youngest, who kindly ‘volunteered’ to help...

The shot on the right is with a ringflash used as the only light and as you can see, there are shadows – but the shadows are soft and radiate from the centre outwards.

Ringflashes can be used in conjunction with other lights too.

In the shots below she was photographed against a blitzed-out white background...
The shot above left was lit with a shoot through umbrella, above camera and right – the light has the distinctive softness of a closely-placed umbrella with gentle but distinct shadows. Cathy’s glasses didn’t cause a reflection problem because the light was placed at an angle that ‘bounced’ the reflection away from the lens.

Notice the different shadow characteristics with the ringflash shot on the right. Notice too that reflections in her glasses are a real problem, simply because the flash is directly in front of the subject and so reflects the glare straight back at the lens.

The reflection problem can be overcome by angling the subject so that the light strikes the glasses at an angle that sends the reflections away from the lens.

It’s also possible to combine ringflash with other lighting – in the example below, the key light was a shoot through umbrella above camera and right, and the ringflash was used in the fill position, fixed to the camera.

Although the ringflash was in the fill position it was actually the key light, and was set at twice the power of the umbrella light.
And now let’s move to a black background, to illustrate more examples of combining ringflash with other lights.

A reflective umbrella has been used to produce a hairlight, and because it’s behind as well as above the subject very little light spills on to the face.

And here’s a shot with the ringflash only, with the hairlight turned off.

And with both lights combined.

Of course, as with any other lighting arrangement, we can change the balance (ratio) between the various lights.

For example, the hair light could be more or less dominant, as required.
In this setup, the key light is a reflective umbrella in a rimlight position, i.e. it is off to the side and also behind the subject, limited the amount of light reaching the hair and the side of the face.

Of course, this may be the effect you want to create, but if you want to add fill then a ringflash is an ideal tool because it’s placed around the lens, in the perfect fill position, so it can place fill light in places that other lights simply can’t reach.

The fill ratio can of course be whatever you want it to be.
Typically, people often seem to use Ringflashes against a plain white background. I think this is a pity, because they can be used with just about any type of background, as in the shots on the next page.
And a mirror was used in this shot. As with Cathy’s glasses, all that needs to be done is to shoot at an angle that bounces the reflection of the flash away from the lens.

And finally, it’s worth pointing out that the distinctive ‘ringflash catchlights’ that people often talk about are only obvious when the ringflash has been used really close to the subject. In this shot, the distance was just 12”