

A low-angle photograph of a woman with long, wavy blonde hair, wearing a teal, sleeveless, textured dress. She is looking off to the side with a slight smile. Behind her is a tall, cylindrical lighthouse with a dark lantern room at the top. The lighthouse has some rust on its surface. Below the lighthouse is a smaller, white building with a dark roof and a chimney. The scene is set outdoors with a chain-link fence and some vegetation in the foreground. The sky is overcast and grey.

Portrait Photography with Simple Gear

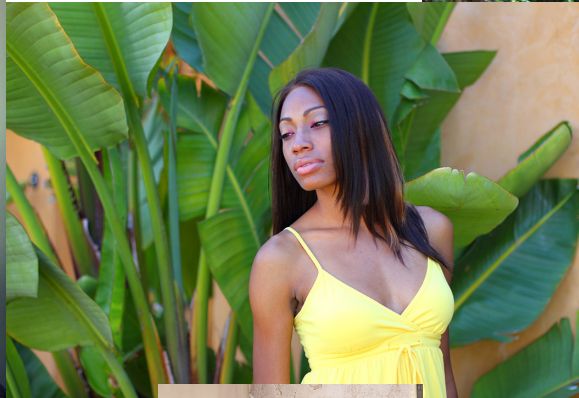
Using simple lighting gear to get much
better portraits... from mild to wild.

Don Giannatti: Instructor

Portrait Photography with Simple Gear

Welcome to the Portrait Class.

We will have monthly live Q&A's, and additional assignments as the course progresses.





Portrait Photography with Simple Gear

Using white cards outside can help you control the fill and reflection from your subject.

Everything reflects... skin, hair, shirts, jewelry and more. You must be able to control those reflections to make beautiful photographs.

I use the white cards in as close as possible to provide the widest and softest light. I also keep the angles in mind as I want to control the brightness of card to provide the brightness of the reflection.

Notice how we use the fill cards outside to provide exceptional light.





Notes:



Using a small light source without modifiers can create a look that closely resembles the sun.

Using a single strobe for the backlight, and the cards in front of Briana makes a simple, and yet quite beautiful light for this portrait.

We do two different shots for this assignment: One with the bare flash and one with a small softbox for a bit more diffusion on that backlight.

You may have to scrim off the light if you are shooting a blonde, but for most portraits, I let the hair blow out... just as sunlight can blow out the back of the hair and shoulders on a subject on the beach.

As you are working on this shot, keep the light off of the face and cheekbones of your model. If those areas blow out, the image will be much harder to work with in Photoshop.

Image above: NIK:
Glamour Glow / Skin Softening
It is not a style I use a lot, but many people like it.

Notes:



Classic beauty is one of my favorites and is a staple of fashion, beauty and glamour photographers.

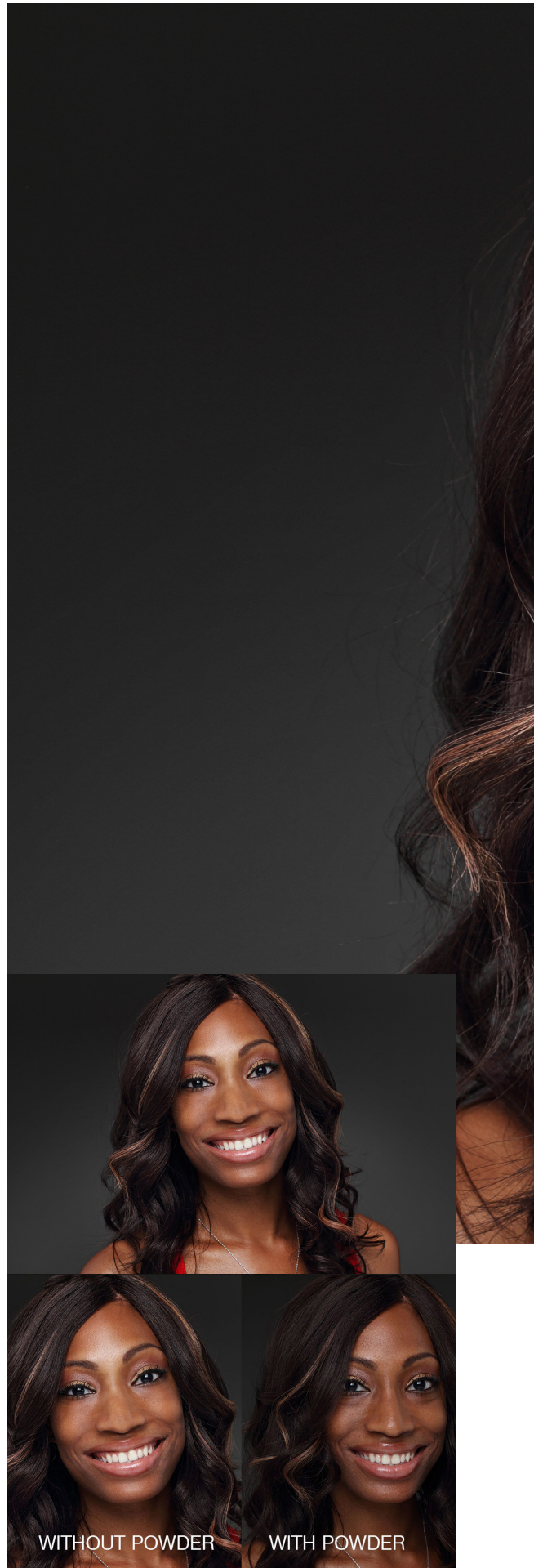
We are using a single strobe on these shots so we can control the fill on the sides of our subject with white cards.

The closer you bring the white cards in on the side or from the bottom, the brighter that fill can become.

Do some testing with the fill cards at different distances and make exposures at 6" increments.

Note the image numbers and make some prints to see how the reflection/fill works on different faces.

You will find that different sizes and shapes of faces may call for more or less fill. Working with the subjects to find the best spot for the fill is one of the challenges of beauty photography.



WITHOUT POWDER

WITH POWDER



Notes:

Portrait Photography with Simple Gear

When the weather doesn't cooperate, there is still an easy way to make the image appear that a little sliver of sunlight has snuck into the image to warm up the portrait.

I find that the strobe can be placed about 6-7ft above and behind the subject at a power setting of 1/16 or 1/8. These settings are typical for almost any small strobe.



Additionally you can work the zoom on the flash to get a variety of different looks. I like 50MM and also zoomed all the way out to 105MM or 135MM on my small strobes.

Doing the zooming makes the light look a lot more like sun penetrating small areas behind the subject.

You can also put something like a small branch or similar in front of the flash to give the light some texture.

Make some shots and work with the strobe at different power, different zooms and add a few items in front of the light to break it up a bit.

Notes:



Portrait Photography with Simple Gear

There are methods that work when blending natural and strobe light... and the best is to first find the ambient.

That means finding aperture and shutter speed that works to make the image look good without the light on the subject.

Once that the background light looks the way you want it to look, then it is an easy matter to add the strobe in.

Strobe is distance and power - that means that the power of the strobe and the distance it is from the subject determines the aperture designation.

Let's say we make an exposure of a room with window light and we find that we really like the way the light looks at $f4 / 1/60$ at ISO 100.

Great. We now know what the exposure of the shot will be... $f4 / 1/60$ at ISO 100.

We simply put the light where we want it to provide the softness, and then place the power at the point where $f4$ is provided.

Notes:



Portrait Photography with Simple Gear

Notes:





A pure white background can be really fun to work with. But if it is not white enough, it can become a dingy gray. If it is too bright it can blow out the highlights and flare around the edges.

I do it this way.

Using a white background we aim the strobes toward it and place them at 1/2 over the exposure we are using for the face.

Think about it... Perfect exposure of white is white.

So we need a bright, clean white exposed correctly.

Placing our subject at f5.6 means all we have to do is expose the white background at 1/2 to 2/3 over the same exposure we are using for the face.

Face is f5.6.
Background is f7.1.

Perfect.

Portrait Photography with Simple Gear

Scenes with too much contrast are very difficult to work with.

The lights are too bright and the darks are too dark.

Adding in a subject can be quite a harrowing experience.

Unless you know what you are doing... and you now know.

First we find our ambient light exposure. We find the exposure of our scene that looks the way we want it with the lights and darks where we think they should be.

Using our meter or our string meter, we can easily add the light to match and have a well balanced, attractive portrait.





Notes:

Portrait Photography with Simple Gear



Sometimes there is not enough contrast in a scene. This shot of Iveena was taken in the dark forest area near Capitola.

There was just a little hint of sunlight coming over her shoulder, but the rest of the scene was very dark.

I used an umbrella to light her - placing it 1/2 stop above the ambient. (In other words, after finding the ambient light, I set the camera to 1/2 stop darker and moved the light to my new setting. Letting the ambient go just a little bit darker helped her face stand out a bit.

The wall of the creek behind her needed to be a little more dramatic, so I added a bare strobe from behind her to light it up and give the shot some dimension.

Try working in total shade for a shot or two, and use a second light for the background if you have it.





Notes:

Portrait Photography with Simple Gear



Natural light portraits are easy to do when there is some great light to work with.

Knowing how to use it can make you the hero when it comes time to make portraits on the fly.

This shot had some issues with the black hat reflecting back on the forehead, and tops of the cheeks.



You will see in the video how we had her turn her face up just a bit to offset that reflected black hat.

Notes:



Portrait Photography with Simple Gear

Iveena's sultry pose fits perfectly with the lush tropical look of the background.

Letting the backlight blow out gives the image the feeling of warmth and natural beauty that we were going for.



Sometimes I work hard to match the background as in blending strobe and natural light, and sometimes I don't care and let it blow out.

This is one of the latter choices as I prefer the natural look to the beauty shots.





Notes:

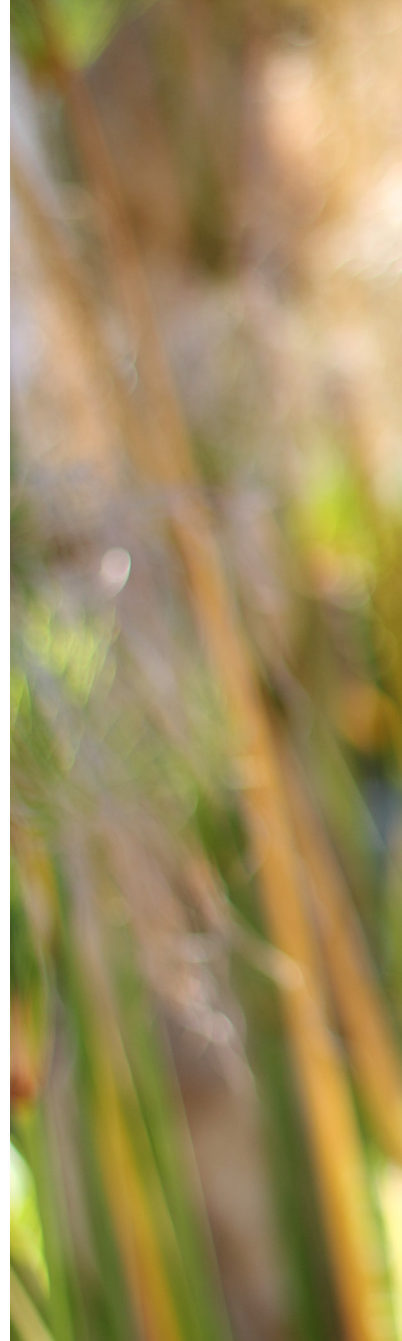
Portrait Photography with Simple Gear

I love the light blowing out around her... and it can be so attractive when you make sure the face is presenting well.

The natural surroundings are doing a splendid job of lighting up her face and skin and this shot needed very little Photoshop to clean up the skin.

Be very careful with your meter... make sure that the sunlight is not hitting the dome of your ambient light meter, and make sure it is not flaring into your lens.

Both can cause bad exposure readings.





Notes:

Portrait Photography with Simple Gear

Working with the face out toward the light - especially from a corner - can be a very beautiful light.

I love corners... there is so much interest with the leading lines and the way that the walls surround the subject.

With the light wrapping her from camera right and from right behind me like a giant softbox, it softly wraps around the face and provides a wonderfully soft portrait.





Notes:

Portrait Photography with Simple Gear



I love to find dark backgrounds for my backlit shots. Briana's hair is so lovely against the dark foliage and the skin color / presentation is darn near perfect.

With the sun so low in the background, the hairlight is subtle and more of a sliver of edge light.



This can be both a gift and a curse... if it is too low, it may not be delivering enough light to the area behind you or enough in front of the model to prevent deep shadows under chin and nose.

Notes:

If you see that start to happen, grab a few of those white cards and clamp them on a stand between you and your subject. They will provide just enough light to open the shadows and help the skin be clean and bright.



Portrait Photography with Simple Gear



The sun was playing in and out of those magnificent clouds, so I needed to make my exposure as they came in and out, noting how the different light did different things on both the background and the subject.

I had Abby in the greens sort of 'emerging' from them, and my speedlight over left shoulder. It is a bare light with a diffuser on top of it.

I took an exposure of the foreground, but keeping in mind what I wanted the background to do. Blending the exposure meant I had to wait till the sun was out in the background, but still in the clouds where Abby was. We spent about 20 minutes waiting for the light... I would get 3 or 4 shots and the sun would change.

Patience.

In the end, an exposure of f8 at 1.1/60 (ISO 100) was perfect for flash and background when sun was backlighting.



When I saw the soccer field, I knew there was a shot in there... somewhere.

I started exploring the field through my viewfinder, and found this interesting juxtaposition of nets and background.

Putting up one speedlight on a stand, I set it to match my ambient - as long as the ambient "was the shadow" of the cloud ambient. When the full sun came out, the entire shot changes drastically.

The speedlight is un modified, but also set at a zoom of 24MM so it would be a quite wide spread of light. When the ambient and the strobe are so close, the image doesn't have that "strobed" look that I do not enjoy.

First - find the ambient. Once you do that, it is much simpler to find the exposure for the flash. Power and distance... and a little string.

Portrait Photography with Simple Gear



A view of the fence shot from another perspective. In this shot, I wanted the fence to be a big part of the image. You can see the position of the strobe in the images to the right.

I also got down much lower for these shots so that the background and leading lines would be lower in the frame. This elevates Abby and makes her taller and larger in the frame.

Also note how I use my Tenba bag to anchor the stand from the breeze. By looping the back strap around the stand at the bottom, the bag works as a weight and keeps the stand from moving.





Portrait Photography with Simple Gear



Sometimes you can use your lights to make your own reality.

The lighthouse at Pigeon Point was perfect for creating something with an ethereal and somewhat mystical feel to it.

I wanted the light to seem mysterious, and reminiscent of the current crop of Vampire movies that are all the rage... heh.

Again, finding the ambient light is the best way to start - then you know what you need to do with the lights you have.

We do two shots - one with a single speedlight and one with two speedlights.

The Photoshop work will be a lot of fun for you to work on as well.

Try creating your own reality and share the images with us.

Notes:





Portrait Photography with Simple Gear

Top Left:

The ambient light shot. I am exposing for the bricks and sidewalk here. I know Paige is going to go very dark in that shadow.

Lower Left:

The speedlight on the right is flashing, but not the one on the left. I can then take measure of how the image is going to look in the shadow area, and how much light I will be giving to Paige from that right side strobe.

Right:

Now both flashes are firing and I get the shot I was looking for. Kind of a fun light and using the shadow of the palm tree for an interesting effect.

The flashes were zoomed to 35MM for these shots. I wanted a very wide spread of light from the strobes.





Top Left:

You can see the strobe on the right firing here, but not the one on the left. Comparing the narrow beam to the images on the previous page, you see how focused the light is in this shot. I have moved both strobes to a zoom setting of 105MM - effectively making them more 'spot light' in coverage.

Bottom Left:

Now both strobes are firing and we have a much more complete view of what we will achieve with this light.

This Page:

Paige in two small pools of light in the shadow of a palm tree. I like this version best... lots of drama with the small lights.



Portrait Photography with Simple Gear



Left:

You can see how high I have placed the ambient for this shot (aperture and shutter speed). I didn't want the ambient light to go so dark as to make Paige look 'strobe lit' or with that 'flash' look.

Left Below:

Here we show the flash firing and how well Paige is covered by the small umbrella. This umbrella is a 28" white in the bounce position. It is just off of camera axis for a nice presentation.



Right:

The portrait crop shows how well the light held up in the ambient. I opened the shutter speed one stop and got more hair light... actually, Paige's hair is reflecting the brightly lit open sky above us.

Far Right:

I moved Paige into a little bit of sunshine coming over the top of the building for this shot. No other settings were changed, but I did pose her so that none of the hot backlight would fall on her cheeks. Lens on this and previous shot is 100MM Canon.





You can see the mix of ambient and strobe in the shots below. The top shot shows the image in ambient and the lower shot shows the strobes firing and lighting Paige up from two different positions.

The camera left strobe is aimed at her face and chest and the camera right strobe is aimed at her hip and legs. This gives the image some interesting dynamics.





My favorite shot from this setup. I love the dynamics in the legs and the 'on-toe' dance look.

You can really see how matching the sun with the strobes create a very unearthly kind of light.

This look is something I like a bit more than lowering the ambient to make the background go very dark. While this image still certainly looks lit, it doesn't look harsh.

Portrait Photography with Simple Gear

Don Giannatti has been a photographer for more than four decades. Starting with a desire to do fine art photography, he quickly made the jump into commercial. Over the decades he has owned studios in Phoenix, New York, Chicago and LA. A wide range of clients kept him shooting everything from studio product to fashion, beauty and travel.

With a preference for photographing people and still life, Don feels that lighting is the most important part of the image making process. Understanding the light and how the subject reflects the light helps photographers visualize the image before starting the shoot. This “subject centric” approach to light is what he teaches and is the subject of his second book to be released soon.

Don current maintains a studio in Phoenix, teaches workshops all over the world, and writes for the on-line Photography magazine, Lighting Essentials.

Learn more at Don’s site for photographers;
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Don has written three books for photographers. They are all available on Amazon and at fine bookstores all over the world.

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