



# 'High and Low Key Photography'

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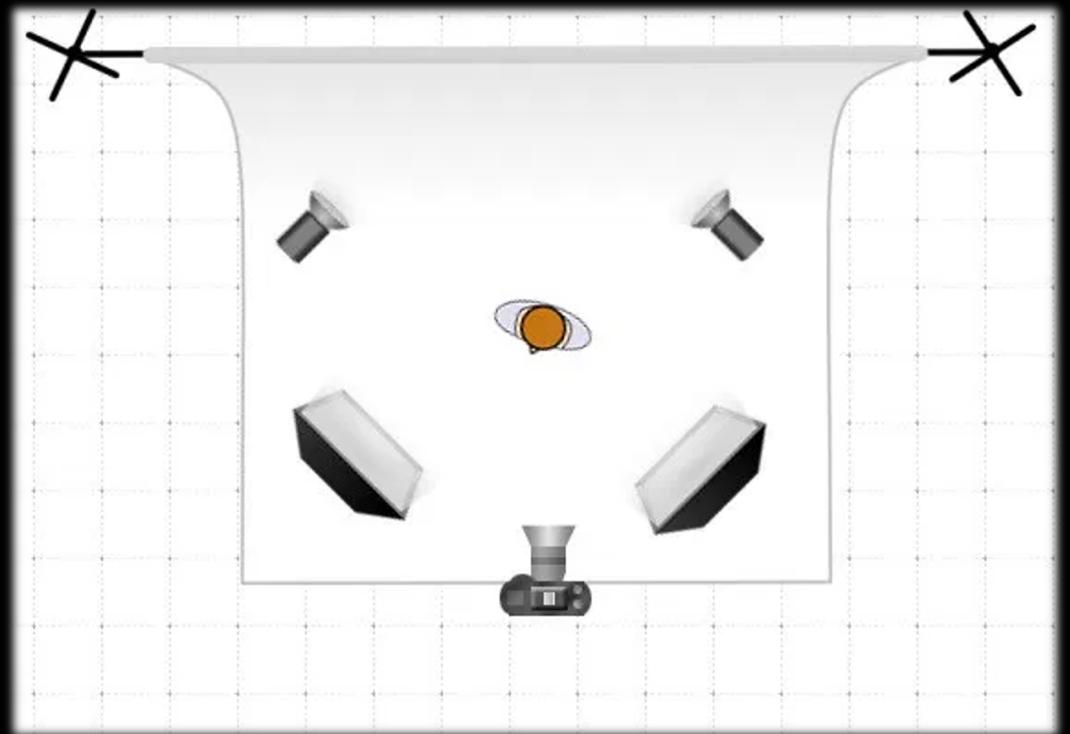
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4 light set up

**High key** shots usually lack dark tones, and the **high key** look is generally thought of as positive and upbeat. **High key** lighting is used a lot for **portrait** photography as well as product photography. It is different from **low key** photography, which produces the opposite effect.



Studio set up



## High Key: The End State

The main advantage of working in the studio is that you're in absolute control of the light. You control the amount of light sources, the position of the light sources, the character of the light.

Personally, I always try to use as few light sources possible. I also prefer using hard lights to get extensive and concise pictures. So, here I'll show you how to create a high-key portrait using four hard light sources.

## Step 1: Light the Background

The first thing I did was to put one bareheaded light on each side of the model and direct both light sources towards the background.

These lights will then act as both background lights and rim lights. You can clearly see that I've overexposed the background to create an even, white area.

But what you might not notice at first is that I increased the power output of these lights 2-3 f-stops more than necessary to make the light bounce off the background. This created the nice and soft lighting effect that you can see on each side of the model's head.

Next, measure it. In this case I got 11.0 aperture. In most situations, when you are shooting in the studio the parameters are 1/200 sec and ISO100.

1/200 sec is usually the flash sync speed of most cameras.



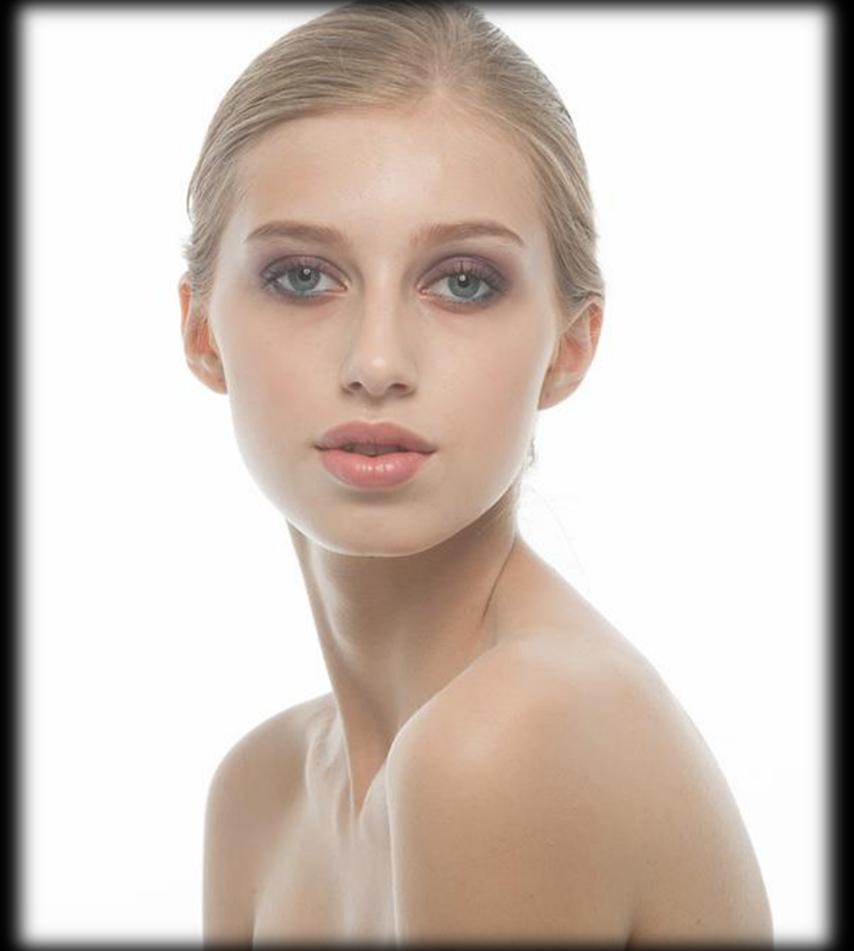
## Step 2: Set the Key Light

The next step is to set the key light. This will be placed right in front of the model's face, as I already have two symmetrical lighting patterns on each side of the model's face.

The key light is a large monolight equipped with a **Beauty Dish**.

This not only creates a soft light, but also nice, round circles in her eyes, we call them 'catchlights'.

The key light doesn't have to be placed very high up, just slightly above her forehead level – high enough to not be visible in the shot!



## Step 3: Set the Fill Light

The next task is to reduce the dark shadows on the model's neck. Remember: we're working on a high key portrait here! There should be no deep shadows!

So what I did was that I tried using a silver-sided Collapsible Reflector in front and below the key light – just slightly lower than the position of my camera. The closer the distance, the softer the light we get.

The Collapsible Reflector created a beautiful additional catch light in the model's eyes. (The small, white dot underneath her iris.)

But it didn't really solve the problem of the dark shadows around her neck. The light bouncing off the Collapsible Reflector just isn't strong enough. So, we need to add another light source!



## Step 4: Add the Fourth Light

Now we add a fourth monolight equipped with a **Snoot**, positioned at the same level as the key light but directed toward the Collapsible Reflector.

The Snoot was equipped with a honeycomb grid to narrow its light beam. This was necessary to prevent any stray light from reaching the model's face, we call stray light 'Spill'.

We only want the spot of light bouncing off the Collapsible Reflector to reach her.

And this is what the result looks like:





The lighting setup with reflector

## A Deeper Understanding

Let's turn off our background lights to get a better understanding of what our key light and fill lights are doing.

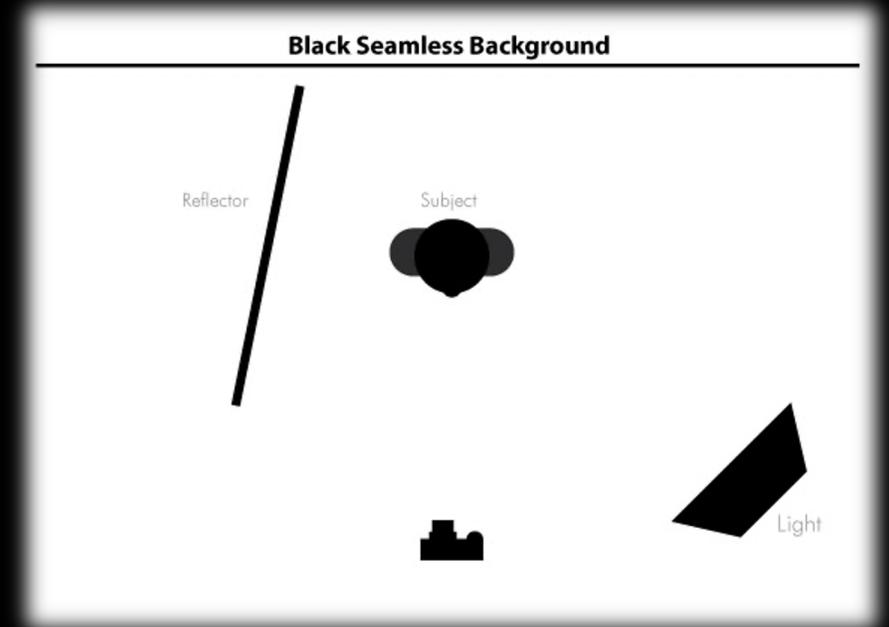
The image above was shot with the only key light and fill lights. Notice that the background had become grey and that the soft, bright lines of light on each side of the model's face have disappeared. It's still a nice shot. But it's not a high-key portrait.



# Low Key Portraiture

Low Key photography is one of the most challenging forms of photography, for any range of shooters. Low Key photography is the ability it holds to add drama and hard-hitting emotion within a shot.

You don't need to use artificial lighting to get a **low-key portrait**. You can always use natural window light. But to control the natural light, you must close the curtains down to a tiny slit. Then, with the room lights off, place your subject in the light and expose for their face.





## How Do You Use Low Key Lighting with Flash?

Low key photography often uses a single light source to keep dark areas in the image. So, to create low key lighting artificially, you can use a single flash as well.

To make it easy for you, think of the flash as that beam of light from the window. And like a window, consider placing it above the head of the subject.

Instead of positioning the light directly in front of the subject, move it about 45 degrees to the side. But feel free to experiment with the angle to create different results.



## What Settings Should You Use for Low Key Photography?

For demonstration purposes, this sample image was shot at 1/60 of a second, at f/4, and ISO 250 with the flash turned up one third.

As you can see, it overexposed parts of the face because it metered for the light in the background.

To avoid overexposure, set the camera into 'Manual'. Doing so allows you to control the settings to prevent overexposure entirely.

For a low key portrait, keep the ISO and flash compensation constant.

To cut out the ambient light, turn up the shutter speed to 1/1000 of a second and narrowed the aperture to f/8. Doing so allowed 1/64 less light in than previously. Please note, that you will need a High Sync Speed technique to reach this shutter speed.

As an alternative, you can also place a black paper sheet or fabric behind your model.



# Other Low Key Photography Ideas....





Questions?