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GET OUT THERE AND TAKE SOME DAMN PHOTOS!
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How To Shape Light



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Tools For Shaping Light

Shaping light is all about controlling your light, and these are some of the tools you can use:

- Flags
- Cookies/Gobos
- Umbrellas
- Softboxes
- Grids
- Snoots (not mentioned in the video)

You can shape your light whether you're using continuous/LED lighting, or instantaneous/flash. Regardless of the light sources, when shaping your light, it's much easier if you can see the results in real time.

If you are using flash and your flashes don't have modeling lights, I'd recommend picking up some cheap LED or other continuous lights that you can use as modeling lights.

Put the lights in the position you plan to have your flash in, then use the continuous light to aid in the placement of the light shaping tools.

Flags

Flags are tools for blocking and directing your light. Typically some kind of black material, but can be anything you use to block and shape your light.

One of the most accessible flag material is black foam board available at most dollar stores.

With flags you can:

- Block light from illuminating part of the scene you don't want lit
- Create shapes like doors or windows
- Create very constrained light that illuminates very specific areas of a scene

When using flags to shape your light, remember that the closer the flag is to the light source, the softer the edges of the shadows will be.

- If you want your shadows to have soft edges, position the flag closer to the light
- If you want your shadows to have harder edges, position the flag further away from the light

Cookies/GOBOs

A Cookie/GOBO is something you use to break up the light to create patterns or shapes in the light. (If you're wondering, GOBO stands for "Go Between Optics")

Cookies can be ANYTHING, but a very common practice is to take some kind of flag, like black foam board, and to cut the cookie pattern into it.

You can also use things like house plants, fake plants, branches, material, feathers, literally anything

When using a cookie to shape the light on your background, it's common to use a dedicated light for the background/cookie

Remember, just like with flags, the closer the cookie is to the light, the softer the edges of the shadows will be.

Also remember that cookies aren't just for backgrounds, and can be used when lighting your subject as well.

Umbrellas

Umbrellas are pretty well known light shaping tools for creating soft light, and they are great because they are cheap and easy to use.

The down side to umbrellas is that they're sloppy. You get very nicely shaped soft light out of an umbrella, but you also get a ton of sloppy light spilling out all over your scene.

This is often fine for someone just getting started, and that light can be shaped and controlled further with the use of flags, but if you want more/better shaping and control in your modifier, I'd recommend a softbox.

Softboxes

Softboxes are the evolution of the umbrella. Some industrious photographer somewhere along the line got tired of flagging the light from their umbrellas and decided to build the flags right into the modifier.

Boom. Softbox.

Softboxes are great for controlled, diffuse light. Because the flags are built right into the modifier, the sloppiness is greatly reduced and there is very little spill.

However, even with a softbox you can get some spill (as illustrated in the video). This is where the grid comes in.

Grids

A grid is exactly what it sounds like, a grid of material that is used to further shape and control light.

In the video, I showed you how you can use a grid on a softbox to further control your spill to shape and direct your light exactly where you want it to go.

What a grid does is constrain the light and keep it from spreading out as much as it would without the grid.

That ability to constrain your light is perfect when you want to shape it.

However grids aren't just for using on softboxes like the one I used in the video. You can also use grids on bare speedlights, LED light panels, etc...

In fact, I often use this [DIY grid](#) on my speedlights to shape my rim lighting.

Snoots

Snoots are kind of like a snout for your light. In fact, this is a DIY snoot I made for my speedlights:



Front



Side

If a grid is like herding sheep through a gate, a snoot is like running the sheep in a single file line through that same gate.

A snoot gives you incredible control in shaping, aiming and placing your light exactly where you want it to be.

Conclusion

Shaping your light is the next step in flash photography/lighting. It's all about understanding what you want your final image to look like, and using your lights and shaping tools to help create that photo.

But you can't really shape your light if you don't know how to use your lights, and if you're using flash, you absolutely have to understand how flash works in order to shape it.

If you want to get a real jumpstart and learn everything you need to know about how flash works, how to use flash take amazing photos, and save yourself a ton of time, check out my [Understanding Flash Photography Video Course](#).

Understanding Flash Photography expands on everything covered in this quick start guide and MUCH MORE including:

- Detailed walk through of how to use TTL flash
- Detailed walk through of how to use Manual flash
- How to shoot with your flash on and off camera
- The different types of light modifiers you can use
- How to use second curtain sync
- How to use High Speed Sync
- and much more...

[Go check it out](#), and then...

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