Guide To Using Color Gels

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Color Gel Techniques

Use Warming Gels

Warming gels (also known as CTO gels) serve two purposes. The first, and perhaps most important is color correcting your flash to match the ambient light. This is most often necessary when using flash while shooting in the sun.

In this example, I forgot to add a warming gel to my light, and as a result, the lighting looks a bit off. It's not bad, but in this shot, Cassandra lacks the warmth that the rest of the scene has.

Fortunately in this situation the lighting wasn't so warm as to make the shot look really fake, but if you've ever seen those outdoor photos were something just feels off, it's likely the photographer didn't use a CTO gel to match their flash to the warmth of the sunlight.

CTO gels come in 1/4, 1/2 and full CTO, so you can choose the intensity of the warming effect to give you the best match possible.

You can also use warming gels creatively.

In this case, you're leaning into the warm/orange color of the gel for purely creative purposes. It's no longer about color matching, but about adding color or atmosphere to your photo.

A simple way to do this is to create fake sunlight. In the example below, I wanted the capture the idea of warmth and sun in a studio setting, and so I deliberately gelled my lights with warming gels to create that look and feel.

Use Contrasting Colors To Create Interest & Tell A Story

Contrast is a tried and true way to add punch and interest to a photo, and you can very easily do that with color gels, like in this example right here:

The cyan and magenta are perfectly contrasting colors, adding a powerful contrast to this image.

When using contrasting colors, don't just throw the colors in there, think about what the colors mean and how they make you feel. While adding contrast with color is powerful, choosing your colors carelessly can make your photo less effective.

Use Gels To Add An Accent Color

You don't always have to gel all the lights, often, a splash of color is much more effective than washing your whole image in color.

In the following example, we were in a haunted house, and I wanted to emphasize the spooky/creepy feel of the hanging doll parts, and I wanted to complement the green in the models dress.

To do that, I added the green rim

light, which not only added some color and spooky mood to the model, but it helped illuminate the background scene in the green, augmenting the spooky feel I was going for, and creating a stronger connection between the model and the background.

Use Gels To Change Your Background Color

Another tried and true technique, using color gels to change your background color is a super easy way to spice up an image.

In the case of this example, I wanted to spice up the thumbnail image for one of my videos, so I used my green gels to turn my white vinyl background green!

Tips For Successful Use Of Color Gels

You Have To Control Your Lights

How your lights interact is ALWAYS important, but when using color gels with your lighting, it's even MORE important because the interactions will have a huge effect on how the color looks.

Let's say you want to use a color gel to make a nice, blue background, and then for the subject, you want to use a non-gelled main light .

With just your background light set up, everything looks great.

But if you don't control the spill from your non-gelled main light, it's going to wash out the blue on the background.

The fix for this is really simple, it's just a matter of modifying or flagging your lights to make sure they only interact when you want them to.

In this example, by flagging the main light, I was able to maintain the blue of the background without any contamination. And it's not just flags; you can also use grids and snoots to control your interactions!

Watch For Light Leakage

This is related to the first tip, and it pertains to how you attach your color gels to your lighting.

If you're using a system like mag mod, or a reflector kit, it's not as much of a problem, but if you're affixing your color gels with gaff tape or velcro or rubber bands, the gels don't always perfectly cover the flash head.

When that happens, you get un-gelled light leaking out and contaminating your scene, washing out your colors and ruining the look you're trying to create.

The fix for this is really easy. All it takes is a bit of gaff tape to seal up any gaps and prevent light leakage.

Double Up Your Gels!

It's honestly pretty easy and cheap to get a variety of gel colors, but this tip has saved my butt a bunch of times. If you find yourself short of a color, just double up the colors you do have to create it.

For example, if you don't have a purple gel, you can double up a red and blue gel and you'll get purple light.
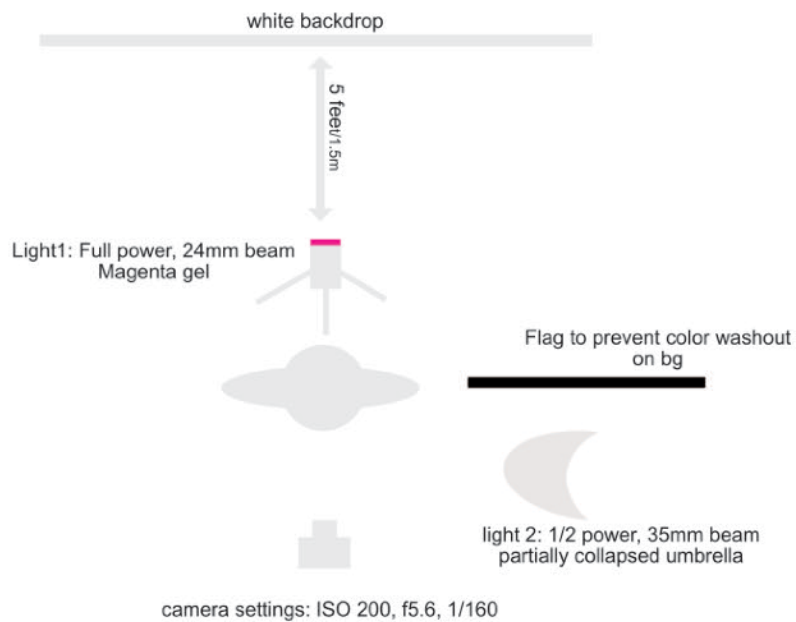
If you don't have yellow, double up with red and green!

And a bonus tip, you can also double up color gels of the same color to increase the intensity of that color!
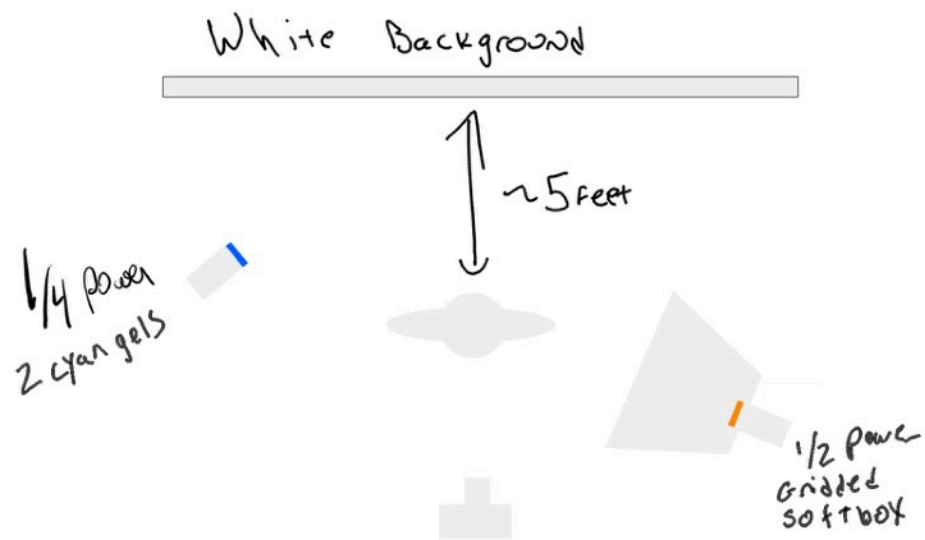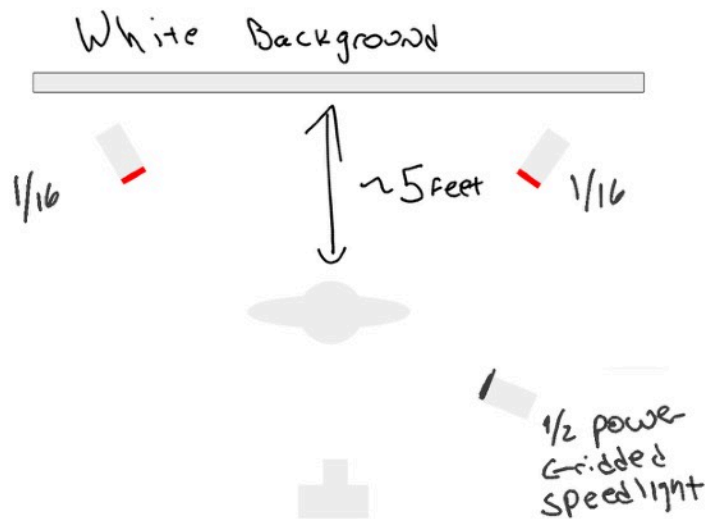
Examples With Lighting Diagrams

Changing The Background Color

White Background

~5 feet

1/4 power
2 cyan gels

1/2 power
Gridded
softbox

Conclusion

I am excited to help you in your your photography journey, and I am really looking forward to seeing what you can do with your flash and gels, and if you're just getting started with flash photography and you want to truly master your flash so you can use it to take amazing photos that will match the vision you see in your mind, check out my Understanding Flash Photography Video Course...

and then…

GET OUT THERE AND TAKE SOME DAMN PHOTOS!