



Karl Baden, *Charlotte*, 1992

Baden works hard to make his photographs reflect his humorous worldview, even if it means crawling under his bed. To get the shot in this low-light situation, Baden used an on-camera flash to surprise his dog with a quick burst of light and hard-edged, even illumination. © Karl Baden; courtesy of Robert Mann Gallery, New York, NY, and Howard Yezerski, Boston, MA.

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Lighting

Light is the most fundamental component of a photograph. It not only causes the image to form, but its visual quality goes a long way toward establishing the look and feel of the picture. Learning to see and work with the subject lighting is a critical skill for making effective photographs.

Characteristics of Light

Some of light's most important characteristics include its strength, quality, and direction.

Strength. Some light sources are inherently stronger than others. For example, a midday sun is brighter than an evening sun; stadium lights are stronger than candlelight. The strength of light has important visual consequences. Bright sunshine provides plenty of light to reveal detail and information about your subject; a dimly lit nightclub scene, on the other hand, may have mostly shadows with a few bright patches, contributing to a mysterious, romantic, or even edgy mood.

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The amount of light in a scene also has important technical consequences when you are taking pictures. For instance, bright light may allow you to set a faster shutter speed, whereas low light may require that you use a high-speed film.

Quality. The type of light falling on your subject also has a major impact on the look and mood of your photograph. Light is often characterized as either hard or soft. **Hard light** travels uninterrupted from the source to the subject, as happens with bright sunshine or a spotlight, and produces sharp and relatively high-contrast photographs. By creating bright highlights and deep shadows, hard light also emphasizes the textural and three-dimensional qualities of a subject. For example, in late afternoon, sunlight on a portrait subject's face may be bright on one side and dark on the other, with all the features defined by light and shade.

Soft light is diffused, or interrupted, as it travels from the source to the subject. It produces less contrast and a relatively shadowless effect, such as when

Light Quality



A sunny day creates hard light, emphasizing a subject's textures and three-dimensionality (left), whereas a cloudy day makes the same subject appear relatively soft and flat (right).

sunlight is scattered by clouds on an overcast day. In soft light, a portrait subject's face is more evenly illuminated and only generally defined, with softer edges and little difference between both sides of the face.

Direction. The direction of the light relative to the subject is yet another important factor to consider. Depending on the angle at which it strikes, light can flatten your subject's appearance, enhance texture, or create a dramatic effect.

Most of the time, you will want light to strike your subject more or less from the front. Frontal lighting illuminates what's important in the scene and often reveals the most information about it. However, different types of frontal lighting produce different effects. Lighting that strikes the subject directly flattens its appearance and obscures its textural qualities. Light striking the front at an angle can emphasize a subject's three-dimensional qualities and texture. On the other hand, **backlighting**, when light strikes the subject from behind, can create an interesting, silhouetted appearance.

You must consider all of these characteristics of light relative to your subject when taking a picture. While it may sound complicated, by paying more care-