
04 – Bouncing Flash

How to bounce your flash

A single flashgun, used directly, gives hard shadows because it is a small light source. The only way to soften the light, is to make the source of light larger. The most effective way of doing this with on-camera flash, is to bounce it. Not only do we have softer light then (because of it being a larger light source), but we also have the opportunity to make the light directional.



settings: 1/160 @ f3.2 @ 800 ISO
using TTL flash; FEC = 0 EV

With this image, I bounced my flash to my left, and upwards. I wanted the light to come from an imaginary softbox near me. My approach to bounce flash photography indoors, is to consider it as if I am shooting in a studio with a single large softbox that I can position. For this reason, I try not to use the ceiling directly between myself and my subject to bounce my flash. That will usually create top-heavy light and shadows under their eyes ... along with being flat light coming from the camera's position.

If you bounce the flash off a wall to the side of you, or behind you, then the source of light relative to the subject, is much larger than if you had shot with the flash straight on. There is a world of difference.

For [off-camera flash](#), we have a variety of choices how we can control our light source's direction and quality of light. For on-camera flash, when working indoors with bounce-able surfaces around you, using bounce flash is a fast and effective way of dramatically improving the quality of light from our flash.



Just for comparison, here is the image without flash, so that it is clearly obvious how much flash was used in the top image. With the ambient light so low in the final image because of my choice of settings, what you see in the top image is nearly all light from the flash.

So where do I want my light to come from? Where would I have placed the softbox if I had been in a studio? This way of thinking usually gets me great results as in this photo above – the kind of light that it is difficult to tell whether off-camera flash was used, or effective bounce flash.

By bouncing off other surfaces like the walls or ceiling, you will also soften the light – **if** you're using the correct angle. And here I want to stress something again – shooting with an omnibounce at 60 or 45 degrees, should **not** be a default way of using flash. For the best result, some thought needs to be put into **how** you use flash, and how you direct the light from your flash. Keep in mind that the intended result is to have no hard flash shadow. No tell-tale sign that on-camera flash was used.

Let's look at an example where the light from the bounce flash is even more controlled:



settings: 1/100 @ f3.2 @ 800 ISO .. using TTL flash; FEC = -1.3 EV

Looking closely at this photograph, you can see the interplay between light and shade on her face. Instead of flat lighting as we would get if we bounced directly behind us, the light came from somewhere behind and above us, from our left. The approach here was the same as in the first image – where would I have placed my softbox had I been in the studio. The quality of light here is as good as you would get from off-camera lighting. Yet, it is on-camera bounce flash. The difference comes in **how** the flash was bounced.

A key factor in both these images, was that there was **NO** light directly from my flash on my subject. All the light was indirect. If I bounce my flash by tilting and swiveling it, I get to bounce the light at an angle – away from the

subject. Then the light that comes back, appears more directional. There are areas of shadow and light. Bounce flash need not look flat. By keeping the basic physics in mind of angles of incidence and reflectance, it is usually easy to figure out where to bounce from to enhance the available light, or how to make the bounce light soft but directional.

You can control the light from your on-camera flash, by flagging the light with a piece of black foam:

related articles:

- [a video clip where I demonstrate how I use the black foamie thing](#)
- [directional bounce flash](#)
- [the black foamie thing](#)
- [why use a light modifier that is black?](#)
- [bounce flash and catchlights](#)
- [throw away the Tupperware on your flash](#)
- [using bounce flash to mimic window light](#)
- [how to get 'short lighting' with bounce flash](#)

With this second image, the available light makes a difference in that it gives a nice background with some out of focus highlights. My camera settings were dictated by the available light. I wanted enough of the light to register in the background. Since I was shooting with TTL flash, I had control over the ambient light by my choice of shutter speed, aperture and ISO.

adding flash to available light

The preceding page on [dragging the shutter](#) explained how to blend available light with flash.

Follow-up articles:

- [flash photography tutorial](#)
- [when aperture does **not** control flash](#)
- [exposure metering and flash](#)
- [combining flash and available light](#)

TTL flash or manual flash?

[I mostly shoot with TTL flash](#) when I shoot with **on**-camera flash.

[Off-camera flash](#) is usually easier to deal with as manual flash.

Since I frequently shoot with TTL, I don't often use the full power that the strobe is capable of, unless I'm using the flash at the extreme end of what it can push out. If your flash is your main source of light, it is important that you stay within the range of the flash's output capabilities, with an appropriate ISO and aperture selection.

Bouncing your flash reduces your flash's output considerably – but your flash should compensate for this loss automatically if you shoot in TTL or Auto mode on the flash. That is, if you stay within the flashgun's power range. If somehow the technology doesn't quite match the theory here, just know that this is how your specific camera and speedlight responds ... and dial in a new flash exposure compensation default when you bounce.