

THE TOP TEN
WORST PHOTOGRAPHY
LIGHTING SITUATIONS
AND HOW TO
CONQUER THEM

Lindsay Adler Erik Valind



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To everyone who knows it's not the camera that makes the photo. It's the photographer.

To everyone who wants to be a master of their craft.

To all those people who know it's the camera that makes a photo great. Just kidding!

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-Lindsay

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To my dad, a voracious reader. Seeing you with a book in hand every evening must have left an impression. There was never a shortage of reading material in the house or want for a recommendation on what to pick up next.

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-Erik

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Introduction

As photographers, we all fantasize about capturing that perfect shoot under the ideal lighting conditions. Nothing feels better than clicking the shutter knowing that you have captured that beautiful scene. Perhaps you show up to a portrait session with the sun low in the sky, creating a heavenly glow of light around your subject. She is tall, slender, and in a flowing dress on the beach as waves crash behind her. Sometimes you really do have those striking visuals in front of you, just waiting to be recorded.

Other times, reality is not so pleasant, even bordering on brutal. You show up to the midday shoot to find harsh sunlight with no shade in sight and a concrete building for a background. Or perhaps the event you're photographing is indoors lit by sickly green, overhead fluorescent lights.

The reality can sometimes be miserable, but your images don't have to be. You can't always control everything on your shoot, but as portrait, wedding, and fashion photographers, lighting is an essential ingredient we must master.

Think of *Shooting in Sh*tty Light* as your survival guide for terrible lighting situations. No longer will you feel overwhelmed or confused when approaching challenging or unpleasant lighting. We, Lindsay and Erik, are here to demystify the light and give you practical, effective solutions to common lighting challenges. Whether you're a beginning photographer or experienced professional, this book will help you feel confident in creating quality images no matter how undesirable the light you encounter. You will know how to assess the scene and use your photographic toolbox to take control if it.

In this book we will teach you how to handle the ten most common scenarios of bad lighting. Some crappy lighting situations are actually a blessing in disguise—if you know how to work them! Other crappy light situations are just...well...crappy and leave you with very few options. This book will not provide every solution or every elaborate lighting formula possible. Instead, it focuses on educating you on efficient and proven techniques for overcoming the lighting challenges you face. Our goal is to share with you the most common, most efficient, and most effective solutions. You don't need to know every single trick in the book, just the solutions that fit your style!

First, let's start with five foundation tips. If you take this advice to heart, though, you may be able to stop reading right now.

Tip 1: Don't Shoot in Sh*tty Light

Light is so important to a good image that you must consider it as a major element of the shoot. Without it, you don't have a shot. Don't schedule your shoots in the middle of the day or in a room lit solely by fluorescent light. It's your image, and the light will make or break it. The best way to deal with sh*tty lighting is to avoid it at all costs.

In photography it's okay to be a control freak. Your job is to control every element of the photo that you can. While in other parts of your life people may torment you for being anal, detail oriented, or OCD, photography is one of those fields that embrace these traits!

So be a control freak. Take control of your light. Don't shoot in sh*tty lighting.

Tip 2: Educate Your Clients

Most of your clients aren't photographers (even if some think they are), and most are not visual artists. Chances are they don't understand light—but you do. You are the expert! Too often we are so eager to please our clients, we let them select every element of the shoot: the location, the clothing, and the time of day. This is a guaranteed recipe for

sh*tty light. You are the expert and know what it takes to make a great shoot, so you need to share this knowledge from the start.

Understanding light is both an art and a science, and it's also your job as a photographer. A lot of clients will schedule their portrait sessions or wedding ceremonies in the middle of the day or in direct sunlight because they don't know any better. It's your responsibility to educate them. Let them know what time of day, location, or clothing will help make the best photograph. Show them your expertise, and help make the shoot the most successful it can be!

If a wedding client approaches you for advice, recommend that they not hold the ceremony at high noon, or perhaps recommend that they situate the alter beneath the shade of a tree. Chances are they never even thought about light when planning their big day.

Speak up! Let them know. A bride will certainly pay attention to you if you let her know that light can be the difference between her looking like Snookie and Kim Kardashian. Feel free to exaggerate. Recommend good locations. Recommend lighting conditions. Show your clients you care about how they look. We promise your images will improve markedly.

Consider showing clients comparative samples of portraits or weddings. Show them the difference between images shot at different times of day or at different locations. Most times, showing is a lot better than telling. Another approach is to have your clients look at your work to determine which images they are most attracted to. Be sure to emphasize the importance of light to the success of these shots, and let them know what they can do to help be part of that success.

Educating your clients will enagage them as active partners in helping you create successful images.

Tip 3: Read This Book

When all else fails, read this book. You will face times when you have no choice but to shoot in sh*tty lighting. Maybe the venue cannot be changed, or the time of day is set in stone, or you simply cannot sway your client. Sometimes the light is going to be a massive challenge. This book was written for such times.

You don't have to dread terrible light. Instead, approach it confidently and knowing you can bend it to your will. It's not magic! We will discuss light, techniques, and other tips and tricks. Everything from shooting in direct sunlight, to shooting in mixed light, to shooting in low light with no flash—we cover it all! By understanding how to conquer

sh*tty lighting, you're on your way to becoming the miracle worker your clients expect you to be. The good part is, it's no miracle. It's just about understanding the light.

We've added a few features that we hope you find useful in understanding how to conquer light. As a quick reference, a red next to a photo means the shot failed to conquer the light and needs a bit of improvement. By studying these, you'll learn to quickly identify some of the pitfalls of unflattering light. We've also added green check marks (v) next to the lighting results we prefer. By comparing the two, you'll be able to quickly reference problems and solutions.

Next, if you need help understanding some of the more technical terminology we use, watch for words that are color coded. You'll find these words and their definitions in Appendix A's glossary.

Tip 4: Equipment Doesn't Make the Shot, but It Can Help

We photographers do like our "toys" (huge telephoto lenses, fancy flash modifiers, light meters, the list goes on), but we sometimes tend to forget these toys are really just tools. You don't need a ton of equipment to solve many of the most challenging lighting situations. You just need the *right* equipment.

When you read this book, we hope you will realize that buying more equipment is usually not the solution. Typically, you need just a few simple tools (a reflector and a flash) to conquer nearly every situation. In fact, even more important than equipment is seeing the light. You must see and analyze the light to help you determine which tools and solutions are best.

We wrote this book so that you can achieve almost all of the techniques with any digital camera that allows you to adjust your basic settings: aperture, shutter speed, and ISO. Furthermore, you don't even need an expensive lens. While we recommend a faster lens (see Appendix B, "Equipment"), most images can be achieved with the basic kit lens included with your DLSR.

The most important thing in any photographer's toolbox is an understanding of light and how to interact with it. So before you stress out about filling up your kit with expensive equipment, fill it with knowledge. Your credit cards will thank you later.

Tip 5: Practice Makes Imperfect Light Perfect

We will provide you with various suggested tools and options, but remember that it's all about which option works for you. Don't just take our word for it. Try out these techniques. We mean it: Try them out, see what fits best with your photographic style, your budget, and the challenges ahead of you. Practice before you need to perform on a big job, like photographing someone's wedding day. Practice makes perfect, and this book will help you perfect that imperfect light!



CHAPTER FOUR Mixed Color Temperatures

A photographer, a model, and an assistant walk into a bar. It may sound like a bad joke, but it actually happens. What makes it a bad joke on the photographer is the mixed lighting that you'll find in many cool locations. Any room with a lightbulb and a window suddenly thrusts you into a juggling match of mixed color temperatures.

Consider the challenges you may face: You walk into a room and find nasty fluorescent light. You read Chapter 3, you know what to do—but wait. Besides that overhead fluorescent light, there's a big bank of windows letting in daylight. Now what? Your subject is half illuminated by light with a green tone (fluorescent) and half illuminated by light with a blue tone (daylight). Needless to say, the combination is not flattering for any portrait or event. What if a tungsten table lamp kicks some light into the scene? Now you are contending with blue, green, and orange light creating a big mess of your photo! So what do you do? How can you take charge of the light and make great images?

Survey the Scene

The very first thing you need to do when approaching a mixed lighting situation is to determine how many light sources you are contending with and where those light sources are located. Each type of light has a different color cast (or color temperature). Our eyes like to automatically white balance what we see, so look closely. In other words, when you walk into a fluorescent-lit room, you don't just see everything all in bright green; your eye auto-corrects for you. This normally helpful biological feature makes it more difficult for you to analyze mixed lighting situations. This is something you'll learn with practice and by careful examination.

Look around the room: Are there windows? What is the source of overhead light? Does the room have any decorative lighting, table lamps, or other mixed light sources? Understanding the scene and light sources will help you better conquer them. Next, ask yourself: What is the dominant light source in the scene? Is the room lit predominantly by window light? How much is that tungsten light from overhead affecting the room? Is the room illuminated by fluorescent overhead lights? What is that small daylight window in the corner doing? Understand your scene, and you'll be able to approach the problem with confidence. If you are having difficulty analyzing the mixed light in the scene, consider snapping a photograph and analyzing the image. This may make it easier to see! Once you know what you're up against, you can choose an approach for handling mixed lighting situations.

TAKEAWAY ACTION

For each scene you approach, take the time to analyze the light, including the number of light sources, color temperature, and direction of light.

Eliminate Conflicting Light Sources

Right off the bat, you may be able to eliminate one or more of the conflicting light sources. In the room with daylight and fluorescent light mixed, for example, you may be able to close the curtains over the windows to eliminate the daylight. For a portrait with tungsten lights and window light, you can turn off the tungsten lamp and focus on using only the daylight. Your first step is to figure out what you can do to reduce the number of conflicting light sources. The fewer color temperatures you have to contend with, the better!

After you analyze the light in the room, you will be able to analyze which light sources you can eliminate. Also, if you identify the dominant light source in the scene, you can use that to your advantage by trying to eliminate any secondary sources of light.

Move Your Subject

If you cannot eliminate any conflicting color temperatures, the next thing for you to consider is moving your subject. Try to move her into a part of the scene that reduces the mixed light. At minimum, ensure her face is illuminated by only one type of light.

Take a look at a practical example: You've been hired to photograph a model in a record store as a PR shot for the store. As you can see in **Figure 4.1**, very orange-yellow, overhead tungsten lights illuminate the entire store. A large window, however, allows in daylight at the front of the store. This creates undesirable mixed light on the subject when posing her in most areas of the room. You can't turn off the overhead tungsten lights because you're shooting during the store's operating hours, and you can't eliminate window light because there are no curtains. You must find another solution.

By moving the subject you can ensure that there is one predominant light source on the face. You move the model to the front of the store and turn her toward the window, lighting her entire face with daylight and using only a bit of tungsten light to illuminate the background. Finally, you switch your camera's white balance to Daylight to ensure accurate skin tones (Figure 4.2). Yes, the background stays orange in tone, but the subject is lit in flattering light.



The subject is half lit by tungsten light, half lit by daylight through a window. This creates an unflattering mixed light on her face. The left side of the face is orange in tone, while the right side of the face is a cooler blue shade.





By moving the subject toward the window, you reduce the effect of the tungsten light on the face. While the background is still tungsten lit, the face is completely lit by daylight.



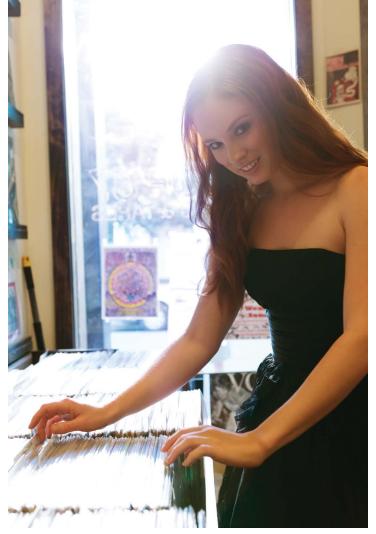
What if you don't want the subject near the front of the store or you can't move her into daylight for some reason? Your next option is to move her as far from the daylight as possible. Moving her toward the back of the store reduces the daylight-balanced light on her face and switches the predominant light source to the overhead tungsten. Change your white balance to tungsten (using white-balance presets, a gray card, or an ExpoDisc as discussed in Chapter 3), and you have a correctly white-balanced image. The quality of light may not yet be ideal, but the color in the image is much improved (Figure 4.3).

After you have moved your subject so there is only one dominant light source on the face or body, you can reduce the appearance of the mixed light source in the background by changing your frame. Instead of including the window in the background or including parts of the scene illuminated by window light (as in Figure 4.4), for example, try a camera angle that shows predominantly tungsten-balanced background elements.





If you move the subject away from the window, the tungsten light in the scene becomes dominant.





Your framing can help to eliminate conflicting light sources and white balances. Notice the conflicting light sources here; the light coming through the window is a different white balance than the light illuminating the subject's face.



WATCH IT! Remember your white balance.

In dealing with mixed lighting situations, the correct white balance is essential. For mixed lighting solutions, we highly recommended that you find a way to custom set your white balance. Use a color checker, a gray card, or an ExpoDisc as recommended in Chapter 3. An ExpoDisc will give you the most accurate custom white balance in mixed lighting situations because it accounts for all light sources and color temperatures affecting your subject (**Figure 4.5**).



FIGURE 4.5
An ExpoDisc captures incidental light on a subject's face and therefore provides a more accurate reading of white balance.

Add a Gelled Flash

When you move your subject to reduce the number of light sources, you may have moved her into a poor lighting situation. Back at the record store, suppose you determine the ideal location of the model and the dominant source of light is tungsten. Yet this light is still quite unflattering, even after setting a good white balance. Because the room features overhead tungsten lights, you decide to add a flash to the scene to improve the direction of the light on the subject.

Fundamentally, you follow the same steps as you learned in Chapter 3: Set your white balance for the tungsten scene using a gray card or an ExpoDisc, then add a flash with a matching tungsten gel, sometimes called a CTO or color temperature orange gel. (Tungsten light is orange.) Notice the difference in the image before (**Figure 4.6**) and after adding the flash (**Figures 4.7** and **4.8**). The flash adds contrast and a better direction of light to the image.

If you do not gel the flash in this scene, you will be creating your own mixed-light scenario. While the scene is tungsten, your flash is daylight balanced. If you leave your flash ungelled, then you will have a tungsten environment with daylight flash on the face and body.



FIGURE 4.6

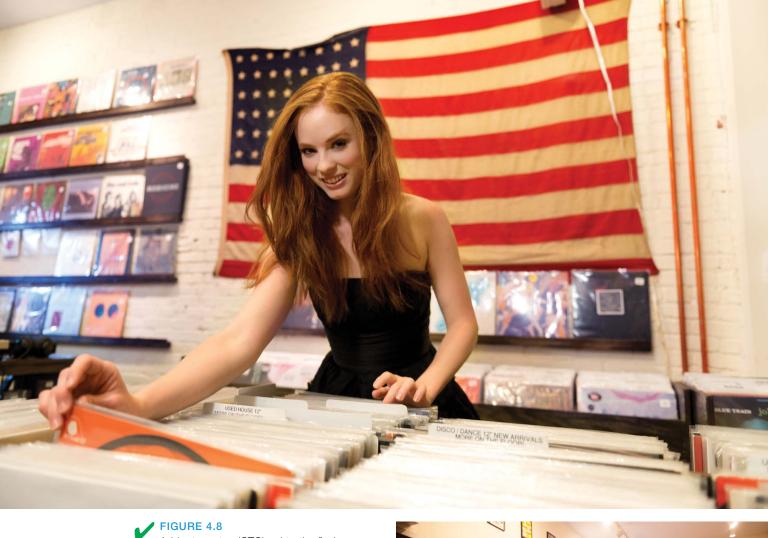
Here the tungstenilluminated model has very unpleasant light on her face. There are shadows in her eyes, and she seems to blend into the background.





When you introduce a flash into the equation, the subject pops from the background and has a better quality of light on the face. With no gel, however, the light on her face is a different color temperature (daylight) compared to the ambient light (tungsten).





Add a tungsten (CTO) gel to the flash so that the flash color temperature matches the ambient light. Not only does the flash improve the quality of light on the face, but now you can neutralize the white balance for a balanced image.



Overpower One Light Source

A final, very popular, solution for mixed lighting is to overpower one of the light sources. In short, you introduce a gelled flash into the scene and use it to overpower the weaker light source. In some situations, when you cannot turn off overhead light and cannot move your subject, overpowering at least one of the mixed light sources may be your only option.

In the record store scenario, for example, one option is to overpower the daylight window and white balance for tungsten light. Here are the steps to take:

- 1 Set your white balance. Set a custom white balance using an ExpoDisc. You could also use a gray card or use the Tungsten white-balance preset on your camera. This way, you are set up to capture the existing color temperature, plus the light you are about to add to the scene.
- 2 Gel your flash. Use an off-camera flash, and gel your flash with a CTO gel to turn the flash to a tungsten white balance. Now your flash white balance will match the white balance of the ambient light. (Under other lighting conditions, you may need to use different gels to match the ambient light.)
- **9 Position your flash.** Place your flash near the light source that you are mimicking. At the record store, you're mimicking window light and therefore need to place the flash high and outside the window like the sun.
- 4 Power your flash. Be sure your flash overpowers the ambient light: in this case, the daylight from a window. Due to the contrasty nature of the scene, manually setting your flash's power will give you the most reliable results. You will also need a lot of light to overpower the daylight, so you may want to look at small flash options beyond the standard speedlights. The Qflash from Quantum (www.qtm.com) has a higher power output with many of the same features. If you are comfortable with studio flash on location, try a portable studio strobe.
- 5 Shoot! We think you will be pleased with the results (Figure 4.9).



By turning the flash to a tungsten light source, you can match the ambient light indoors and overpower the daylight. The result is an even color balance!



Another option for lighting this record store scene is to allow the daylight from the window to illuminate the subject and use a daylight-balanced flash to bounce off the ceiling or light the background, overpowering the tungsten light source. Now all lighting elements in the frame are daylight balanced. Ideally, you would turn off the tungsten lights in the room and use the daylight flashes to be the sole source of illumination. Remember the importance of white balance no matter which solution you choose. Stick a gray card in the scene to use as a reference in your post-processing, as seen in **Figure 4.10**.

Don't Wait for Post-Processing

To be honest, fixing mixed light scenes in post-processing is time consuming, painful, and less efficient than fixing mixed light in the field. You could process the same RAW file multiple times and combine the different color versions of the image together in Photoshop. The various versions of the image will have different white balance adjustments, however, and combining them will involve a lot of masking and attention to detail. If possible, why not just shoot it correctly in camera?

When you don't shoot it correctly in camera, and then find it too difficult to fix in post-production, what can you do? Many photographers resort to converting the images to black and white or desaturating them. Black and white is a strong medium to help focus the image on emotion and human interaction, but often it is used as a crutch to deal with bad white balance. What do you do if the client prefers images in color? Well... shoot it correctly in camera.



Don't forget the importance of white balance. You can use a gray card (seen here) to create a point of reference for correcting white balance in post-processing, shoot with an ExpoDisc, or use built-in white-balance presets.



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