Using the Nikon Creative Lighting System

A step by step guide to using the SB-600 and SB-800 flashes

Including real world examples, case studies and system setup.

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**Introduction**

Using Nikon's new i-TTL flash system is fun and amazing. The ease and speed at which we can set up complex lighting arrangements is simply incredible. Long gone are the days of manual flash setups, calculating guide numbers and setting the appropriate apertures on our cameras. Here are the days of “click and go” flash photography.

It is truly amazing to watch the Nikon wireless flash system work. Once you get the knack of setting up the flashes to the correct Channels and Groups, then just about anything is possible. I use the SB-600 and SB-800 flashes extensively in my professional work and have found them to excel at a wide variety of lighting tasks such as sports, portraits, product, macro and corporate photography.

As flexible as the SB-600 and SB-800 flashes are, please keep in mind they are still relatively small and will be hard-pressed to light up an entire building or illuminate a sweeping landscape. Like most things in photography, we need to use the right tool for the job. The Nikon SB-600 and SB-800 speedlights are perfectly suited to lighting up people, portraits, rooms and lots of industrial locations. However, if you need to light up large-scale commercial assignments, then it is still wise to use more powerful studio strobes from companies like Hensel, Profoto or Elinchrom.

Many photographers are intimidated by using a flash, and rightly so. There is a lot of technology involved with these units and initially, at least, our real-world results are much worse than we expected. Being able to produce consistently good results with the Nikon CLS (Creative Lighting System) takes practice and knowledge. My goal with this book is to fill your mind with knowledge about the flash system so you can go out and create stunning images. I want to give
you a hands-on, practical guide that will help you learn the strobes. I want the flashes to become second nature to you in their operation and setup.

As with everything in photography, you need to practice in order to get better. During my digital photography workshops, I always teach with a hands-on approach that encourages participants to learn through doing. I encourage you to practice your flash photography in as many ways as possible. Get out and take photos every day. Use the photos and setups included in this book as inspiration to get out and learn!
How to Use This Book

Reading the eBook
Obviously, this is an eBook and is designed to be read on a computer. Specifically, this book has been created in the Adobe Acrobat® format and will be able to be viewed in any Adobe Acrobat reader software. If you don’t have Adobe Acrobat on your computer, you can download the most current version from www.adobe.com (http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/).

Note that you can read the “Book” in a vertical format on your laptop by rotating the pages in Adobe Acrobat and then rotating your laptop. This way, you get a larger view and you won’t have to scroll through each page to read the content.

Printing the eBook
You may find it more convenient to print this book out on 8.5” x 11” paper and then bind it so it reads like a traditional book. If that interests you, then here are a couple options:

1. Print the book out with your home office printer (color or black and white). Then three-hole-punch it and place in a three-hole binder.
2. Take this PDF file to a copy shop like Kinkos and have them print and spiral-bind or coil-bind the document. You’ll probably have to show them the copyright notice in the front of the book (page 2) which states you can make a print-out of the eBook for private use.

The images included in this book are all sized at 180 ppi resolution so you can zoom in nice and close to see all the detail. Additionally, they have been designed so they will print out with good detail on most printers.

Hotlinks
There are a number of hotlinks imbedded in the document which will jump you to specific internet pages that give you additional resources to read. Simply click on those hotlinks to go to that web page (for example: www.outthereimages.com).
**Searching the Document**
One of the values of a PDF is having the ability to search for specific content. Use the Adobe Acrobat viewer’s search utilities to find specific topics in the book. For example, if you wanted to find information on the SU-4 Mode, then push the Search Button (shown below) and type in SU-4.

Push this button in Adobe Reader to use the text search utility.

Enter the PDF search terms here and then click the “Search” button below.

![PDF search interface](image-url)
Bounce Card
Nikon included a small built-in bounce card on the SB-800. To access it, pull out the Wide Angle Adapter, and the card will automatically extend (Figure 5.8). The purpose of a bounce card is to reflect some of the light forward to the subject while still allowing some of the light to bounce off a ceiling. Doing this will (hopefully) create a nice catch light in the subject’s eyes. It also serves to lighten up some of the dark shadows which frequently appear under the eye sockets.

In reality, this bounce card is too small to really be effective. A real bounce card should be at least 4”x6” or larger (Figure 5.9). Bigger is better when it comes to light diffusion and bounce cards are no different. Most photographers who use bounce cards end up taping a large card to the back of the flash. These provide much better results!

If you want to use the bounce card, you should set up the flash head to about 45 degrees. At this setting, some of the light will bounce off the ceiling (assuming you are inside) and some of the light will be reflected off the card towards the subject. I like to extend the Wide Angle Adapter out when using the card, but if you want, you can push the diffusion panel back into the flash head.

Figure 5.8
When using the Bounce Card, deploy the Wide Angle Adapter for better results. Also, point the flash head upwards at 45 degrees.

Figure 5.9
This is a “real” bounce card that actually has some useable surface area. It is 5” x 8”. The bigger your bounce card the better your flash results! Attach it with Velcro ® or Gaffer tape.
Chapter 11: Camera-Based Functions for Your Flash

FV Lock
FV Lock stands for “Flash Value Lock”. It is a special feature that allows you to set the flash output value once, then shoot a bunch of other shots retaining the same flash output. Nikon bills it as a way to set the exposure with the subject in the center of the frame, then recompose the picture so the lighting is accurate when the person is off-center (see graphic below).

I've found a different use for FV Lock that is very helpful in preventing people’s eyes from closing from the normal iTTL pre-flash. As I mentioned before in the book, sometimes the pre-flashes cause people to close their eyes before the real flash. In many shots, this results in a photograph with the person’s eyes closed (Figure 11.1)! The FV Lock function is activated when you press the FV Lock button on your camera (Figures 11.2, 11.3, 11.4). Once you push this, the flash fires a pre-flash which the camera remembers. Then, you can continue shooting without the pre-flashes.

Figure 11.1
Sometimes the Nikon pre-flashes cause your subject to close their eyes. Use FV Lock to prevent this problem!
Chapter 12: Case Studies and Examples

The goal of this chapter is to help you understand how to put everything together for some common shooting scenarios.

From a philosophical standpoint, you should generally endeavor to make your flash photography subtle, soft and gentle. Lots of new photographers get immediately turned off from flash photography because it is frequently harsh and obnoxious. At least once a week a photographer will make a comment to me such as, “I don’t like to use flash photography because it washes out my daughter’s face” or “I get a shadow behind Grandma’s head”. The truth is there are good ways to use flash and bad ways to use flash. Most of the bad ways involve on-camera flash. Most of the good ways involve diffusing the light somehow and getting the flash off the camera.

This chapter is dedicated to showing you a number of real-world examples using flash photography. I’ll show the picture and then describe how it was taken. The purpose is to break down the shot to its individual elements so you can understand everything that went into it. I’ll cover on-camera, off-camera, remote and even popup flash. Here goes …
Outdoor Portrait: One Commander, Multiple Remotes

**Comments**

The great thing about Nikon’s Creative Lighting System is how easy it is to quickly set up a photograph. The image at right was taken outdoors with three Remote speedlights. A key light on the right, a fill light on the left and a hair light in the background.

This image was taken with a D2X, a SB-800 Commander and three wireless Remote flashes. I used Manual exposure and set my ambient light exposure to 1/125@ f8. This effectively darkened the background trees so they were about 1.3 stops below a medium exposure (0.0). I did this to make the subject have good separation from the background.

Then, I added the flashes. The Key (flash on the right) was set at TTL + 1.3. The Fill (flash on the left) was set to TTL +0.3. The hair light (flash in back) was set to M 1/64.

I placed a twig on the ground where I wanted my young model to stand and then went about taking pictures. Total time for setup, photos and takedown was about 15 minutes. That is fantastic!

**Setup Details**

- **Camera:** D2X
- **Exposure Mode:** Manual
- **Meter Mode:** Matrix
- **Aperture:** 8
- **Shutter Speed:** 1/125
- **ISO:** 400
- **White Balance:** Cloudy
- **Lens:** 24-120mm f4-5.6
- **Sync:** Slow
- **Commander Flash:** SB-800 set for “- - -”
- **Key light (right):** SB-800 TTL +1.3
- **Fill light (left):** SB-600 TTL +0.3
- **Hair light (back):** SB-800 M 1/64
- **Accessories:** light stands, 32” umbrellas
- **Image Quality:** JPEG Fine Large
Clamps and Brackets
Having a good supply of clamps and brackets should be required for any flash photographer. They allow you to fasten your flash to just about any object. The standard clamp lots of folks use is the Bogen Superclamp (Figure 13.7). It is truly a great product and is also built like a Sherman tank.

I also have a big supply of plastic clamps (Figure 13.10) I purchase from hardware stores. These clamps allow you to hold up lights, backgrounds and reflectors with ease. I have modified a few of my clamps by adding 1/4” x 20 threaded screws into the handle. This allows me to attach a flash to the clamp as shown in Figure 13.9.

Figure 13.7
The Bogen Superclamp is a rough and flexible product that will attach to many types of things such as tripod sockets, light stands, tables and doors.

Figure 13.8
Here’s the Bogen Superclamp attached to the leg of a tripod. On the top of the Superclamp I’ve attached my SB-800 flash with the AS-19 stand that came with the flash.

Figure 13.9
Using a simple plastic clamp as shown means you can put a flash just about anywhere! Here, a SB-800 is attached to the clamp with the AS-19 stand that came with the flash.

Figure 13.10
I purchase standard plastic clamps from hardware stores and then modify them with 1/4” x 20 bolts so I can mount my flashes to them.
About Mike Hagen

Mike Hagen is the President of Out There Images, Inc. His company is focused on creating the finest photography workshops possible.

Mike Hagen has worn many hats in his short lifetime. He graduated from college with a Mechanical Engineering degree and worked in Semiconductor Manufacturing for 10 years. He is currently a small business owner, a freelance writer and a professional photographer. His passions are traveling, creating, writing, photography and teaching. He is happily married and the father of two beautiful children.

Mike aspires to live life to the fullest and to help others do the same. His enthusiasm and zest for life are infectious. His devotion to God and family guides everything he does.

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