

Lighting

Natural Lighting

If you want to improve the quality of your photography, one thing you can do right away is learn to use natural light better. The good news is that unlike good quality lenses and camera bodies, natural light is free. The best photographers seek out the best quality light for their subject. Their quest for better photos is paralleled by a search for better light.

“Painting With Light”

The word photography is derived from the Greek for ‘painting with light’. This is a good description – a photograph is made from the light that enters your camera’s lens and hits the sensor (or film). Without light you would have nothing.

Broadly speaking, there are two types of light – natural and artificial. Natural light comes from the sun. The quality and quantity of the light depend on where you are the weather conditions and time of day.

As photographers, we need to be students of light – observing the lighting conditions and learning why light behaves like it does. Then we can understand how light affects our photos and how to make the best use of it.

The more you understand light and how it affects your photos, the better a photographer you will be. To help you out, we’ve put together a brief guide to the main types of natural light and how to make the most of them.

Hard Light

The light from the sun on a sunny day is hard light. It’s strong and direct and casts deep shadows with hard edges. In the middle of the day, especially in the summer, hard light can be very ugly. Avoid taking photos at this time if you can.

Hard light is best at either end of the day, shortly after the sun has risen and just before it sets. Photographers call this period the golden hour, because of the quality of the light. If the sky is clear, the light is still hard, but it’s a great deal softer than in the middle of the day. It also comes at your subject from a low angle which reveals form and texture and is much more interesting than midday light.



This photo of a Mexican pinata was taken in harsh, tropical sunlight. The hard light brings out the colours of the pinata against the deep blue sky.



Hard light is also good for architecture and bringing out colours. This photo was taken in La Boca in Buenos Aires. The sunlight brings out the strong colours

Soft Light

Soft light describes the type of light that you find in the shade or on a cloudy day. Any shadows have soft edges. Soft light, especially on a cloudy winter's day, can seem grey and dull, without much potential for photography.

The key to using soft light is to understand that it has very little contrast. It's the opposite of hard light from the sun.

Soft light is great for taking photos of people, especially portraits. If you're outside on a sunny day, taking photos of people, find some shade and take photos of them there. The results will be much better.

Soft light is also suitable for taking photos in rainforest and woodland, and for still life and flowers. On a cloudy day, avoid including the sky in your photos – it usually just comes out white.



This photo was taken on a cloudy day. Soft light is ideal for photographing details like this hand made stirrup. This photo was taken in the middle of the day – if the sun had been out the photo would look completely different.



This photo of a gaucho was taken on the same day. The soft light is perfect for portraiture; hard sunlight would have ruined the mood of this photo. It's no coincidence that both these photos are in black and white – soft light is also wonderful for monochrome work because the light brings out the subtle tones and textures in the photo.

Backlight

Backlight is created when the light source is behind the subject. Backlight, like hard light, has lots of contrast. Also like hard light, it's normally best for photos at the end or the start of the day. Backlighting from the sun at any other time of the day has too much contrast.

Backlighting is good for landscapes, portraits and architecture. It's a powerful, moody, evocative type of lighting. It is very dramatic if combined with weather conditions like mist or fog.

You'll need to keep your lens scrupulously clean for shooting backlit subjects, as the light will shine right on the front element of your lens, causing flare. Sometimes flare is unavoidable – if this happens to you the best way to deal with it is to work the flare into your composition. Make it look like a deliberate part of the photo, rather than an unwanted side effect.



This cathedral is backlit. The statue and towers are semi-silhouetted by the strong light. The photo was taken in the evening. The light is hard, but much softer than at midday.

Dramatic Light

Dramatic light is created by dramatic weather such as a thunderstorm. It's the type of light that you see when the clouds clear after a rain storm, or if the sun breaks through the clouds on a rainy day near sunset.

Dramatic light is ideal for photographing landscapes, seascapes and architecture – almost anything outside. If you are confronted with a scene lit by dramatic light, treat it as a gift and take as many photos as you can while it lasts. Dramatic light normally doesn't last very long, and it may not return.



This photo was taken during a violent thunderstorm – the lightning was real and not added in Photoshop. The mountains have been turned into dramatic silhouettes by the light.

Sunrise and Sunset

At sunrise and sunset the light is beautiful and full of colour. It has the potential to be any of the types of light we've discussed so far – soft, hard or dramatic. If the sun is out your subject will be backlit. The light can change between all of these states very quickly.

No matter what your subject, sunrise and sunset are wonderful times for taking photos. This is especially true for landscapes and seascapes, but also for architecture and nature. This is your time for creating evocative photos full of mood and atmosphere.

It's the kind of light that travel photographers love because it makes everywhere look so beautiful. Professional landscape photographers love this time of day so much that they get up early to make the most of sunrise and stay out late for the sunset.



Sunset over the Río de la Plata, Uruguay. The colours are beautiful.

Interiors With Natural Light

You can use the natural light coming through doors and windows to photograph interiors. You have to pay lots of attention to where the light is coming from when you're doing this. The light, even on a cloudy day, will be hard because it's coming in through the doors and windows. If you include open doors or windows in your photo, they will burn out because they are so bright compared to the interior.

The good thing about this type of light is that it can be very dramatic and moody, especially inside an old building. Some people will solve the problem of shooting in these conditions by using HDR



techniques.

An old shop in Argentina. The light coming in through the doorway is very moody and evocative. It suits the old style of the shop, which is like a living museum, perfectly.

Using the Light

Next time you're out taking photos, think about the natural light. Does it suit your subject? Would the light be better at a different time of day, or in different weather conditions? It may be that to get the best out of a location, you have to return at another time when the light is better.

If you remember just one thing from this article, it should be this: that natural light is at its best at the beginning or end of the day. These are the best times to be out taking photos. If you haven't tried it before, do it soon. Nothing will improve your photography so fast.