10-Min. Guide to Off-Camera Flash

ED VEROSKY

HOW TO CREATE
PROFESSIONAL PORTRAITS
WITH REMOTE FLASH SETUPS

USE SIMPLE, AFFORDABLE GEAR • APPLY ONE EASY TECHNIQUE

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Introduction

Off-camera flash doesn't have to be complicated. If you've tried flash before and felt like it just made things harder… Or you've seen other photographers' portraits and thought, "Why don't mine look like that?" —

This guide is for you.

You'll learn a simple lighting setup using a basic flash — something you can use almost anywhere to start getting better results right away.

There's a lot of advice out there, but it doesn't have to be overwhelming.

My goal is to simplify flash — with affordable gear, repeatable steps, and a system that actually works.

Let's get started. And when you're ready to take things to the next level, I've got a complete course that picks up right where this guide leaves off.

What You'll Need to Get Started

In this chapter, I'll outline the gear you can use to build a basic flash portrait lighting setup. All you need is a camera, a standard flash on a stand, and a way to trigger that flash. As you learn more and your needs grow, you can expand to a multi-light setup and more sophisticated lighting.

MY GEAR LIST

For this guide, you only need one flash to get started. This will allow you to learn one-light portraiture and practice basic lighting techniques. Eventually, you'll want a complete portable setup that can handle most portrait lighting scenarios.

Here's an example setup based on the gear I often use. This is not my only combination, but it works for about 90% of my work, both in and out of the studio:

- **Flash Master Transmitter: Godox XPro/II**
- **3 x Flash Units: Godox TT685 (or Flashpoint equiv.)**
- **3 x Flash Mounting Brackets: Godox S2 S-Type**
- **2 x Light Stands: Impact LS-8AI**
- **1 x Light Stand: Impact LS-96HABI**
- **2 x Generic Shoot-Through Umbrellas**
- **1 x Softbox: 36″ Glow EZ Lock Octa**

Sometimes, I'll travel with larger lights like the Godox AD400 or AD600 Pro models. However, these require sturdier stands than I normally carry on location. Despite the extra weight and size, they are often worth it.

A basic shoe mount flash or small strobe setup is versatile, portable, and powerful enough for most portrait work. The brands and models I mentioned work well for me, but there are many other options.

Recommended Gear for a One-Light Flash Setup:

- **Light Stand**
- **Mounting Adapter (swivel bracket)**
- **Flash or Strobe**
- **Lighting Modifier**
- **Flash Trigger**

Light Stands

Use a sturdy light stand with adjustable height. Heavy studio stands, like C-stands, are an option, but I prefer lighter, compact stands that are easy to transport yet strong enough to bear the weight of my flash or strobe and lighting modifiers (see Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1. *Impact Light stand.*

The most important thing to consider when choosing a light stand is its load capacity. Ensure the stand can reliably carry the weight of your flash or strobe, plus any adapters and modifiers you might use. You might also consider using sandbag weights to stabilize your stand when using lights and modifiers that could cause it to tip over.

Recommended Light Stand Specs:

- **Load capacity.** At least 8 lbs total.
- **Maximum Height.** A maximum of 8' should be sufficient for most portraiture done in a home studio or on location.
- **Air-cushioned.** This feature helps prevent damage to your light and modifier by slowing the collapsing of the stand, avoiding a jolting drop when a knob is loosened.

Mounting Adapters

Mounting your flash or strobe to your light stand often requires one or more adapters, especially if you use a basic shoe-mount flash with a lighting modifier.

Your light stand will probably come with a standard, threaded stud on the end. This might be all you need if you're using a studio strobe. Some strobes, like the Godox AD400 and AD600 Pro models (Figure 2.2), fit right over the stud and feature built-in swivel and lighting modifier mounts.

Swivel Brackets

The ability to swivel, or angle your light up or down, is important. If you're not using a studio strobe, you'll probably need a special adapter that functions as a swivel for your smaller flash. Some swivel brackets secure the flash unit via the flash's "foot" into cold shoe. You'll need to purchase a shoe if the adapter doesn't come with one.

Figure 2.2. *Godox AD400Pro strobe. Adjustable angle/tilt bracket is built into this unit. Image: GODOX Photo Equipment Co.,Ltd..*

Standard shoe-mount swivel brackets attach a shoe to a connector stud that fits into the top of the swivel bracket. These brackets often feature an

Figure 2.3. *Cold shoe and stud being attached to an umbrella adapter.*

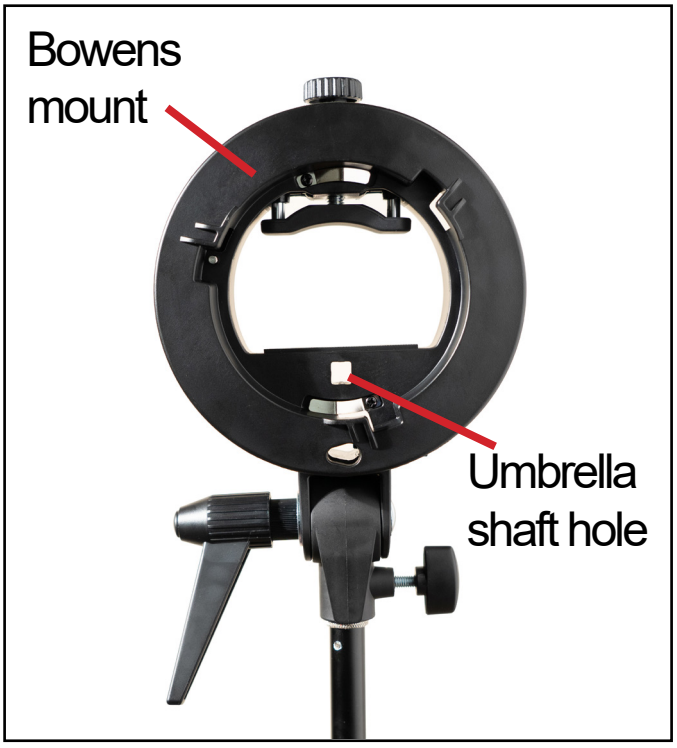

Figure 2.4. *Godox S-type flash holder and swivel. This unit features a versatile Bowens mount.*

angled hole for securing the shaft of an umbrella modifier, sometimes referred to as umbrella adapters (Figure 2.3).

Another good option is the S-type Bowens mount-compatible bracket as shown in Figure 2.4. This adapter secures the flash with a vise-like holder, swivels, and features an umbrella shaft hole and the versatile Bowens mount, allowing the use of various lighting modifiers.

Flash Units & Strobes

Good shoe mount flash units provide enough light for most simple portrait setups. Some flashes offer only manual flash power adjustment, while others also offer compatibility with most major camera manufacturers' TTL systems. I recommend a flash that offers both manual and TTL control (Figure 2.5).

Figure 2.5. *Shoe mount flash units.*

Studio strobes, available in manual and TTL-compatible models, provide more than enough power for portraits. Some also offer a modeling light feature, which is a continuous light that helps you visualize the effect of the light and shadow pattern on the subject between flashes.

Lighting Modifiers

Flashes or strobes can be used without a modifier, but adding a lighting modifier helps control the spread and quality of light. We'll focus on translucent (shoot-through) umbrellas and softboxes for our discussion.

A shoot-through umbrella (shown in Figure 2.6) is positioned with the top of the umbrella pointed directly at the subject. The flash or strobe is positioned near the base of the umbrella shaft, with the light striking the inside of the umbrella to create an effectively larger light source.

Figure 2.6. *Umbrella shown in the shoot-through orientation. Rather than have the umbrella bounce/reflect light from the flash onto the subject, the top of the umbrella is directed toward the subject providing a kind of "open softbox" effect.*

Figure 2.7. *As with a shoot-through umbrella, the light from the flash is directed through a translucent fabric onto the subject. However, with a softbox like this Glow 36" Octa, the light does not bounce out of the back; it is all directed toward the front.*

A softbox (Figure 2.7) does the same thing as an umbrella but directs all the light toward the front of the modifier onto the subject, often more evenly. The downside is that some softboxes aren't as easy to set up on location as a simple umbrella.

Flash Radio Trigger

Your flash must sync to your camera's shutter to fire during an exposure. To use TTL for automatic flash control, you'll need a flash compatible with your camera's TTL system and a way to send TTL control signals from your camera to your flash. This is usually accomplished with a built-in or external TTL transmitter, a radio trigger (Figure 2.8).

Radio triggering of flash, both manual and TTL, is the most reliable and versatile. It avoids messy cords and line-of-sight limitations you might encounter with sync cords and optical triggers.

A simple radio trigger solution involves attaching a radio flash trigger to the hot shoe of your camera. A matching remote receiver or a remote flash with a built-in radio receiver will accept signals from the transmitter. During exposure, the camera sends a flash control signal through its hot shoe to the radio trigger, which transmits the signal to the remote flash radio receiver, firing the flash instantaneously.

Some solutions offer TTL operation, so be sure to use a TTL trigger compatible with your camera and ensure the flash and/or its receiver is compatible with the transmitter.

Figure 2.8. *Third-party radio flash trigger compatible with my camera's brand of TTL. This transmits signals to compatible remote flash units in either manual or TTL modes.*

Backgrounds and Environments

We'll take a quick pause in our discussion of the lighting setup to address a closely related topic: backgrounds. A portrait background can say as much or as little about your subject as you'd like. It can ground the subject in an environment that helps tell the story of who they are or what they do. It can complement the subject with color and tone. It can isolate the subject in nothingness, leaving their actual location up to the viewer's imagination or out of mind altogether.

Keep in mind that the actual environment where you create the portrait might have very little to do with the visual background you create in the image. Lighting, exposure settings, depth-of-field, and framing/cropping all contribute to the eventual background seen in the portrait. The following will provide a quick overview of how to make the most of backgrounds and the environment.

Studio Portrait Backgrounds

Most traditional backgrounds are designed to create a nondescript but complementary look, allowing the subject to command all the attention in the photo.

Some backgrounds feature painted or printed "scenes" to offer context or help tell a story, but those are usually better suited to multiple light setups, so we won't cover them in this guide. Backgrounds like these are often portable and easy to set up. I prefer to use two stands and a crossbar to support a roll of seamless paper or a fabric backdrop, as shown in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1. *Seamless background paper.*

ENVIRONMENT AS BACKGROUND

If there's enough light to work with, you can successfully incorporate the environment into your subject's background. This is easier if enough ambient light is included, but the creative use of a flash can light up an entire room to create an environmental portrait. This might be harder to achieve under low ambient lighting when you're focusing most of your one-light setup on the subject. So, with only one light, you might have to trade off between controlled contrast (light and shadow) and broad, even illumination.

Depth-of-field is also an important factor in creating a good environmental portrait. Imagine a busy workshop where both the subject and the background are in sharp focus. This can make the background a distracting rather than complementary element.

By adjusting your camera settings, you can ensure that your subject remains in focus while the background has just the right amount of blur. You can use shallow depth-of-field to blur out the background details entirely, rendering only soft shapes and colors as the backdrop for your portrait. If using wide apertures to achieve shallow DOF in bright ambient conditions, an ND filter or High-speed Sync (HSS) for flash can come in handy.

Off-Camera Flash Portrait Setups

Let's get to the practical application of everything we've learned so far and set up a radio-triggered flash with a modifier to create beautiful one-light portraits!

SETTING UP YOUR REMOTE FLASH

Make sure you've read your flash and trigger manuals and are familiar with their operation. Follow these steps to put your light stand setup together.

If using a standard swivel adapter, flash attached via cold shoe:

1. **Setup your light stand.** Extend the stand in front of you so that the top of the stand is about chest level.

2. **Mount the umbrella adapter to the stand.** Fit the bottom of the umbrella adapter (swivel bracket) onto the top stud of the stand. The stud should slip into the bottom hole of the umbrella adapter. Tighten the knob on the bottom of the umbrella adapter (Figure 4.1, knob is labeled "C") to secure it to the stand.

3. **Mount the cold shoe to the umbrella adapter.** In our example, the cold shoe screws onto the brass spigot/stud secured in the top hole of the umbrella adapter. In Figure 4.1, the stud, which is not visible, is secured in place by the fastener labeled "A." If you have a separate radio trigger receiver for this setup, you might be able to mount it directly to the stud or choose to mount it to the cold shoe mount.

Note: For the following steps, keep in mind that the large adjustment lever on the umbrella adapter should be on your right-hand side when the flash is pointed away from you. This will insure that the angled umbrella shaft hole is in the correct orientation.

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4. **Mount the flash unit onto the cold shoe.** If you already have a separate radio trigger receiver unit mounted to the cold shoe, mount the flash to the flash shoe on the trigger receiver unit instead, as shown in Figure 4.2.

5. Place the umbrella. Open the umbrella and slide the umbrella shaft through the shaft hole on the umbrella adapter as shown in Figure 4.1. The flash head should be pointed into the open side of the umbrella. Turn the knob (here labeled "B") to secure the umbrella shaft in place.

6. Connect the flash trigger transmitter to the camera. The transmitter should be set to the same radio channel as the receiving unit. When you click the shutter, the transmitter signals the remote receiver, which fires the flash unit.

Figure 4.1. *Close-up view of light stand setup. This flash has a built-in radio receiver so an external radio receiver is not necessary.*

Figure 4.2. *Light stand setup showing the flash mounted to a flash trigger receiving unit.*

If using an S-type or S2 flash bracket to mount your remote flash:

1. Setup your light stand. Extend the stand in front of you so that the top of the stand is about chest level.

2. Mount the S-type flash holder/bracket to the stand. Fit the bottom of the bracket onto the top stud of the stand. The stud should slip into the bottom hole of the bracket. Tighten the knob on the bottom of the bracket (Figure 4.3) to secure it to the stand.

3. Mount the flash to the bracket. Place the head of the flash into the clamping area and turn the knob at the top to secure the flash.

Figure 4.3. *Close-up view of light stand setup. This flash has a built-in radio receiver so an external radio receiver is not necessary.*

4. Place the umbrella. Open the umbrella and slide the umbrella shaft through the shaft hole on the bracket as shown. The flash head should be pointed into the open side of the umbrella. Turn the umbrella shaft secure knob to secure the umbrella shaft in place. Note that other types of modifiers (with Bowens mounts) can be attached to this bracket via the Bowens mount.

6. Connect the flash trigger transmitter to the camera. The transmitter should be set to the same radio channel as the receiving unit. When you click the shutter, the transmitter signals the remote receiver (external or built-in to the flash) which fires the flash unit.

If you are using a softbox modifier or any other type of gear that is different from the setups described here, just follow the directions in your gear's manual to set it up.

LIGHTING PLACEMENT

Now that your light stand and modifier are set up and your flash is synched to the camera, you're ready to place your light for your portrait. The following examples demonstrate variations on a lighting placement technique that works every time. The light is positioned roughly 45 degrees in front of and to one side of the subject, and down about 45 degrees from above their head (see Figure 4.4). The actual angle you'll use will vary, so this is only a reference point to start from. As you get more comfortable with off-camera flash, try experimenting with:

- Different camera exposure adjustments
- Flash power adjustments
- Distances between light and subject (double and triple the distance)
- Distances between subject and background

Start With These Settings

With a good shoe mount flash, the following settings should serve as good starting points for indoor flash portraiture. Once you zero in on the actual settings that work best for your gear, stick to them for a while as you learn to position the light and your subject for the best results.

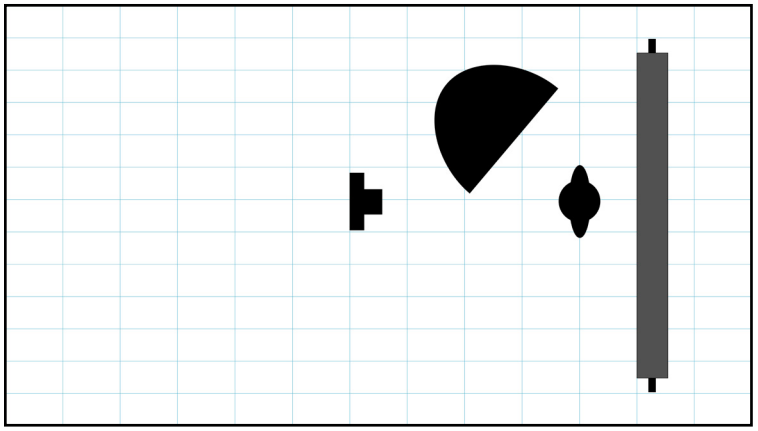
Flash Mode: TTL (remote/slave mode)
Camera Settings: Manual Mode, ISO 200, f/8, use your camera's flash sync speed.

Take a test shot to ensure your subject is properly exposed. If they are too dark, add more flash power with your Flash Exposure Compensation (FEC) setting. If they are too bright, dial in less flash power with FEC.

Eventually, you'll learn to take full control of your flash exposure with a combination of manual flash and manual camera settings instead of relying on TTL.

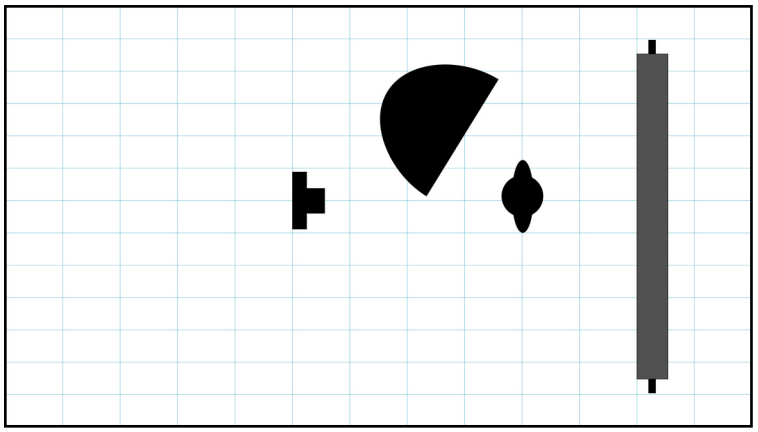
Figure 4.4. *Flash and softbox modifier.*

Our set of indoor examples (Figures 4.5 - 4.8) shows that once the distance between the light and subject are set up for a good exposure, we can just increase the distance from the background to affect its visibility which can change the look of the image dramatically.



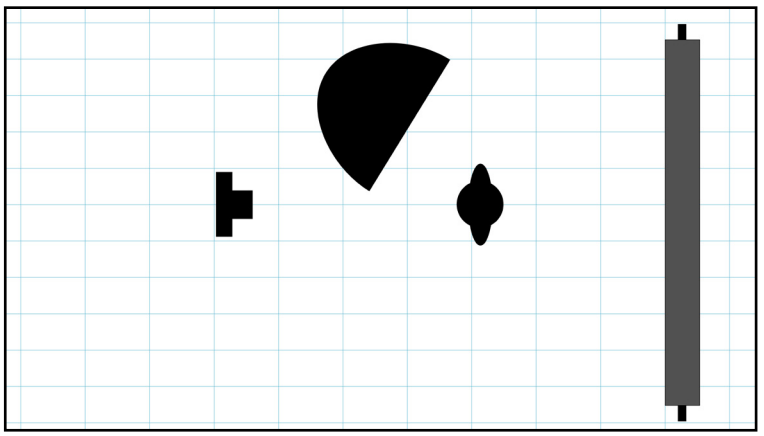
Distance, subject to background: 18”/46 cm
Distance, light to subject: 30”/75 cm
Flash Mode: TTL
Camera Settings: ISO 200, f/8, 1/250
Lens Used: 85mm

Figure 4.5. *Background clearly visible.*



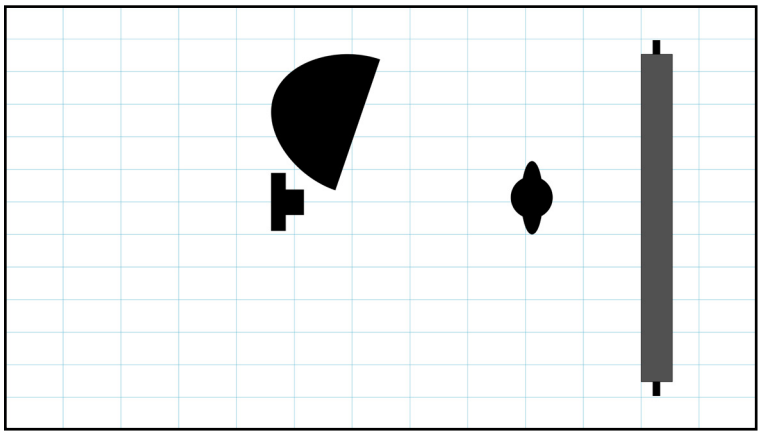
Distance, subject to background: 3’/1 m
Distance, light to subject: 30”/75 cm
Flash Mode: TTL
Camera Settings: ISO 200, f/8, 1/250
Lens Used: 85mm

Figure 4.6. *Background becomes very dark as distance increases.*



Distance, subject to background: 5’/1.5 m
Distance from light to subject: 30”
Flash Mode: TTL
Camera Settings: ISO 200, f/8, 1/250
Lens Used: 85mm

Figure 4.7. *At 5’ (1.5 m) background is almost completely black.*



Distance from subject to background: 3’/1 m
Distance from light to subject: 6’/2 m
Flash Mode: TTL
Camera Settings: ISO 200, f/8, 1/250
Lens Used: 85mm

Figure 4.8. *As the light is moved farther from the subject and background, both start to receive relatively the same exposure. Contrast is increased.*

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

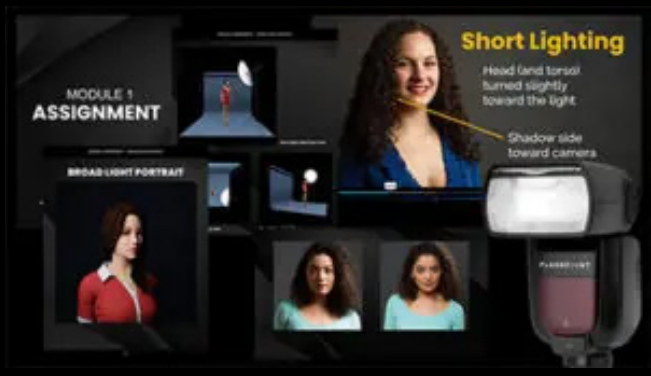
You've just taken your first step toward better portraits with flash. Now imagine being able to confidently light any subject, in any setting — and knowing exactly what to do every time.

If you ever thought, "**I just want someone to walk me through this stuff**," that's what you'll get with my complete course...

Flash Portraits Made Simple

Step-by-step lessons that show you how to take full control of your flash — from simple one-light setups to advanced techniques that deliver pro-level results.

You don't need expensive gear. Just the right instruction. Click below to get started.



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Quick Start Cheat Sheet

One-Light Flash Portrait

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

To get started, make sure you have:

- **Flash unit (speedlight or strobe)**
- **Trigger (and matching receiver if necessary)**
- **Light stand and flash bracket**
- **Modifier (optional: umbrella, softbox)**

3 Steps to Your Off-Camera Flash Portrait

1. Set up the light
Position the light off to one side of your subject, slightly above eye level. Use a shoot-through umbrella or a medium softbox.

2. Connect your trigger
Attach the transmitter to your camera's hot shoe. Make sure both flash and trigger are set to the same channel/group.

3. Take a test shot
Start at 1/250* sec, f/8, ISO 200. Adjust flash power to get proper exposure. Fine-tune light placement to shape shadows. (*use your camera's normal flash sync speed)

Next Step: Take Control of Every Portrait You Shoot

Want to build on this setup? Learn how to confidently use a single flash for a variety of different looks. Use two lights or more, add depth with backlighting, and master professional flash portraits in any environment. Check out my course: **Flash Portraits Made Simple** for step-by-step training, built for real-world results.

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