

Three Point Lighting

The Key Light

It all begins with the key light. The key light is the primary source of illumination in the subject. Other lights in your scene are adjusted based on the intensity and position of the key light. The placement of the key light will determine the kind of shadows created on your subject. The key light is the first light placed.

Typically, the key light is placed to the left or right of the camera and at a 30 - 45° angle to the subject. That is what the textbooks say. Actually, you can place your key light anywhere you see fit in order to get the look and feel you desire. If you increase the horizontal angle (relative to the subject), it will emphasize creases and wrinkles and produce an aging effect. As the vertical angle is increased, shadows begin to appear under the nose, chin, and lips.

When placing a key light, it is often helpful to refer to the placement of the key light in terms of the numbers on the face of a clock (12-3-6-9). Your subject will represent the middle of an analog clock. Your camera is positioned some distance away and is pointed at the subject. The camera is at the six o'clock position, or at bottom of the imaginary analog clock. The Key light can be positioned at any of the other time positions on the dial.

How some of the Key light positions in our imaginary clock influence the scene:

7:00: In the seven o'clock position, the subjects face is fairly well lit, with shadows starting to make an appearance on the left side of the face. This is a desired starting position and sets up discussion for the Fill light.

8:00: Similar to the seven o'clock position, but the shadows start to become longer and begin to obscure the details on the subjects left side (opposite the Key). The shadow cast by the subject's nose begins to create a triangular patch of light below the eye opposite the Key.

9:00: In the nine o'clock position, only one side of the subject's face is illuminated. This creates overly dramatic shots and obscures much of the subject.

10:00 and 11:00: In these positions, the light begins to illuminate the back of the subject and not the front. You need to be careful of placing an intense Key light at these positions as lens flares can occur if the light is not properly flagged.

12:00: At the twelve o'clock position the back of the subject is fully illuminated and the hair begins to glow. At this point, your Key light is turning into a Back light.

The Fill Light

To make sure your subject is not lost in the hard shadows created by the key light, you need to have a way of lightening those areas while still preserving the shadows. Shadows create depth and texture on the subject. Without shadows the subject appears flat.

The fill light does exactly as the name implies, it fills in the shadows created by the key. The conventional placement of the fill light is directly opposite from the placement of the key. Instead of being at the same vertical angle, the fill light is positioned at a slightly shallower angle.

Be careful that the fill light is not so bright that it begins to cast shadows on the subject as well. When using a fill light, it should never be so bright that it begins to compete with the key.

The Back Light

The back light keeps your subject from blending in with the background. The back light (also known as the rim or hair light) produces a rim of light around the subject's head and shoulders to separate the foreground subject from the background. This enhances depth perception in the shot as the highlights in the subject's hair and shoulders make them stand out from the background.

Place the back light at around 180+ degrees across from your subject, or slightly behind your subject to get the effect you want of outlining your subject in light and separating them from the background. The back light should be placed high above the subject – it is meant to shine on the top and sides of their head.

Bounce Cards

Having a key light, fill light and back light produces a great deal of light, and can also produce unwanted high-contrast images. This will create a hard look to the video and may be something you do not desire.

With an understanding of three-point lighting, you can break away from the standards of lighting and reduce the number of lights in your scene for very specific looks. One way to reduce the number of lights in the scene is to remove the fill light. However, you may still need to soften and fill the shadows. The easiest way to do this is with a bounce card.

A Bounce Card can be anything that reflects light. Most Bounce Cards are simple white

foam core sheets that range from ten inches across to several feet. Because the foam core is white, it reflects and softens light. The placement of the bounce card is slightly different than the placement of an actual fill light as it needs to reflect the light of the key.

A bounce card can either be held by a member of the production crew, or clamped or tapped to a c-stand. While the crewmember might seem like the best way to go, unless they are perfectly still, you could end up with some wavering of your fill light that will end up being a distraction in your shot.

One of the problems with foam core is that generally both sides of the foam core are smooth white surfaces. This is a problem because sometimes you don't want the light to bounce back as evenly as the light that is hitting it. One way to get more mileage out of your foam core is to take a hammer or other device and create an uneven surface on one side of the foam core. This causes the light to reflect off at various angles diffusing the light.

If you find that a smooth white card is not bouncing all the light you need, you can cover one side of the foam core with aluminum foil. Again, to keep the bounce card from being a perfect mirror, first crinkle up the foil before adhering it to the board.

An aluminum reflector can come in very handy in those cases where lights are not present. Especially useful if you are shooting outdoors where there is a pocket area that is too much in the shade, or in a large indoor space where you need reflected light in the back of your shot. It creates a fill light effect for the quick shot without having to use an actual lighting fixture.