

Studio Lighting

The goal in studio lighting is to highlight the shape and texture of your subject and help establish the mood of your photograph. Using different lighting qualities (hard or soft) and the direction of the light hitting the subject helps to achieve this goal.

The Main Light

The **Main** or **Key** light is your most important light. It establishes the shape of your subject. If your light is set at or close to the camera, there is little or no shadow created on the subject, so you end up with a very flat subject. Too much angle and you might lose the shape or look you want.

The **Quality** of the light is one of the key components of all photographs. It doesn't matter whether you are in the studio working with artificial light or outdoors, the **Quality** or **Feel** of the light will determine the photo's visual mood and impact. The quality is controlled by the size of your light source, how close it is to the subject and how defused it is. Hard light has defined shadows like the sun on a cloud-free day. Soft light, like the light on a cloudy day, has very soft shadows. I like to refer to this hard vs. soft as "**Edge Transfer.**" How spread out are your shadows? Do they go from highlight to shadow quickly and have a sharp transition, or does it take a long time with a soft spread of gradual grays and a smooth transition? Another way to think about the quality of your light is to think about **Contrast**. In portraits, this is often referred to as your lighting ratio. A 1:1 ratio means your main light and your fill light have equal values or intensity. This will result in a very soft, flat photo. This could be good if you don't want to show texture or flaws in your subject. The higher your lighting ratio is, the more contrast your photo will have. Lighting ratios 1:2 (main light will be 2x as bright as your fill or 1 stop brighter) 1:4 (main light will be 4x brighter than your fill or 2 stops brighter) 1:8 (8x brighter or 3 stops).

The Fill Light

Your fill light is just that. It is used to add some light to your shadows to help control the contrast of your photo and to show detail in the shadow area. If I'm using a light as a fill light, I always place it at and slightly above my camera. I don't want to introduce a secondary shadow into my photo. If I'm using a fill card as my fill light, I place it where I get the most natural looking fill. There are times when I use both a fill card to fill the shadow and a small mirror to reflect light into an area that I would like to highlight.

April challenge is to do a still life using any type of light. This could be a natural light shot; window light, full sun or cloudy day light or an artificial light shot; flood light, lamp light, flash light.