

Fear.

Life is full of it. Photography is no different. It is art and it is technical, very technical. This became only more true with the transition from film to digital capture where no longer being a photographer was enough, you had to be and still have to be, a colourist, a software maven, and you even need to be a bit of an 'electrician' because rarely do all the parts work at the same time without some sort of 'divine intervention' (with you having to play the part of the Divine). So for many of us, art equals fun and technical equals fear. It need not be that way, just about anyone can come to grips with the technical side, you don't have to be technically inclined, but you do need to be disciplined. I mean you yourself must be a disciplined person not that you need to be disciplined by a dominatrix or something:-). You need to spend the time to gather the information you need, then you need to discipline yourself to spend time practising it so that it becomes second nature so that when you are on the job this technical side is background, second nature, innate. Otherwise it will take over the shoot and drown all creativity. Technical does kill creativity if it is not second nature, but when it is, technical makes room for even more creative thought since you breeze through technical problems that invariably plague all photo shoots. So gather, learn, practise, then practise and practise and practise some more.

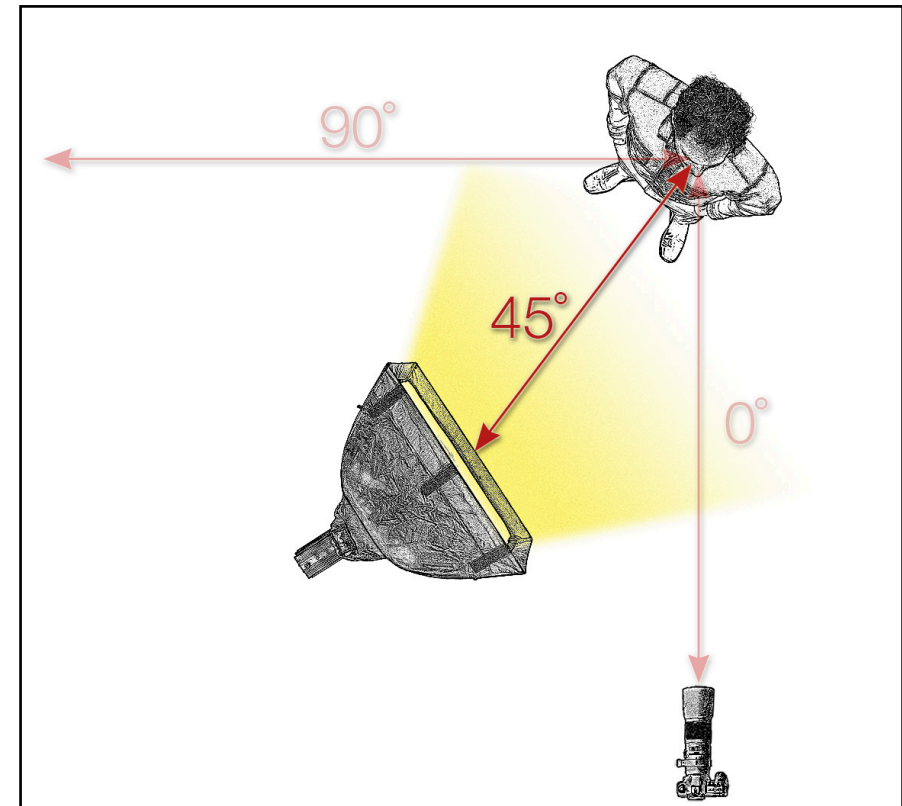
When you are starting out in photography it can be a little overwhelming—there so much to know and so much that has to happen all at once. This was certainly the case for me when lighting some of my first portraits, especially since I had the added stress/fear of a live human being staring expectantly at me and my photographic technique was far from innate. I became flustered and as a result couldn't think clearly making bad decisions about posing, exposure, and lighting. If I was more practiced, these things would have been at my finger tips – when knowledge is innate it is in your sub-conscious and it is your sub-conscious that keeps working even when your conscious mind is shut down with fear. This is what martial arts and self-defence are about. Even a simple basic thing like where to place the main-light escaped me because I had not logged it into my sub-conscious through practise. So in light of the above, let's look at some really basic technical lighting bits that are a good starting point for photographers wanting to master lighting people and their fear of doing so. For this article I'd like to pose the question, 'Where should you place the main-light for a portrait'. This question is like saying, 'What should you eat for dinner?'. There is no right answer, no single way; it is subjective, and is governed by what you are wanting to portray, by what the subject needs, and by how hungry you are. I can, however, help you with a main-light positioning that is 'portrait-gospel' from a long way back but also happens to be a good starting point for creating general lighting that works for most people and is a good thing to fall back on when you are lost or don't know where to start.

The magic number is 45 degrees – start by placing the light 45 degrees between the camera and the subject, then point the front of the light directly toward your subject see Image 001. This will place a nice mask of light over the face allowing both eyes to be lit while allowing some shadows on the opposite side of the face to depict depth and roundness.

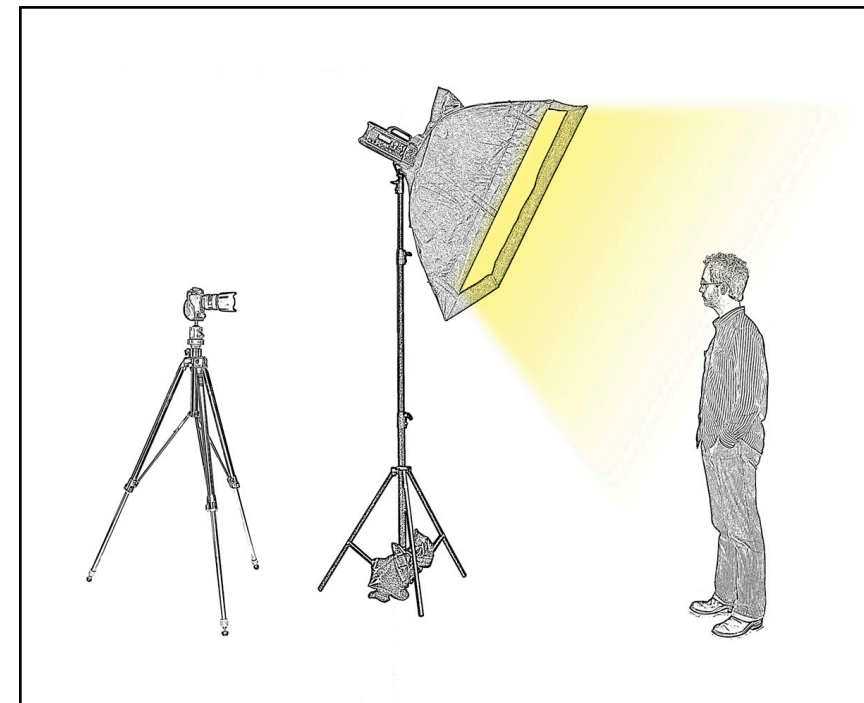
With the light well positioned, the next question should be 'How high should I place the light?'. Which is akin to, 'How much salt should I put in my soup?'. It depends on the subject's facial structure, how you want to portray them, and how high your blood pressure is. The height of the light is of equal importance as light position. Typical portrait lighting places the main-light higher than the subject, the idea being to mimic reality where light, such as the sun, typically comes from above. Once again the starting point uses the magic 45° angle guideline. Using the angle adjustment on your light stand, tilt the light until it is approximately on a 45° angle.

Now raise or lower the light until it is pointed directly at the subject's face, this will determine the height see Image 002. You can do this before the subject arrives by sitting in for them. Simply stand or sit where they will be, approximate their height, then look to the main-light, it should be staring directly at you, if not jump up and adjust. In the end you should see a nice catch light in each eye (see Image 003—free model). These catch lights are reflections or specular highlights of the main-light-source imaging on the surface of the eyes and are usually one of the most important aspects of a person's face since we humans are so tuned in to the eye. With this 45° starting point, you may find that sometimes the catch lights may be obscured by the eyelids when a the pose has the head tilted down or when a subject has really heavy lids like mine (see Image 003)... And that's me wide awake! With super droopy hard-core cases like me or for downward tilted head poses, it is necessary to lower the light and re-angle it a bit until the catch lights come into view just under the eye-lids. Even at that, with my right eye, which is even droopier than the left, it's a trade off between a nice catch light and nice lighting on the face. In this image I pretty much ignored my right eye catch light and concentrated on just my left.

And one final thing, after sweating it with my first few live subjects, I figured out that I could set up the shot before the subject arrived, pretty much finishing the shot before they are even there, then do a few minor adjustments with them in position. Having basic lighting set-ups as a starting point—which you have mastered through practise—like the aforesaid 45° angle makes this very easy to do. In my work, I almost always use a stand-in, that could be your significant other, your assistant, or yourself, to rough in the lighting. I have found that doing a pre-set-up of lighting removes most of the stress and as I learned later on, is the only way to photograph celebrities who only allow you a couple of minutes. I believe that having most of the lighting set-up and decisions in the bag before the client arrives is paramount for a fun, well-run shoot. After all, a good portrait is really about the person in front of the lens and with most subjects it takes most of your attention to coax their soul out to play so you can immortalise them on silicon. If you are stressed out, paralysed with fear, and fussing over lighting at that time, that isn't going to happen.



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dave MONTIZAMBERT'S creating with light

