

Softboxes for Portraiture

By Bob Shell

Generally speaking, portraits of both men and women are more flattering when made with soft light. There are exceptions, of course, but for the moment let's talk about portraiture with soft light and leave hard light for another time.

Just exactly what is soft light? Soft light is light that falls on your subject from a number of different directions, thus softening the shadows and providing modeling but not harshness. What controls how hard or soft the light will be is simple. The larger the apparent size of the light source from your subject's position the softer the light will be. Thus the ultimate in soft lighting is when you are working outdoors under an overcast sky. This is the largest softbox of all, and produces light that strikes your subject from a full 360 degrees. Beginning photographers always seem to think that a bright, clear, sunny day is the best for photography, but just the opposite is true. When I want to photograph a glamorous model outdoors I always hope for an overcast day. Of course it is best not to get too much of the sky in the photograph on such a day since it will be white or pale gray and featureless.

The way to emulate the look of an overcast day in the studio is by using soft lights. These range from very expensive metal and plastic devices to the much less expensive cloth softboxes. I prefer cloth softboxes because they are reasonable in price, light in weight, durable, and can be collapsed for storage or transportation. Softboxes come in a wide variety of designs and prices, and I am sure that most photographers setting up a simple studio can find a brand and style within their budget.

For portraiture I find that I prefer a round or octagonal type softbox because I think people react unconsciously to the shape of the catchlight in the subject's eyes, and a round catchlight looks more natural to most people. Incidentally, if you want to learn something about the lighting used by top pro photographers always look at the catchlights in the models' eyes. When I was first learning studio lighting I spent many hours looking at fashion magazines with a magnifier figuring out exactly what lighting setup was used for photos I really liked. The eyes may be the windows to the soul, but they are also the tip-off on studio lighting.

How large should your softbox be? That depends completely on the look you want in your photos. If you want relatively dark and clearly defined shadows, then use a smaller softbox and move it farther from your subject. If you prefer the almost shadowless look of high fashion photos, get as large a softbox as you have room for and move it in close to your subject. If space is a serious issue, some companies make special versions of softboxes that are thinner from front to back, but these are more costly.

When shooting a head and shoulders type of photo I generally use a softbox about 32 – 40 inches in diameter and place it about four to six feet from my subject. For full-length photos I use a really large rectangular softbox that measures six feet in length. That gives me even illumination from head to toe with a standing subject.

Sometimes I use just one light on my subject and need just a touch of light in the shadows to keep them from going too dark. There are two ways to handle throwing some light into the shadows. The simplest way is to use a reflector, and I keep several around my studio at all times. I use both the round ones which snap out for use and snap into a smaller size for storage, and larger rectangular ones with metal frames. Generally I use a white fabric, but sometimes a silver or gold. Reflectors can give you the look of two lights when you only use one, but there are limits to how much light they can throw back onto the subject. If you need more light than a reflector can provide, then you need another light. Often I use a small softbox on my subject as the main light which defines and models the subject and a big softbox with its flash set to low power to fill in the shadows and gives me more control than I could get with a reflector.

The most important thing to remember with lighting is that there really aren't any hard and fast rules. What is important is to know what you want your images to look like and then work at getting the right lighting equipment to produce that look. Don't be afraid to experiment. Try all sorts of variations in placement and intensity of your lights and take notes so you will be able to duplicate looks you like and avoid looks you don't like. This is how you develop your own very personal style of lighting. Each of us has a different artistic eye and there is no one-size-fits-all formula for lighting.



Sometimes one light is all you need. It just depends on the look you want in your picture. I wanted somewhat dramatic lighting for this photo of Samantha, so I used just one light and fitted it with a 32 inch small softbox about six feet from the model.



Keeping the single light I used in the first photo, I've softened the shadows in this photo of Christina by using a reflector to camera right. You can make your own reflectors from foam board or poster board, but for long-term use you will probably be happier with commercially made reflectors that use fabric stretched onto metal frames.



When working with a single light, watch carefully for an unsightly shadow of your subject on the background, as in this photo. You can eliminate this by moving your subject farther from the background if you have room, or you can add a background light. These are generally of relatively low power and mounted close to the floor behind your subject and angled up onto the background. In place of a dish reflector you may want to use a special reflector made just for this purpose, that prevents the light from spilling over to areas where you don't want it.



To get rid of that ugly shadow on the background I moved my model several feet farther away from the background. This doesn't make the shadow go away, but it moves it sideways far enough to fall outside the picture area. Of course, if your light is more frontal, that is coming from close to the camera, this solution does not work and you must use a background light to kill the shadow.



For reflectors, many photographers prefer the round types that have fabric mounted on a flexible frame that fold to very compact size for transport and storage.



For studio use and location work when it isn't windy, I use this type of reflector. It can be mounted on a stand as shown, eliminating the need for an assistant to hold and aim it.



I prefer to use round or nearly round softboxes like this Photoflex OctoDome in my photography because they produce round catchlights in my subject's eyes. Many people think a round or nearly round catchlight looks more natural than a square or rectangular one.