

Beginner's Guide to Shooting High Key

by Admin on June 13th 2010



Today we're going to learn all about what high key photography is and how to create the effect. We'll go over what kind of equipment you'll need, how to set it up, as well as what camera settings you can expect to give you good results. What is High Key Photography? High key photography uses unnaturally bright lighting to blow out most or all harsh shadows in an image. High key methods were originally developed as a solution to screens that couldn't properly display high contrast ratios, but has developed into more of a stylistic choice. High key images usually convey a positive or upbeat tone. This method is perfect for a subject that is funny, lighthearted or beautiful. You see high key used regularly for model photography, flowers and other subjects that are relatively feminine in nature. Another area perfect for high key is product photography. Practically speaking, the bright nature of the photo really highlights the product and can make for some great attention-grabbing contrast. Psychologically speaking, a product shown on white tends to suggest that it is high quality or upscale in nature. The Nikon image above probably reminds you of a number of ads you've seen for premium products like the iPhone. Apple is fond of using high-key artwork and photography to show off their line of super-stylish electronic devices. The opposite of high key is of course low key. Instead of eliminating shadows as in high key photography, low key photographers utilize dark scenes and heavy contrast to convey a sense of drama or foreboding. Lighting Equipment Effectively shooting indoors in high key is not easy if you don't have the proper equipment (outdoors on a bright day can be easier and cheaper). If you want to achieve that studio, white background look, ideally you'll have some studio lighting on hand. Getting started with studio lighting can be quite expensive. Many starter kits are available from a range of manufacturers. Depending on the quality and amount of equipment you want, you can expect to spend anywhere from \$200-\$1700 and beyond. Lighting conversations can quickly become complicated, but I'll try to keep it simple here. Basically, you have two primary options: continuous lighting or flash. Within continuous lighting you can choose from either tungsten (hot lights) or fluorescent (cool lights.) Tungsten lights tend to run really hot and produce warmer looking light while fluorescent lights run fairly cool by comparison and produce something more comparable to daylight ([source](#)). The problem with both of these is that they are fairly low-powered, which can make it difficult to pull off high key photography if your lights are good enough. Alternatively, flashes are more versatile and powerful and are therefore the only choice for many studio photographers. Ultimately, it's quite difficult to get a good feel for a lighting kit until you get your hands on it. The best you can do if you're purchasing online is to do your research and read plenty of reviews. Below are a few lower-end affordable options to begin your search with. [CowboyStudio 330 Watt Three Light Kit: \\$290.99](#) 3 Monolight Studio Flash/Strobes 3 Softboxes 1 Boom Kit w/Sandbag 1 24" Photo Tent [Smith-Victor FL-130 3 Light Studio Flash Kit: \\$338.95](#) 3 Monolight Kits 2 Black-Backed White Umbrellas Are Included 3 Aluminum Stands 1 Hard Carrying Case [Britek Flash Light Kit with Boom](#) "total kit 576 wt: \$534.99" 2 HS-600 Flash Lights 168 w/s 2 PS-200 Flash Light s120w/s 4 Modeling Lamps for HS,PS Series 4 Reflectors 4 Modeling Lamps for HS,PS Series 2 32" Silver Photo Umbrellas [a lot more](#) Lighting Setup Once you've got some decent

lights, you'll need to set up your studio environment.

Don't mistake the information below as the single right way to shoot high key photography. There are tons of places and ways to get a good high key shot, this is just to give you a good idea of one of the most popular methods of achieving the effect. Ideally you'll have at least three lights, four if you've got the equipment. You'll also need a seamless white backdrop of some kind. Many professionals mount a 9 ft wide roll of paper high on stands, then roll it down across the background and onto the floor of the shot. If you're on a budget or in a hurry you can try using a sheet (watch for wrinkles) or an empty wall. Position your subject in the center of the backdrop and make sure to keep the shot's frame within the bounds of the paper so no gaps are showing. Next setup a key light and a fill light. The key light is off to one side and is your main source of light on the subject. Make sure the lighting on the subject is fairly flat. As strange as that sounds, remember that you're not going for contrast here but brightness throughout. Having your key light to one side will likely produce harsh shadows on the opposite side of the subject. Here you setup a less bright fill light to smooth out some of those areas. Shooting with only these two lights will produce a gray, shadow-filled background. Since we're going for solid white, you need to eliminate these shadows by using one or two lights angled and pointed at your backdrop. The key here is experimentation. Don't worry if you end up with a lot of bad shots at first, it can literally take hours to figure out a decent light setup if you're new to studio flash photography. One thing to watch out for is the light bouncing off your backdrop, which can cause strange halos around your subject. At the same time, you want to make sure you're blowing out the backdrop enough to get a fairly solid white. Deborah Wolfe from [Studio On a Shoestring](#) recommends that you keep your background lights at least one f-stop over your subject lighting and meter the lighting for your subject to produce an overall setting of f/11. Camera Settings To evaluate camera settings for a given technique, I always like to take a look at a real example and inspect what the photographer did to achieve the effect. This photo was taken with a Sony DSLR-A350, with an exposure of 0.2 sec (1/5), an aperture of f/5.6, an ISO of 100, and an exposure bias of +2 EV. Notice that all of these settings are aimed at letting in lots of light. The 1/5 sec exposure is quite long and would normally produce a blurry photo if not for a couple of factors. First, the subject isn't moving. Fortunately, flowers are fairly immobile and tend to stay pretty still while you're shooting (barring any wind). Unfortunately, you don't have the same luxury with people. Secondly, the camera was probably mounted on a tripod. With such a long exposure you'll want to use a tripod whenever possible to avoid camera shake. Finally, the flash actually serves to freeze the subject in place so that even if you're shooting a person, handheld with a long exposure, it's a fairly easy to get a crisp image. The 5.6 aperture is neither really high nor really low. The shot looks like it would've been taken down below f/3 but because it's so close the DOF looks fairly shallow even above 5.0, which allows for more light to be let in without sacrificing a nice blurry background. Finally, the 100 ISO tells us there was already a lot of available light in the scene and the exposure bias is pumping up the brightness even further. What you can learn from this is that you're definitely going to want to shoot at 100-200 ISO in a bright environment with a f-stop that's high enough to give you a really bright scene. Feel free to shoot way up at f/11 or higher if you're not aiming for a blurry background and don't have strong enough lights to fill the area well. You'll also want to lengthen your exposure to brighten the scene as much as you can without blowing out the highlights or causing blur from camera shake or model

movement. Conclusion To sum up, high key photography seeks to eliminate harsh shadows and create a bright environment. It is generally used to convey an upbeat, funny or beautiful subject but can be manipulated to communicate a number of moods and concepts. If you want to shoot high key indoors, it's best to have some studio lighting available, preferably 3-4 flashes: two on your subject, two on the backdrop. Also, make sure your camera's settings are optimized to let in lots of light. Make sure there's enough to brighten the scene considerably without blowing out the subject. If you've got some nice high key shots to show off, be sure to leave a link in the comments and share your methods with us!