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@bybanghansen

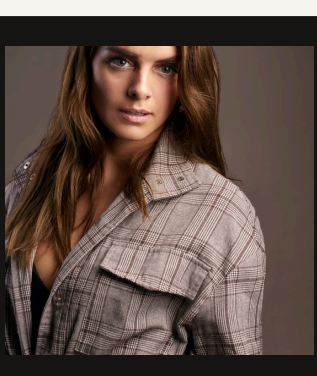
Portrait Lighting

A workflow for lighting a face

1 Pick the pattern
2 Shape the light
3 Balance it
4 Fix it fast
✓ Before you shoot

1 Pick the pattern

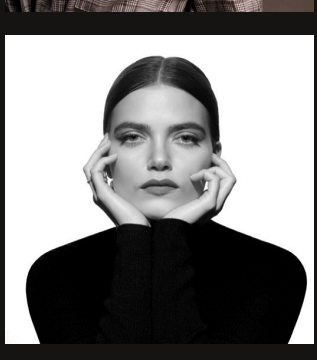
Five setups from my studio



Loop

Soft key a little to the side and above. A small nose shadow

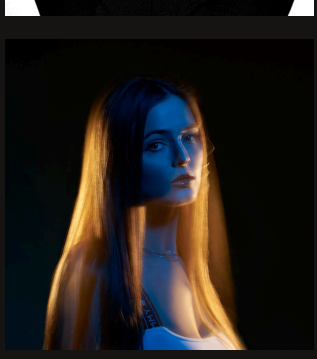
Amalie Vellev · @amalievellev



Butterfly

Key in front and high. A shadow under the nose

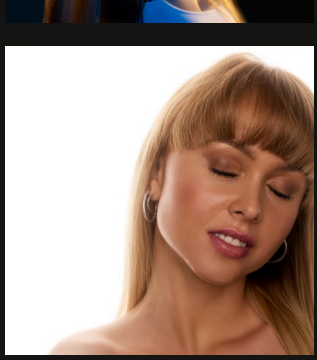
Sascha Ravat · @sascha_liri



Rim

Two lights behind trace the hair. A front light fills the face

Julie Grove · @juliegrove.jpg



High-key

Bright background, soft key, few shadows

Athalie Bech · @athaliebech



Low-key

Dark background, one hard light from the side. Lots of shadow

Zarah Buchwald · @zarahbuchwald

Two more to know. Rembrandt: key 45° and higher, a lit triangle under the far eye. Split: key 90°, half the face in shadow. **Short or broad:** light the side turned away from the camera to slim the face

2 Shape the light

Softness comes from size and distance

What counts is how big the light is **compared to the subject**. Not the watts, not the price

Closer is softer. The same softbox gets bigger when you move it in

Further is harder, and more even across the frame

Feather it. Aim the edge of the softbox at the subject: softer light, fewer hot spots, darker background

Double the distance, a quarter of the light (–2 stops)



Light close: fast falloff, dark background, dramatic

Light far: slow falloff, subject and background closer in brightness

3 Balance it

Key to fill

1:1	0 stops. Flat and even
2:1	1 stop. Soft and commercial
4:1	2 stops. Shape and depth
8:1	3 stops. Moody and low-key

No fill light? A white board opposite the key gives 1–2 stops

Flash and ambient

Shutter	ambient only, up to sync speed
Aperture	flash and ambient
Flash power	flash only

Set the background with the shutter first. Then bring the flash in

Colour temperature

1900 K	candle
3200 K	tungsten, warm bulbs
5600 K	daylight, flash, most LED
7000 K+	shade, overcast, blue hour

Daylight key in a warm room? Gel the key warm and set 3200 K

4 Fix it fast

Dark eye sockets	lower the key, or bounce from below
Two nose shadows	the fill is too strong. Pull it back
Shiny forehead	feather the light, or go bigger
Flat face	move the key further to the side
No catchlight	raise the key or bring it in front of the eyes

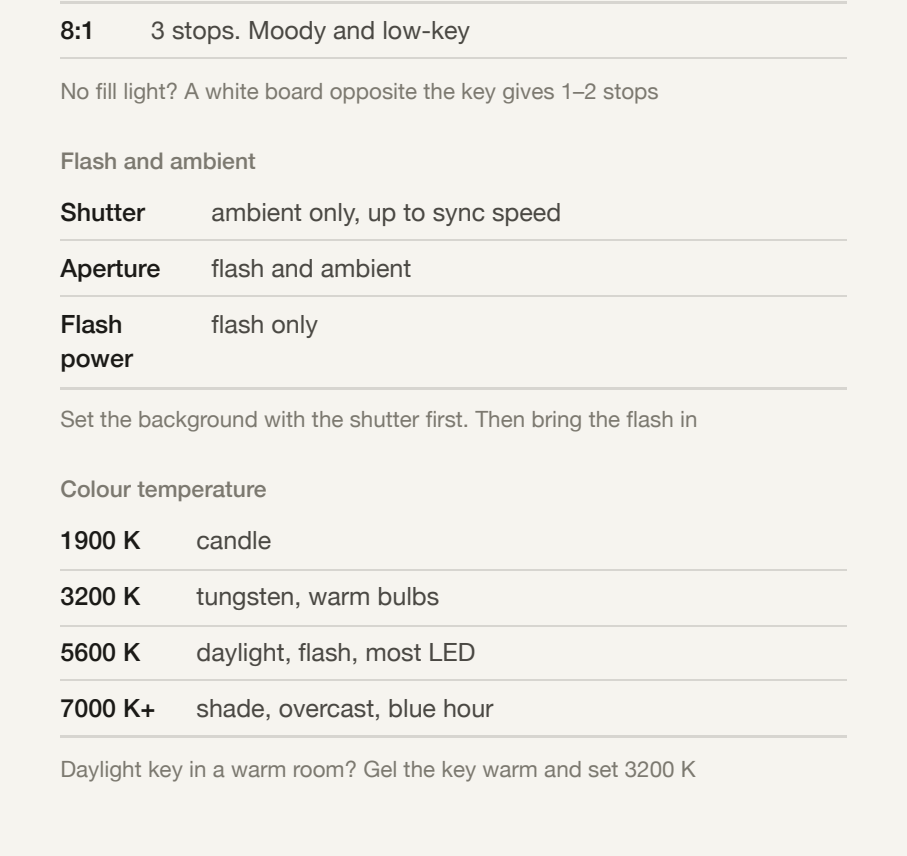
No gear? Use a window

Subject **beside** the window, not facing it: instant loop or Rembrandt

A sheer curtain is free diffusion

Step away from the window for contrast, closer for softness

A white wall or sheet of paper opposite is your fill



Maiken · @maiken.h.model

Before you shoot

Don’t skip these

- [ ] One pattern chosen for the face
- [ ] Light as close as the frame allows
- [ ] Decide your light and shadow ratio
- [ ] Mixing with ambient? Shutter sets the background
- [ ] A catchlight in both eyes
- [ ] White balance matches the light