

An Introduction to the Nikon Creative Lighting System

If you have one of the newer Nikon digital SLR's (D70, D70s or D200), you have, whether you realize it or not, one of the most advanced flash systems available at any price built right into your camera. At the same time, if you've tried to read the camera manual and the flash manual and actually make it work, there's a real good chance that you've thrown up your arms in disgust and given up on the whole idea. Like everything else, it's not that hard once you understand it. It took me several attempts to get it to work, but once it does work, it's pretty easy to use. What I'm going to try to do here is get you started using the system. Once you gotten over the original hump, the sky is pretty much the limit.

Should You Use the Creative Lighting System or Studio Strobes?

I'm not qualified to answer that question. It would probably all depend on how serious you are going to be about flash photography and whether the portability of Nikon's Creative Lighting System (CLS) is important to you.

Whether you decide to get a set of studio strobes or not, you will undoubtedly need a standard strobe flash for your camera. Whether you buy the SB-800 or the SB-600, the wireless capability is built into both units, so you might as well take advantage of it.

Should You Buy the SB-800 or the SB-600?

If you've spent much time at the camera forums, this question comes up regularly and usually sets off a thread that runs for a long time. In my opinion, this is a no-brainer. The SB-800 puts out a lot more light and will remotely control almost any number of other flashes. It is more money, but I think it's well worth it. The current price for an SB-800 is about \$315, the current price for an SB-600 is about \$185. Save some extra money and get the SB-800. Nikon frequently offers rebates on the SB-800.

Setting Up the D1X, D2X, D50 or D100

If you have any of the above cameras, the wireless capability is not built into your camera since they do not have a built-in flash. You will need to buy either the SB-800 to act as a controller or the new SU-800 flash controller system to use the CLS. You will also need to buy either an SB-800 or SB-600 to use as a remote flash. I have no experience in this area, so I'm afraid that I won't be able to help. I would recommend getting Thom Hogan's eBook for your camera or just slogging your way through the manual for your camera and the flashes.

Setting up the D70, D70s or D200

(Note: I don't have a D200, but I'm assuming the menu commands will be pretty much the same.)

Turn your camera on and press the "Menu" button. When the menu appears in the LCD display, go to the Camera Setup menu (it's the one with the wrench icon) and right-click on the thumb wheel. Scroll down to the CSM item, right-click on the thumb wheel again. Select "Detailed", press the "Enter" button.

Scroll up to the Custom Settings menu (it's the one with the pencil icon) and right-click the thumb wheel again. Scroll down to the "Flash Mode" item (it's number 19 on the D70/D70s menu) and right-click the thumb wheel again. Scroll down to "Commander Mode" and right-click the thumb wheel again. Select the "TTL" option and press the "Enter" button.

What you have just done is tell the camera that the on-board flash is going to be a controller for an off-camera flash.

Setting Up the SB-800 As a Remote Flash

(Note: I have never used an SB-600, but I am guessing the procedure is pretty much the same.)

Power the flash on. Press and hold the “Sel” button in the center of thumb wheel on the back of the flash. The flash menu will appear. On the top right of the first screen of the flash menu should have two flash unit icons with a curved arrow going between them. If this doesn’t appear, click the plus sign on the thumb wheel until it does. Press the “Sel” button again and another menu will appear on the right side of the LCD display. Use the plus and minus buttons on the thumb wheel to scroll down until the “Remote” option is highlighted. Press and hold the “Sel” button until the LCD display goes back to the somewhat normal display.

You will notice that the LCD display has changed. At the top left of the display is a channel (CH) indicator. The number 3 should be largest number. This indicates that the flash has been set to channel 3. If 3 is not the largest number, press the “Sel” button to highlight the “CH”. Use the plus button on the thumb wheel to make 3 the largest number.

At the lower right of the display, there is a group indicator. The letter A should be the largest letter. If it isn’t, press the “Sel” button until the word “Group” is highlighted. Press the plus button on the thumb wheel until A is the largest letter.

You’re ready to take your first wireless picture!

Taking Your First Wireless Picture

Pop up the built-in flash.

With your camera in one hand and the flash in the other, take a picture of something. Make sure the flash is a little in front of the camera and that your hand isn’t covering the red plastic panel on the front of the flash. Press the shutter release button and make sure both flashes fire. If they both fire, you’re all set. If they don’t, go through the previous steps again and make sure you have done everything correctly. This really does work. These instructions have been user-tested.

Note: Be sure to try this out at home before you do anything else. Make it simple. We’ll get more advanced in the next steps.

Big Deal

Right now, you are probably wondering what the practical use is for what we have done. After all, you probably won’t be taking many pictures where you will be holding the camera in one hand and the flash in another. All we have done previously is to make sure that you can get the wireless part of the CLS to work. We’ll get to the fun part next.

At the same time, if you are taking pictures of flowers or something else small, you can easily put the camera on a tripod, hold the flash in your hand and trigger the camera with the optional wireless remote control. You can also put the flash on the small plastic flash stand and use it to light up a room for interior shots. Remember, the camera will run any number of flashes remotely. The possibilities are limited only by your imagination and budget.

Using the Flashes with Light Stands and Umbrellas

Most of the time, you will probably be using your camera and flash to take portraits. That being the case, I would strongly recommend getting a light stand and an umbrella. Umbrellas give you the ability to control where the light goes as well as providing nice soft light without getting hot spots. You can buy a light stand and umbrella for a little over a hundred dollars. I would recommend getting a 42” umbrella. A simple umbrella comes with either a silver or white reflective surface. You can also get umbrellas that can

change reflective surfaces from white to silver to gold for just a little more money. The changeable umbrellas can usually be used as a translucent “shoot-through”. Get one of these if you can.

Assemble the light stand and umbrella. Mount the flash unit on the stand so that the flash is pointed into the umbrella. Make sure that the flash is close enough to the umbrella so that all the light from the flash goes into the umbrella and doesn't spill out into the room.

While you're doing these test shots, using a tripod is an excellent idea. You will be trying several different combinations of light positions, f-stops and metering modes, so it's really helpful if the camera stays in the same place.

Position the flash/umbrella so that it is a little above and a little to the left (your left) of your subject at a distance of around two or three feet. The closer the light is to the subject, the softer the light will be. What we're going to try to get is a “Rembrandt” kind of light on the subject.

Put your camera in aperture priority mode with a reasonable f-stop, somewhere between 8 and 14. Use either center-weighted or spot metering (try both) and focus on the eyes. The eyes are the most critical part of any portrait. Press the shutter release and make sure that both the on-board flash and the flash in the umbrella both fire. Look at the LCD display to check your shot. With any luck at all, you should have gotten a good portrait where the subject's face is pretty well-lit with some nice fall-off of the light on the right side of the face. If the shot didn't turn out the way you expected, try different light/umbrella positions and/or different metering modes until you get the results you want. The camera and flash are very intelligent, so let them do the heavy lifting.

Adding a Reflector

Reflectors are a very handy thing to have around in general. They are available in lots of different sizes and options. The best ones to get are the ones with different colors (white, silver, gold and translucent) of reflective surfaces. The translucent, or shoot-through, reflectors are helpful outside when you need to soften bright sunlight. A 42” multi-color reflector usually runs about a hundred dollars. The single color ones are much cheaper, usually around sixty dollars.

Position the reflector so it bounces the light from the flash back into the front or side of the subject. This is a good way to add some soft fill light. I like the gold reflectors for this purpose. The warm light is flattering, especially during the winter months when we're all kind of pasty-looking. A reflector is also a good way to add a hair light.

Adding a Second Flash

(I'm spending a lot of your money, aren't it I?)

Adding a second flash to your kit expands your lighting horizons pretty dramatically. You don't necessarily have to buy another flash if you're good friends with another Nikon shooter. My daughter and I share flashes all the time. We both have an SB-800, so it's pretty easy to pass them back and forth as needed.

The second flash can be used as additional main light if you are shooting a small group or it can be used as a hair light. You can use the hair light either with or without an umbrella. You should try both because there will be times when you need to use both methods. You will need another light stand in either case. Set up the second flash for remote use following the instructions we have above for putting the flash in remote mode. There is essentially no limit to the number of flashes the camera will control. Pretty neat, huh?

Position the second light behind and to the right (your right) of the subject so that the light from the umbrella falls onto the subject's hair and just highlights the back of the hair.

Press the shutter release button, make sure that both flashes fire and then check the image in the camera's LCD display. If both flashes don't fire, make sure that both are set up properly and that the red plastic

cover on the front of the flash isn't covered up. Adjust the position of the lights until you get the effect you want.

Notice that we don't have to change anything on the camera. The CLS is smart enough to figure out all of this for you, which is pretty amazing when you think about it.

You can also get pretty nice effects using the hair light flash without an umbrella. One effect that is impressive is to put the second flash right behind the subject and fire the light into the back of their head. This may take some experimentation, but eventually you will get a nice a halo effect around the person's head.

Practice, Practice, Practice

Although we've covered a lot of ground here, you (and I) haven't even scratched the surface of lighting. Practice whenever you can get a willing, or at least unresisting, subject. The Nikon CLS is amazingly powerful using just one light. Having a system that allows you to add more lights and reflectors without changing the camera settings is pretty amazing. It's already in your camera, you might as well use it.

Links

D70 User's Guide in PDF format -

http://www.nikonusa.com/pdf/manuals/tnirp/D70_en.pdf

D70s User's Guide in PDF format -

http://www.nikonusa.com/pdf/manuals/noprint/D70S_en_noprint.pdf

D200 User's Guide in PDF format -

http://www.nikonusa.com/pdf/manuals/noprint/D200_en_noprint.pdf

SB-600 Manual in PDF format -

http://www.nikonusa.com/pdf/manuals/SB600_en.pdf

SB-800 Manual in PDF format -

http://www.nikonusa.com/pdf/manuals/SB800_en.pdf

SB-600/SB-800 Shooting techniques. Lots of suggestions for using multiple speedlights -

http://www.nikonusa.com/pdf/SB800_techniques.pdf

Thom Hogan's eBook Manuals. If you have a Nikon camera, these are a great value. Thom writes what the Nikon manuals should be, but aren't -

<http://bythom.com>

Dave Black Photography - Dave is a world-renowned Nikon shooter. His monthly "On the Road" and "Workshop at the Ranch" articles are always a good read. He has several "Workshop at the Ranch" articles dealing specifically with the creative lighting system -

<http://daveblackphotography.com>

A large list of SB-800 and general flash resources -

<http://www.softstonegroup.com/sb-800.html>

Better use of an on-camera flash (excellent!) -

<http://www.planetneil.com/faq/flash-techniques.html>

A great list of general flash techniques -

<http://www.dg28.com/technique.html>