

# Portrait Photography Lighting Setups for Studios

Our experts share three effective lighting strategies for portrait photography



Learning to shoot portraits starts with mastering the uses of a single key light and builds from there. We ask three top portraitists how, when, and why they choose one-, two-, or three-light setups for winning portraits, from simple to complex.

The best way to learn portrait photography lighting is to first master the effects achieved with a single light, then graduate to two- and three-light setups.

We ask three top portraitists how to make this exciting and ultimately rewarding journey.

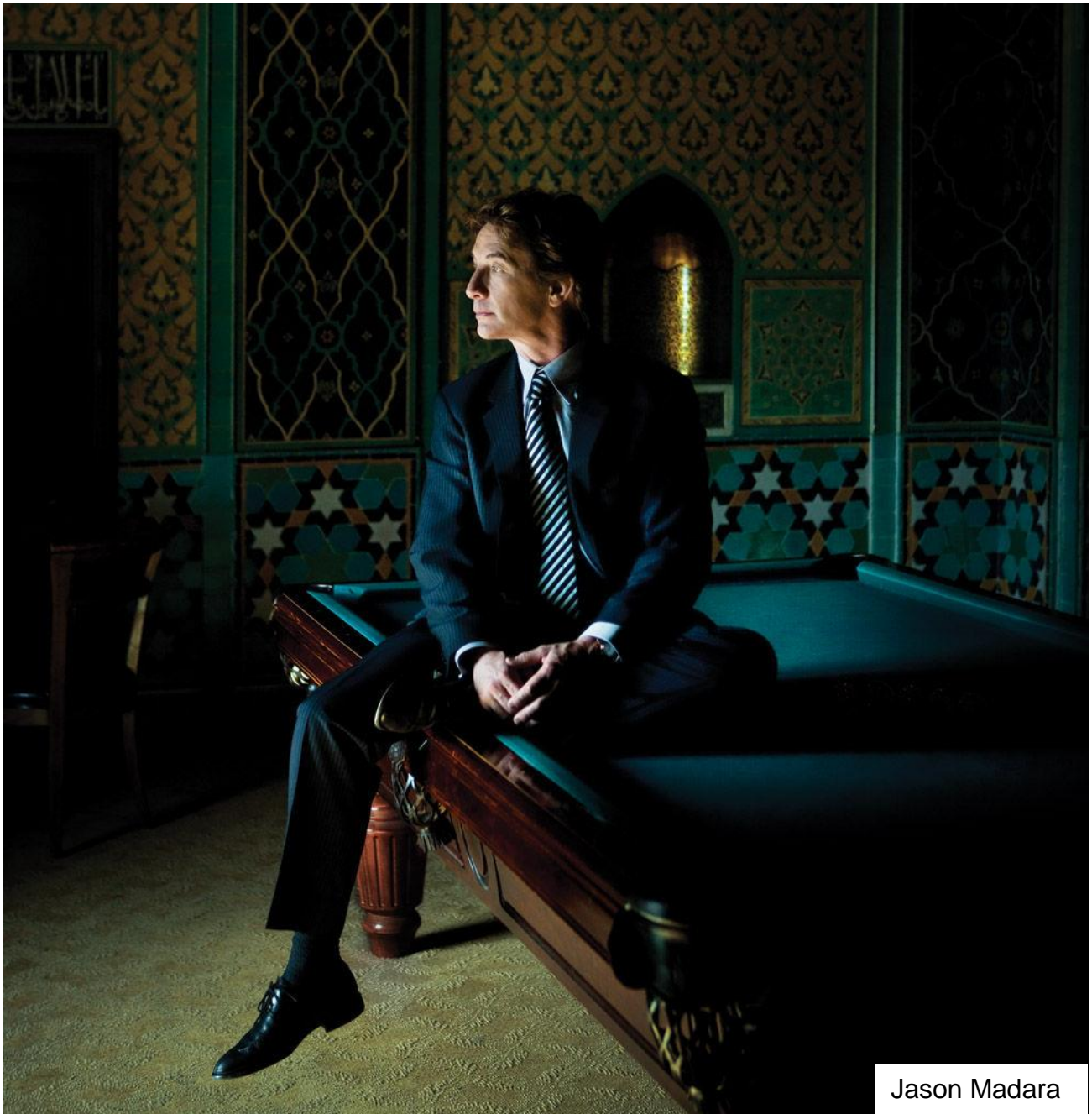
Simple, One-light Setup

Moderate, Two-light Setup

Complex, Three-light Setup

## Simple, One-light Setup

The path to great portraits begins with a single light



Jason Madara

Jason Madara used a Canon EOS 1Ds Mark II with 24–70mm f/2.8L EF Canon zoom, exposing for 1/60 sec at f/2.8, ISO 100.

If you're a novice at portraits, starting with one light (and a reflector to brighten shadows) makes a lot of sense. It contains costs and is visually simple, offering fewer shadows and hotspots to deal with. It's physically easy, with little gear to store, transport, set up, and break down. It's fast to work with and perfect for subjects who quickly grow bored or situations in which you have only minutes to get your shot.

For his portrait of the actor Martin Short, L.A. photographer Jason Madara took advantage of one light's unique expressive powers. "My main goal was to capture a quiet moment with Martin," says Madera. "Most of the images you see of him are upbeat and comical, and I wanted to project a different side of him."

Using only window light, Madara was able to match this simple lighting style to the centered, quiet, thoughtful aspect of Short that he wanted to showcase.

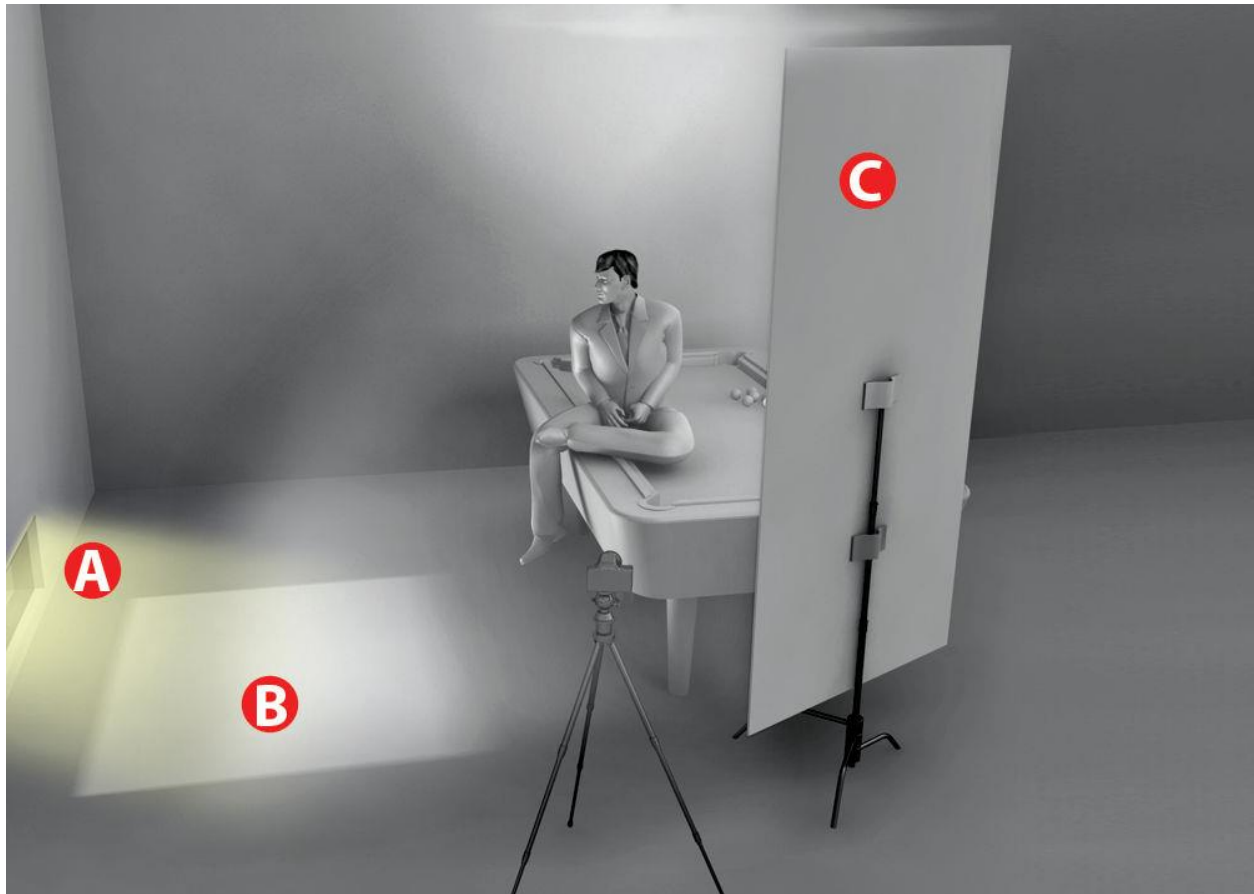
Single-light placement can be different for every subject and every camera angle. You have to learn how and where to place that key (i.e., main) light by doing it. One of the most common approaches is to place your key in front of, close in, and to either side of the subject. This will create strong shadows across the face that accentuate cheekbones and draw attention to your subject's eyes. The shadow you throw under the chin can also set off the face to strong effect.

A second common approach is to place your key light directly in front and slightly above the subject's face, and aim it into the eyes. You will fill in lines and wrinkles this way, and smooth out a compromised complexion.

You can do a lot with one light but, especially with indoor portraits, it often presents a challenge: contrast. As you see in Madara's portrait of Short, if you use one light indoors, it typically will produce only enough light to illuminate your subject, falling short of the background.

A reflector, as Madara used here, can help a little. For situations like this, Madara says, "Bring detail into your interior backgrounds by raising the ISO and lowering the shutter speed as much as possible." Shooting at 1/60 sec allowed him to record more of the beautiful room, while holding correct exposure on his strongly lit subject.

One-light portraits are a great starting point, but are only the beginning. "As my career grew, the jobs became more complex, and I started adding lights to my setups," says Madara. You will, too.



For his single-light portrait of comedian Martin Short, Jason Madara used the light of a small, 1.5x2.5-foot, low-placed window in the Penthouse Suite of the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco. Direct sunlight fell through the window **(A)** onto the floor **(B)**, bouncing back up into Short's face. To throw fill light onto the shadowed side of his subject and, to a lesser extent, the far wall, Madara mounted a 4x8-foot white foamcore reflector **(C)** on an Avenger Century light stand and placed to the camera's right, slightly outside of the view of the lens

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### **Moderate, Two-light Setup**

Moving from one to two lights can open up worlds



For this radiant portrait of a Bay-Area R&B; songstress, David Art used Profoto Acute B strobes in Creative Light softboxes. He shot with a Canon EOS 5D Mark II and 70–200mm f/2.8L IS USM zoom, exposing for 1/200 sec at f/5.6, ISO 100.

The more complex the circumstances, the more the constraints of working with a single light will limit your ability to make the portraits you envision. As mentioned in the previous spread, single-light setups will most likely present you with contrast challenges. Lighting with one light will also prevent you from adding subtle shaping to faces and figures.

And while a simple reflector card can boost a single light, it is often not enough, because you will be limited by placement issues. For less fill, moving the reflector back increases contrast, and for more, you can move the reflector in only as far as the frame edge. Often, there's only one sweet spot for positioning a fill reflector. So add a second light, and start by using it to sculpt and finesse the shadows.

The advantage you gain by adding a second, adjustable fill light is the ability to almost infinitely fine-tune its shaping power. Set it to a low power, and the fill (placed close for softness) will add a dark sense of mystery or drama. Conversely, turn that same light to a higher power to suggest a more sunny disposition.

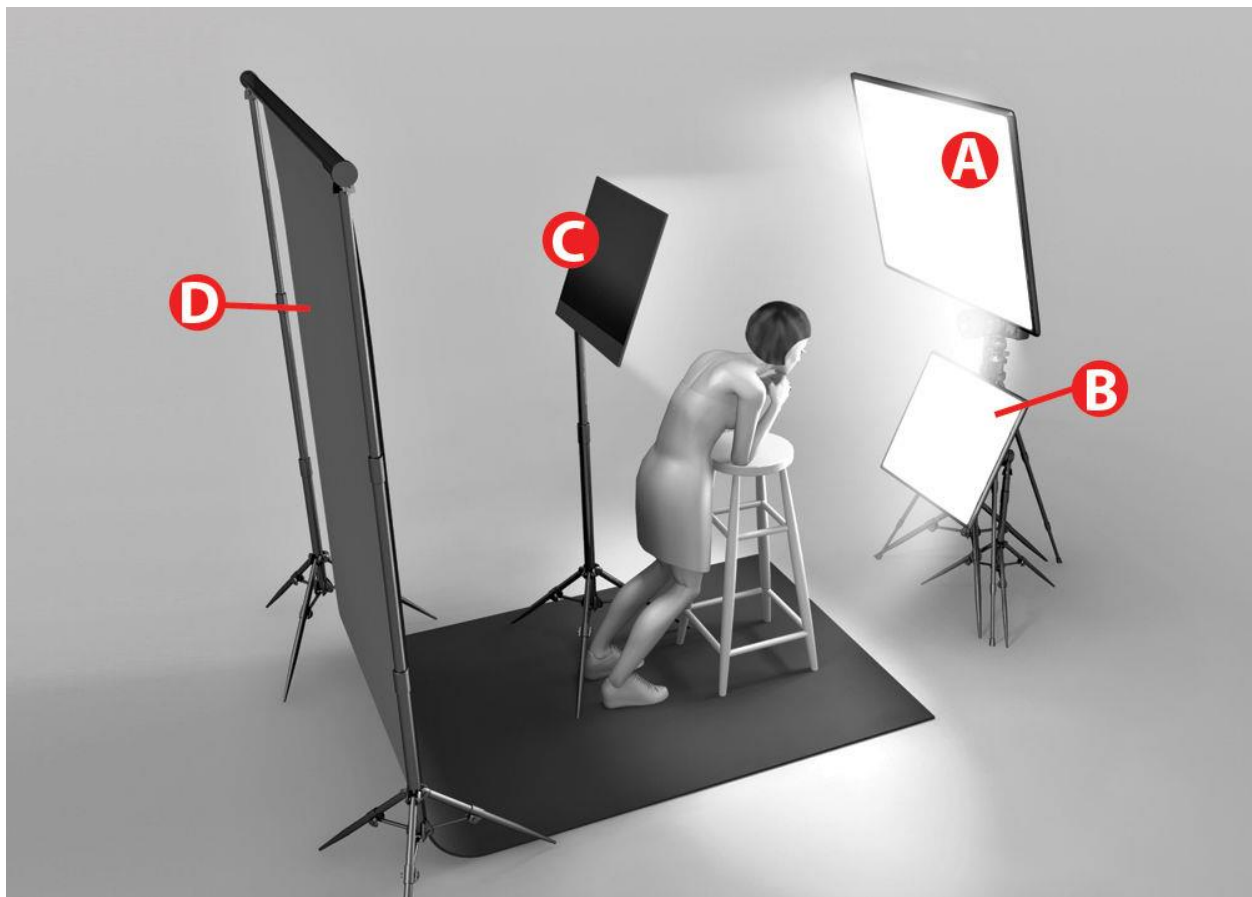
David Art, a San Francisco portrait shooter, used the clamshell, a popular two-light setup, for his intimate view of R&B singer Skye.

“When you’re not working with professional models, the subjects often have imperfections in their skin,” he says. “Women are often concerned about that, so when I shoot them, I tell them I’m going to use my best beauty lighting. With clamshell, it’s actually the truth. And it helps them to relax a little.”

It’s called “clamshell” because the two lights, usually in softboxes, form a V-shape that lights your subject’s face from top and bottom. They form a configuration that resembles, yes, an open clamshell. “The setup fills in the shadows that define wrinkles and imperfections, so the subject has smoother skin and you have less editing later,” says Art.

With this style of lighting, put your lights as close to your subject as possible, and leave little space between them. “With the lights too far apart, you lose some of the shadow-filling strength of the clamshell, especially in the middle of the frame, which is exactly where you need it for most headshots,” Art says.

Keeping the lights closer to the subject will not only cast a softer light, but Art provides an added benefit: “I pay top dollar for my lights and light modifiers. I’m paying for a beautiful and consistent quality of light. The further back I place the lights, the less I benefit from these advantages.”



David Art used a classic two-light setup for this portrait: the clamshell. Starting with two softboxes (**A** and **B**) placed as close as possible to his subject, Art added a silver Lastolite Skylite reflector behind her (**C**) to highlight the hair and shoulders. To increase the portrait’s intimate feel, he posed her against a wall of black seamless (**D**). He then used a 2:1 lighting ratio, with the larger, top half of the clamshell (**A**) twice as bright as the bottom. This helped him produce some shadows in the lower half of the portrait to set off the face.

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## Complex, Three-light Setup

Bring in a third (or fourth) light to make your subjects pop



Adam Elmakias

Adam Elmakias captured this band with a Canon EOS 5D and a Canon EF 17–40mm f/4L zoom, exposing for 1/200 sec at f/13; ISO 200.

While a key light will “find” your subject, and a second light can open up or shape the shadows, two lights alone can sometimes fall short. That's why three-point lighting is probably the most common form of studio portrait lighting today. The three “points” are the key and fill lights that handle the subject, plus a third light to take on other tasks.

The most common of these is illuminating your background. Place a light immediately behind or to the side of your subject, and aim it toward the backdrop to emphasize detail, color, and texture. Its role is to add a suggestion of character, mood, or ambience to the portrait. By lighting part (but not all) of a background, you can also create shadows (or falloff) that can minimize distracting background elements.

Another common task performed by a third light is rim lighting. Place a light behind and aimed at the back of your subject to outline the outer contours with white light. This will better define your subject's shape or line, and it can also separate a subject from a similarly toned background. The outline etched by a rim light can also come in handy later, helping to more easily extract a subject for compositing. Adam Elmakias used it that way for the rock band portrait above.

A third light can also serve as an accent or kicker light. With a highly-focused, soft-edge spotlight, you can subtly open up specific shadows, bring out the modeling of rounded shapes, or create hot spots that draw a viewer's eye.

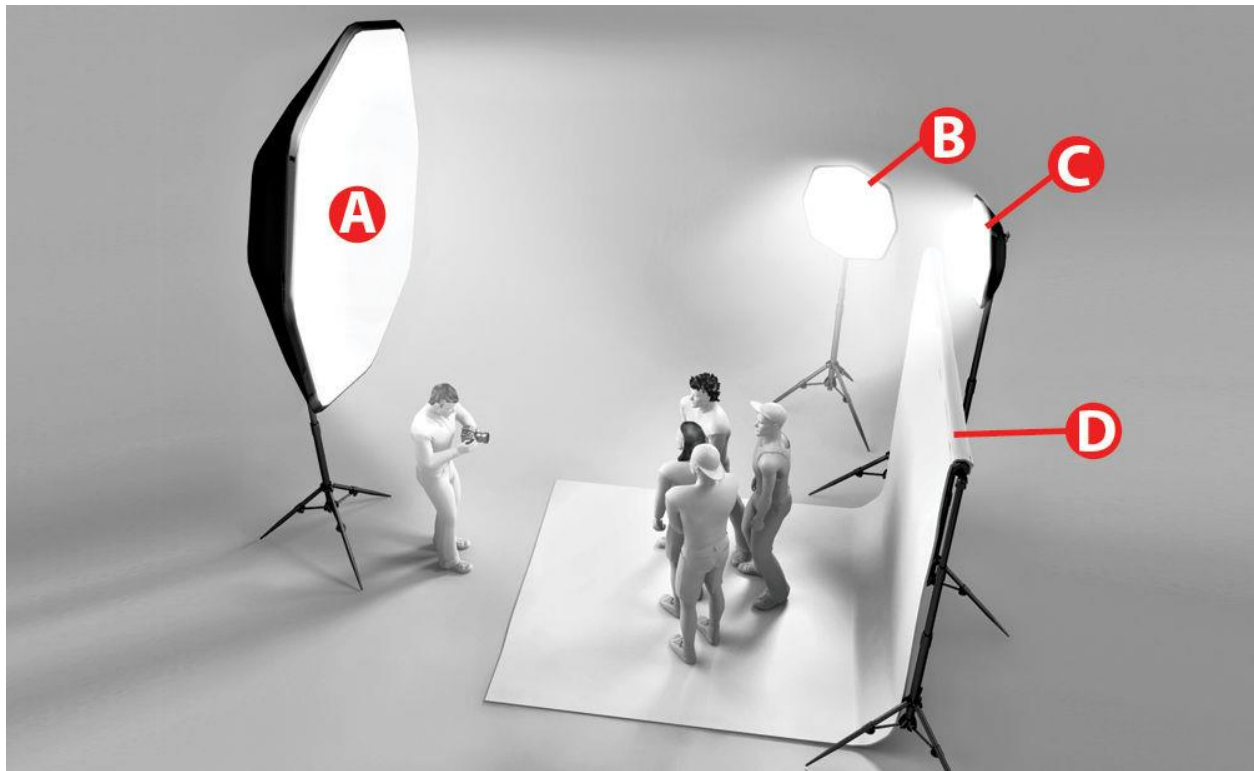
Finally, put that third light on a boom above and slightly behind your subject and aim it down at the hair. Focused with barn doors or a snoot, it will draw attention to the color, style, and texture of the coif, as well as separate head and background.

Rock-band specialist Elmakias has yet another role for the third light: "I like my guys to pop, and the way I do it is by surrounding them by soft light from all sides to fill as many shadows as possible. The look is flat and cartoony, but is surreal and larger-than-life, too." Elmakias puts three lights on his subjects, with the main light as close as possible, for maximum softness and minimal shadows. Then he adds side and back lights, placed high, to fill in any shadows created by the key light. "Keep in mind that every time you add a light, it means more things can go wrong," he warns.

For a shot like this, he poses and lights each musician individually. "I start with one person. Pose him and test the lights, then add the next and test the lights again."

"Ninety percent of my pictures with multiple lights don't work" he says. "Every time a subject moves, there's a new shadow to deal with."

But the ones that do work? **WOW !!!!!**



To front-light his portrait of the rock band Pierce the Veil, Adam Elmakias used an Alien Bees B1600 monolight inside a 7-foot Photoflex Octodome softbox **(A)**. He side- and backlit the musicians with two Alien Bees B800 monolights inside 47-inch **(B)** and 35-inch **(C)** foldable Paul C. Buff octoboxes. The side light **(B)** eliminated shadows on the subjects' shoulders, while the backlight **(C)** rimlit the group, making it easier for Elmakias to extract them from the background in post. His original background was a roll of white seamless paper **(D)**.

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