Bounce Flash Lighting

I have a huge section with tons of sample photos and examples in the eBook - yet in this condensed format, this is probably the biggest "tip" I can pass along to you. Most cameras – be it a cheap Point & Shoot or an expensive DSLR – will take a photo somewhat similar to the one at left when shooting indoors. My customers pay me to take the photo that you see on the right. The photo on the right can be taken with almost any reasonable camera that has an external flash unit which tilts and swivels.

Kaitlyn, the bride, was passing time with her bridesmaids playing a game of Rummikub®. Both photos were shot with the same camera settings: 1/60th of a second shutter speed, ISO 400, f/2.8, with automatic TTL flash (there is actually quite a bit that goes into understanding and knowing the proper exposure which I will get into in the eBook). The difference between the two photos: in the photo at left I pointed the flash directly at the bride. In the photo at right I pointed the flash at the wall behind me and to my left. You'll need to make sure your flash head is "zoomed" all of the way in or you'll have light that will spill.

The best way to learn bounce flash is to begin experimenting. The goal is to shoot as close to natural light as possible (this is why an f2.8 lens is important) and add a tiny boost of light with the flash.

Practice in your home: set the camera in manual mode (let's say 1/60th, ISO 400, f4), put your flash in automatic TTL mode, point it at the ceiling, and take some test photos. Next, try bouncing off a white wall. Experiment with angles and distances. Try shooting off the wall behind you or to your side. I've actually shot my flash past a subject and had it hit the far wall and come back at them (the result was beautiful).

Photography is all about the lighting. As you are learning photography, seek to become a student of light.

Learn what the lens's aperture setting means. Learn about the ISO setting on your camera (the film or digital camera sensor's sensitivity). Learn about shutter speeds (how long the shutter is open). Discover how those three work together to control exposure. I don't have room to explain how each works and relates together, but I will in the eBook.

You need to discover and learn how a wide-open aperture will give small depth of focus – yet allows much more light into the lens. Find out what shutter speeds you can safely hand-hold at (the general rule is that the shutter speed should be similar to your lens: 1/60th is about the fastest you would shoot a 50mm lens at; 1/200th for a 200mm lens).

Try to shoot with as much natural light as possible - which is what the guests at the wedding saw and experienced. When indoors, learn how to bounce the flash off of white (or light-colored) walls and ceilings. Learn to stand near a wall and "hit" it with your flash.

Please do not walk around with your flash pointed directly at subjects and blast them!

Composition Adjustments

There is a reason why cheap cameras are called "Point and Shoots". Actually, that title can apply to expensive cameras as well. The idea is that a person holds the camera to their eye and pushes a button; the result, a beautiful photo? If that was all it took, people wouldn't hire professional wedding photographers and you wouldn't be reading this PDF...

When taking wedding photos, you need to be thinking and working. When is the action going to be occurring, where will it be occurring, and who is the most important person the action is happening to?

Every time you lift the camera to your eye: scan the composition. Look around the edges.

Is the timing right to click the shutter? Are people smiling? Do they look natural? Sometimes it is best to take a quick shot of a particular group or setting and then wait to see if an even better one can be taken.

Is the composition a quality composition? Are you cutting off feet? Is the image crooked? What is in the background? Is the image too busy? Can you see faces?
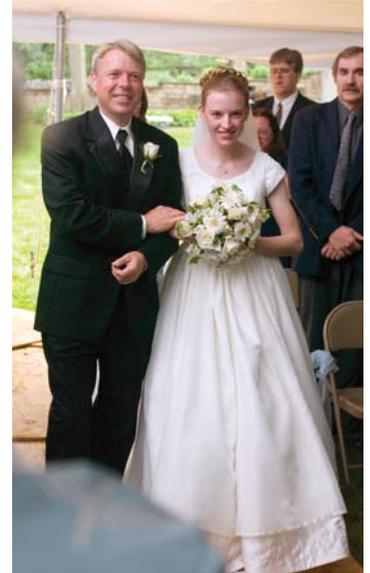
It was raining, and the wedding was being held in a tent. First off: notice the lighting. If you wonder how such beautiful, gentle, directional light can be achieved without using a multi-flash setup – turn back to page one and read about bounce flash. (all I used was my on-camera Nikon Speedlight)

The wedding coordinator was holding the bride's train so that it didn't drag on the muddy ground. The first shot I took was a quick one so that I "had the image." I was watching the composition and noticed the wedding coordinator was VERY obvious in the first photo. I moved to my left to compose the next image.I couldn't move too far because there were guests next to me and in front of me, and while I ended up with a blurred shoulder alongside the left edge of the image, I'll gladly take that over the wedding coordinator's head in-between the bride and her father!

Same group of guests. The above photos took less than a minute to shoot. The one on the left has a terrible composition (it looks like a snap-shot: nothing seems to be "happening", there is no clearly-defined subject, the group wasn't caught at a good moment, and several heads were blocked). The one on the right has a much better composition and focus on the two subjects whose faces are visible. Sure, i could have caught an even better moment when the group broke into laughter, but notice the compositional difference between these two quick snapshots.

Details Matter!

Couples typically spend months planning their wedding. Hours upon hours of planning goes into the day. If you've planned a wedding you know what I mean. Every little detail is important and likely involved decisions. When wedding day arrives: everything seems to speed by in a blur. Part of my job as a wedding photographer is to help them remember the details of their wedding day. Every single photo on this page was lit with bounce flash. Each image took, on average, about 5-10 (no more than 15) seconds to create. From the back of the wedding dress, to the wedding cake, to the wedding cake topper, or the bridal bouquet that was set down for a moment, all are small details that are incredibly important!

The Focus of the Day

Never lose site of the #1 priority of the day: the Bride and the Groom. It is their wedding day. If some formal photos were scheduled to start at 11:00, and the bride isn't ready yet: so what?

The event of the day is the wedding and your job is to record that event. The event of the day is not a photo shoot with you at the helm.

If the Bride and Groom want extra formal photos that aren't on the list: go for it. If, while driving from the ceremony to the reception site, they want to stop and go for a walk in a flower garden: let them do it (and, of course, without getting in the way, photograph them as they walk).

The Bride and Groom have plenty of family and friends who will be making requests or demands of them at the wedding. You, as the photographer, should be one who doesn't. Sure, there are a bunch of details to work through ahead of time that will help you get better photos (I have a whole chapter that will cover that in the eBook), but you want to go about it such that it doesn't even seem like you are making requests. You are there to serve them and record THEIR day.

I have fetched water and/or punch for thirsty couples. I have grabbed napkins for them when they were cutting the cake. I have carried luggage. I have held flower bouquets. I have gone to get people for photos (usually, though, I try to send someone else). To me, I am at the wedding to bless the couple. And if they need help, I'm not going to fuss or complain that my job is to take pictures, I'm going to help them.

Also, during the day, constantly evaluate the photos your are taking. At the end of the day, you should have the most photos of the bride and groom, next would be their family (especially parents) and the wedding party, followed by friends and guests. Do you know how badly you will feel if you find out you never took a picture of the bride's grandparents? Or, what if you only end up with one photo of the groom's father? That probably explains why, immediately following the "send off", I usually turn around and get photos of each set of parents. I want to make doubly-sure I have them properly represented in the photos.

Always go with the flow of the wedding. Document the day. Work hard – and think hard. Don't be in the way! Accommodate everyone to the best of your ability (as long as it doesn't impact the couple's photos).

After the formal photos, Matthew and Kaitlyn slipped into the house for a snack. While they were in the room together, I shot some photos through the french doors. Who cared that "the schedule" called for them to go immediately from the formal photos to the reception tent - it was their day and the guests could wait a minute or two.

When it was time for the send off, Matthew was tired and sat down. Kaitlyn soon joined him. The schedule said it was time for the send off, but, again, who cared? When the schedule is being deviated from, I try to stay near the bride and groom (but not in the way) and keep taking photos.

ISO 400, 1/60th, f2.8, flash bounced off wall to my left, photographed from a landing above the couple.

Top Three Photos of the Day

Before each of my weddings I will ask the couple (each one individually): "If you were to have only three photos from your wedding, what three images would they be?" I believe I started asking that question with the first wedding I did: I was nervous, and figured that if I could find out what three photos were most important to both the bride and the groom (a potential of six, overall), and could nail those images – I would be on the right path and perhaps they wouldn't be as disappointed with all the rest of my photos.

I now could not imagine photographing a wedding without first finding out from the couple what their "top 3" photos are. Sometimes they'll have trouble coming up with them. I'll help them out by saying "These will be the photos that, twenty years from now, you'll have hanging on the wall or on your desk. Yes, there will be a photo album full of images – but these will be the 3 that you'll remember. Don't your parents have one or two, perhaps three photos from their wedding that are on the wall somewhere?"

Once you find out the photos: FOCUS ON THOSE. Make sure you nail them. Take extra shots to make sure you have them covered. Practice for those images. Memorize those 6 shots.

A lot of times there will be overlap between the two lists, so you may not even have 6.

The standard list is usually this: us together, one with my family, and one with her family. Yes, very "traditional" – but, if that's what they want, that's what they want. You'll have to go over and above on photojournalistic "bonus" shots throughout the day to give them photojournalistic equivalents of each of those.

Yet, I've had a number of surprises over the years. One bride's top image (which she had not mentioned to me earlier in our conversations!) – a photo of **him** as **she** came down the aisle. I was very glad I asked, because, while I usually do turn and grab a quick shot of the **groom** as the **bride** comes down the aisle, my main focus is usually the bride. And at that wedding, he didn't disappoint. He went from smiling broadly, to tears, to smiling, as she came down the aisle.

What are a few of the special moments I watch for? I have a much larger list I'm working on in the eBook, but here are some to get you started: the couple holding hands (excellent close-up shot of the hands). The way they look at each other (good to shoot with a telephoto focusing on just one of them). Him whispering something to her (I like to capture this photojournalistically during the day, but during the formal photos I will almost always, at some point, ask him to whisper something to her – I'll often have to prompt her to look down and maybe close her eyes as not all brides will instinctively do that). Also, make sure to capture those few moments when they are together immediately after the wedding ceremony.

On Kaitlyn's "top 3" were photos of her and her little sister "flower girl."

After helping her sister put the sash on her dress (which I photographed as a series), they shared an impromptu hug. Bounce flash.

Touching noses is almost always cute for a bride and her flower girl. Natural lighting in open shade (no flash).

Special Request Photos

As I was finishing the formal photos of Kaitlyn (by herself), I asked if she wanted any other photos than the ones we had done. She said "no", but that she hoped Matthew would carry her for a few photos of them together, although she wasn't sure he would want to. I never want to be bossy or controlling, and if someone doesn't want to do a photo, I'm not about to pressure them into it. However, when I know the bride or a groom wants a photo, I'll do my best to accommodate.

Later on, as we were doing photos of the bride and groom together, I asked Matthew if he would be willing to carry Kaitlyn for a few photos. He said "absolutely!" – and we ended up with some fun shots.

To give you an idea of how I like to be practical in helping others (and what I'm filling the eBook with), I'll share some more details about the formal photo location at Matthew & Kaitlyn's wedding. The wedding was held at the bride's family home. The yard and landscaping were beautiful. The rehearsal was Friday afternoon, and I spent some time walking around the yard looking for the ideal location for the formal photos. Since the wedding would be during the day, I was looking for something shaded with a simple, but attractive, background.

The wedding would be in the lawn (near where I was standing), but would be facing away from the house.

The front driveway was nice, but would have been splotchy with sun and I wasn't seeing many clearly defined, simple backgrounds.

The backyard had good shade and the bushes seemed promising for a clean background. Yet I didn't want to be too close to the background as it's easier to blur a slightly distant background.

The location I chose: I stood near the tree on the right and shot towards the two plastic chairs (which were, of course, moved on wedding day). This is where the series at right was photographed.

When possible, always try to shoot "series" of images.

Learn Lightroom

When I originally wrote this it was Photoshop. Times have changes. Now it's Lightroom. The key point is this: there is often MUCH that can – or needs to – be done to a digital image to "perfect" it. have had images that were headed for the "reject" folder that, based on a few minutes in Photoshop or a few clicks in Lightroom, became a great-looking photos (see images at left). Learn how to post-process your photos.

You will need to invest money and time into your software tools. Learn how to use them. I'll have a lot of resources in the eBook about post-processing images, and there are tons of resources online, and in print, for learning digital image processing.

Develop a workflow for handling wedding images. I don't have time to spend polishing 3,000 individual images after a wedding, yet, at the same time, one of the benefits my clients receive from me are print-ready photos. Sure, they aren't album-ready, but they do look good. Some photographers only go through and post-process 100-150 images for the album. You'll have to decide on your workflow and how much time you spend polishing images. My advice is that, especially when starting out, invest extra time in post-processing ALL of the images from your wedding. You'll learn more about post-processing, quicker, and the photos will look better.

I put James and Sara in the shade and tried to use some on-camera flash to balance them with the sunlight. I hadn't learned the proper technique that I know now (and will share in the eBook) and the photo didn't work. The result (similar to the one above) wasn't good. I almost moved the image straight to the "reject" folder... Instead, I began brightening it (A LOT) and then changed the Hue. In the end, an almost-rejected image became one of my favorite wedding photos with a timeless look.

This is how the camera captured the scene. No flash was used because I was trying for a semi-silhouette effect.

When post-processing I took a few seconds to adjust the contrast, darken the shadows, add some color, and tilt it.

This was the original image. I accidentally used my "inside-the-rain-tent" settings (except for my f-stop): Flash White Balance, f/7.6, 1/80th, ISO 620.

Post-processing I set the proper White Balance (using her dress as the color sample), and tweaked the overall brightness and color.

Learn Lightroom! (continued)

Incorrect White Balance.

Correct White Balance.

White Balance is **critical**. Your customers may not be able to look at a photo and say "Hey, the White Balance is a little off in this image!" But, it is something they will unconsciously (without knowing exactly what it is) notice about a photo. Having quality color is something that sets professionals apart from amateurs. How many professional wedding photographers display images with bad color?

The image as recorded by the camera. Kaitlyn was looking out the window at guests arriving for the wedding.

In Photoshop, I adjusted the color as well as the contrast (through the Levels command). All the while being careful to not blow out the highlight details in the dress.

Unrelated to Photoshop... At each wedding I always try to get a photo of someone looking at the ring. The image above was a quick shot: I wish I would have been a bit more to the left; however, the guest only looked at the ring for a quick moment, and I was glad I managed to get this shot!

Thank You!

Thank you for signing up to be notified when my eBook is released. I hope these tips have been helpful for you. If you have enjoyed these few pages of tips you will definitely want to purchase my eBook when it is available. When will it be released? I don't know - that's why, by joining the email list, you'll be notified.

If your friends would like a copy of these tips, please have them visit my web site where they can also sign up to receive a copy of these tips: http://www.christophermaxwell.com/wedding-photography-tips.htm

If these tips have been helpful to you and you have a web site, I would be very grateful if you would link to the above page on my site!

May God bless you, and your photographic endeavors!

Christopher Maxwell

One final piece of advice: NEVER QUIT LEARNING! Always press on in your photography. Do not become complacent. Even if you just took the best photo of your life, look at it and ask yourself "How could I have improved this photo?"

Always be willing to work hard on your photography. Don't take the easy route. If taking stunning photos was easy, everyone would be able to do it!

Practice, practice, and practice some more. Especially when it comes to wedding photos! Enlist your friends, relatives, parents, siblings – ANYONE – to be models for you. Practice your lighting, posing, and photojournalistic coverage.

If you are like me, I guarantee you will never finish a wedding and say, "Wow! I wish I hadn't spent all that time preparing for this wedding!"

As you start photographing weddings: you must have the mindset that, because you are starting out, you're going to need to work 5 times as hard as any other person would when preparing for, or shooting, weddings!

Remind yourself that: **when it comes to weddings, MISTAKES ARE NOT AN OPTION**.

It is OK to feel pressure when photographing a wedding. Use the nervous energy to keep yourself on your toes.

Improve your photojournalistic skills. You should be able to walk into any building (home, business, or church) and take well-lit photos using your camera, your external flash, and the available light. Bouncing off walls, ceilings, or using a diffuser. Practice, practice, practice. Get permission and then take photos at your next church function. Practice bounce-flash in your home, and then see if you can do the same at your friend's house. **If you can't walk into a home and take well-lit photos, how are you going to photograph the bride and her family on wedding day if they happen to be getting ready at their home?**

When I compare wedding photographers to amateurs, I see that amateurs generally have these three advantages in their favor: a tremendous desire to improve, a love of photography, and time to invest. To be honest, the professional photographers I know that are really good are those that have a desire to keep improving and love what they do!

After reading these tips – don't just think "Nice advice!" Get your camera out, go back through everything page-by-page, and shoot some images!!