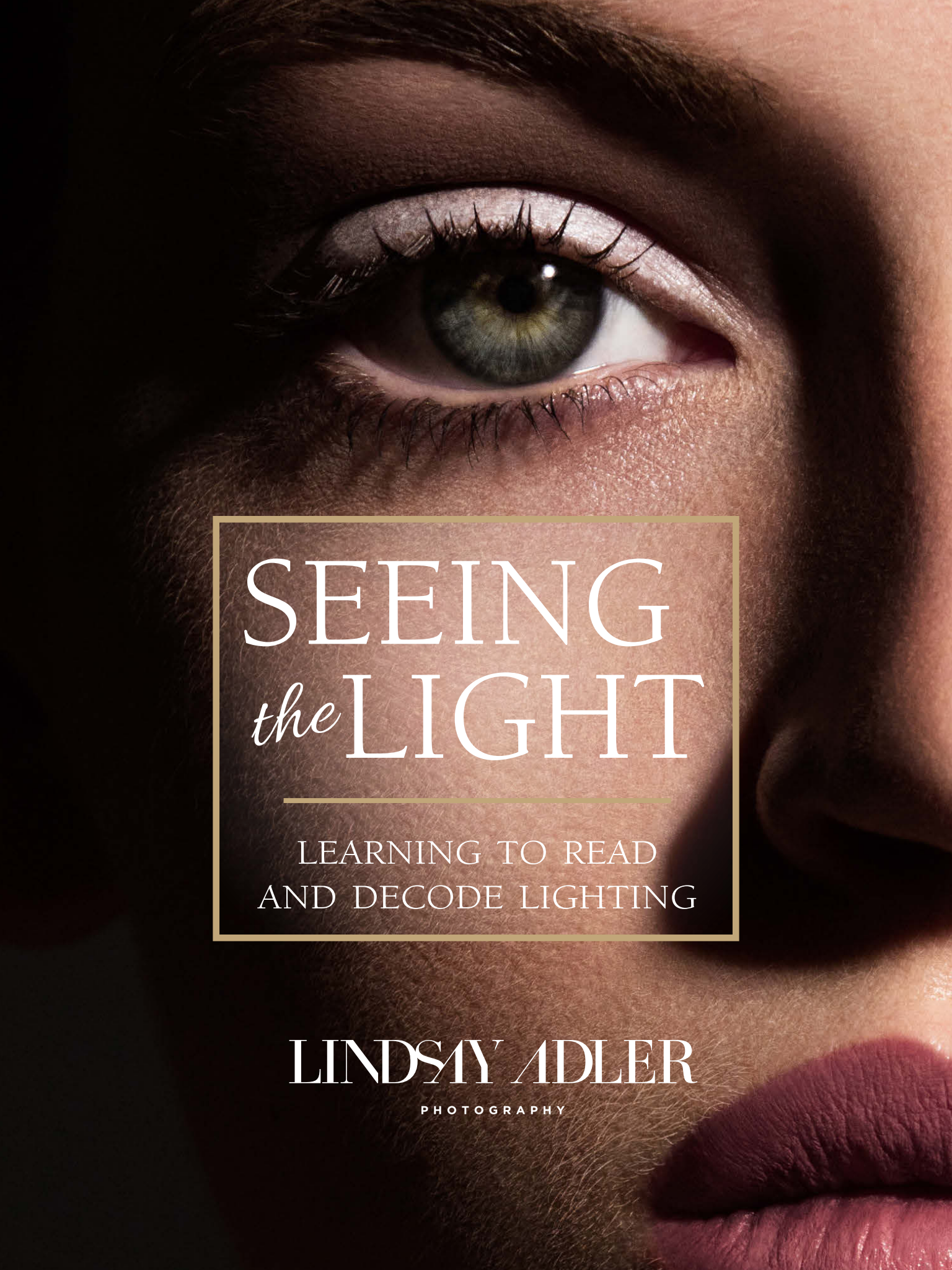


A close-up, artistic portrait of a woman's face. The focus is on her right eye, which is a striking green color. Her lips are painted a deep red. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows on the left side of her face and forehead. A thin gold border frames the central text area.

SEEING *the* LIGHT

LEARNING TO READ
AND DECODE LIGHTING

LINDSAY ADLER

PHOTOGRAPHY

INTRODUCTION

BY LINDSAY ADLER

I was a professional photographer for many years before I truly learned to see the light. No matter what classes I had taken, it just didn't click. Sure, I could tell when there were really bad shadows in a subject's eyes or when the light was grossly overexposed, but that's about it.

Furthermore, the stunning images in magazines were a complete mystery to me. I marveled at the light with no idea how it was done. After many years I could eventually look at those same images and piece together how they were lit, what modifiers were used and more. Eventually I learned to see, read and decode the beautiful language of light that I live by today. Light really is a language!

How did I learn? I learned through a lot of time, a lot of mistakes, and a lot of practice. I spent endless hours in the studio testing different modifiers. I moved the lights around. I added and took away lights, played with reflectors, and much more. I created beautiful photographs and horrible photographs – both teaching me important lessons. As I learned more about lighting, I tried to determine the light used in every photograph I saw. Whether a celebrity portrait in a magazine, fashion editorial, or poster on the subway, I'd study the image to test my knowledge and see if I could deconstruct the lighting setup.

This guide is intended to help you save time, and move you on your path to learning the language of light. I want to help you read the light – to look at a photograph, study it, and determine how it was lit.

Certainly time, mistakes and a lot of practice will help. After reviewing and learning from this guide, I hope you will be addicted to studying every beautifully lit image you see, while decoding how it was lit and the tools used to do so!

Start here, and when you learn this new language, you'll be amazed at how your understanding of photography transforms. Will you always be able to tell how every image is lit? No, but this is certainly a great start.

When looking at a photograph, there are three main elements to study that help you begin to decode the lighting recipe—catchlights, shadows, and highlights. Before we look at these three essential elements, we should first cover some key terminology for describing light as well as some essential 'rules' of light, to help me better explain some core lighting concepts.

Lindsay Adler

CONTENTS

06 Key Terms and Rules of Lighting

- 07 Contrast
- 07 Key Light
- 08 Fill Light
- 08 Rim Light
- 09 Background Light
- 09 Quality of Light
- 10 Specular Highlights
- 10 Catchlight
- 11 Direction of Light
- 12 Short Light
- 12 Broad Light
- 13 A Look at Rembrandt Light

15 Lighting Patterns

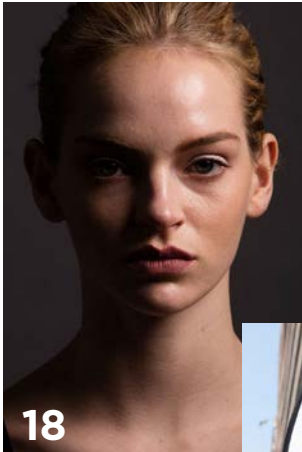
- 16 Paramount
- 17 Loop
- 18 Rembrandt
- 19 Split

20 The Science of Light

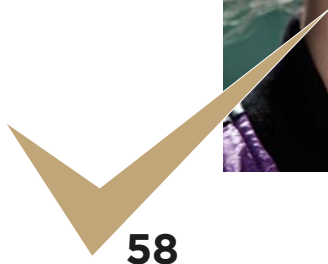
24 Learn to Read the Light

26 Study the Catchlights

- 27 Number of Catchlights
- 28 Placement of Catchlights
- 30 Reflectors
- 31 Shape of Catchlights
- 33 Size of Light Source
- 34 Natural Light
- 34 Irregular Catchlights



CONTENTS *continued*



36 Examine the Shadows

- 37 Direction of Shadows
- 40 Length of Shadows
- 43 Depth of Shadows
- 44 Fill Light
- 45 Reflectors
- 46 Edges of Shadows

49 Highlights and Rim Lights

- 50 Number of Rim Lights
- 51 Rim Light Modifiers, Sources
- 52 Rim Light Placement
- 54 Natural Rim Light
- 55 Background Light

56 Seeing the Natural Light

58 Checklist

60 Test Yourself

- 77 Takeaways



LINDSAY ADLER

PHOTOGRAPHY

lindsayadlerphotography.com



Lindsay Adler and the Profoto D1

"My job is to create high impact images that grab your attention. Light is an essential tool to captivate and draw people in. When creating memorable photographs, I grab my Profoto D1s. They are extremely intuitive, powerful, reliable and let me focus on creating impact. The versatility of these strobes paired with Profoto light shapers provides me endless flexibility and control to bring my vision to life".

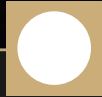
- Lindsay Adler

Learn more at www.profoto.com/us

 **Profoto**[®]
The light shaping company™

KEY TERMS

AND “RULES” OF LIGHTING



In traditional photography education, you'll see a lot of terminology used to define lighting patterns and qualities of light. You'll hear things like “soft light,” “specular highlights,” “rim lights” and much more. Knowing these terms doesn't necessarily make you a better photographer, but it can help you describe what you are seeing and trying to achieve with your light. I'd like to take a moment here to discuss just a couple key terms that will come up within our discussions of reading the light. These terms will help you better understand what I'm referring to as we analyze the light, and you can refer back to this segment to clarify definitions as we continue in our lessons.

CONTRAST • KEY LIGHT
FILL LIGHT • RIM LIGHT
BACKGROUND LIGHT
QUALITY OF LIGHT
SPECULAR HIGHLIGHTS
CATCHLIGHT
DIRECTION OF LIGHT
SHORT LIGHT • BROAD LIGHT
SHORT vs BROAD REMBRANDT



CONTRAST

*high contrast**low contrast*

The range of tones between pure white and pure black (or between highlights and shadows) in your photograph. Low contrast images have limited variation between pure white and pure black, and often exist right in the middle areas. High contrast images have deeper blacks and brighter white areas. There is no right or wrong for a high contrast vs low contrast image, there are just two different types of photograph, and of course there is a wide range in between.

KEY LIGHT

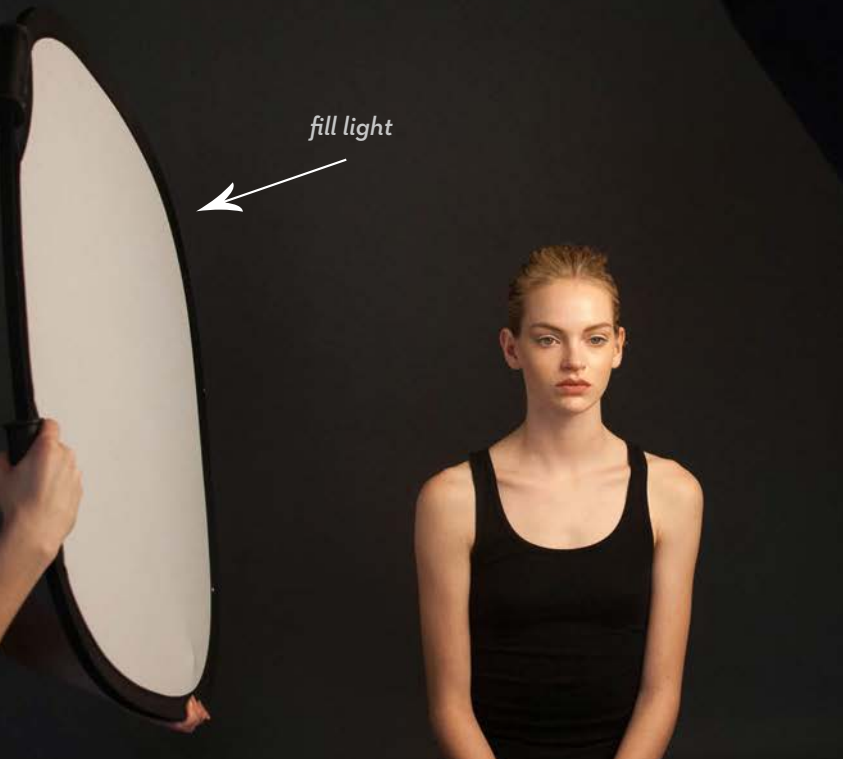
Also known as the main light, the key light is the principal light source in a scene that makes up the primary illumination on the subject. Typically the exposure of the image is based upon the key light. A key light usually sets the overall tone of quality of light and mood in a scene. A key or main light could be a studio strobe, the sun, a window or a variety of other light sources.

*key light*

Profoto
Softbox RFI 3' Octa

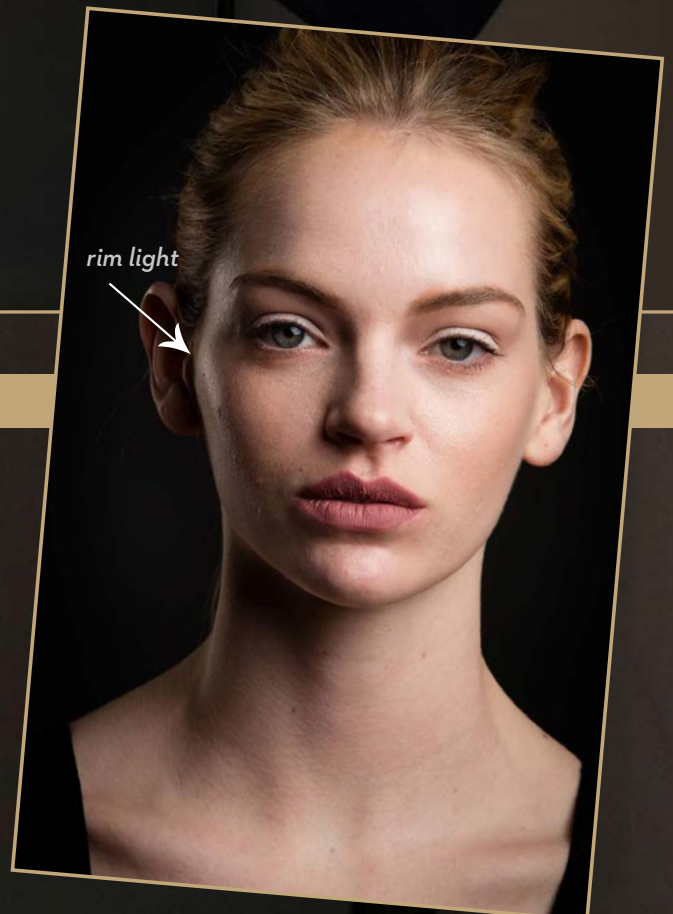
FILL LIGHT

A fill light is used to control the shadows by filling in or softening these shadow areas. A fill light could be a reflector, strobe or other lighting tool.



RIM LIGHT

Typically a back light source creating a highlight on the subject (may be jaw, hair, shoulder, or other part of body). This highlight creates an outline of light on part of the subject, often used to draw attention to an area or create separation from the background.

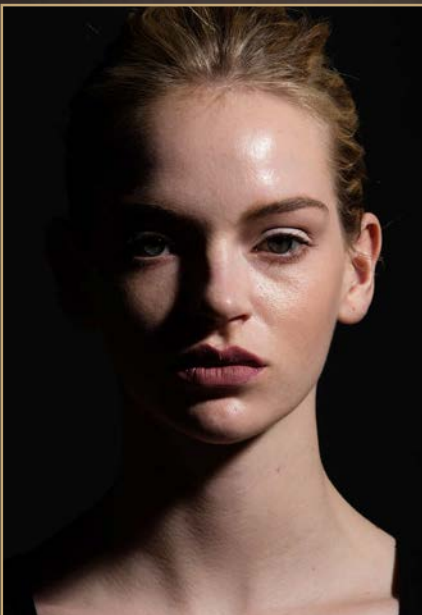


BACKGROUND LIGHT

A light used to illuminate the background behind a subject. This is generally used to create visual interest or separation, so that the subject does not blend in with the background.

*background light*

QUALITY OF LIGHT

*hard light*

The perceived attributes of light, whether “hard light” or “soft light”.

Hard light has shadows with crisp, sharp edges.

Soft light has more diffused shadows with a longer transition between highlight and shadow. Of course, there is hard light, soft light, and many varieties in between!

*soft light*

SPECULAR HIGHLIGHTS

*specular highlights**detail: glasses and jewelry*

The bright spot that appears on shiny objects, which is a reflection of the light source. This could be a highlight on a metallic object like jewelry or glasses, or even a very bright highlight on a forehead. In this sample photo, the highlight on the ring and the bright highlights on the glasses are the specular highlights.

CATCHLIGHT

A light source creates a specular highlight (reflection of light) in the subject's eye. There may be multiple catchlights in the eyes, or none at all depending on the angle of light. Typically including catchlights in the eyes is considered preferable to no catchlights since they bring 'life' to the eyes and subject.



DIRECTION OF LIGHT →

Where is the light coming from in the frame? The direction of light dictates the direction of highlights and shadows on the subject created by the location of the light source. A light can be placed in any position around the subject. Direction of light should be considered on a vertical axis (up and down), and also 360 degrees around the subject. The further the light is off-axis to the camera and subject, the more shadows will be created.



flat light

A very low and centered light will reduce shadows, often referred to as flat light.



dimensional light

A very high light, far to the side, will create a multitude of shadows, referred to as dimensional light. Again, neither is right or wrong, but rather used to communicate different things with our visual language. →



area highlighted here is short light

SHORT LIGHT

SHORT LIGHT is a lighting scenario where the side of the face closest to the camera has less light than the far side. Another way to describe it is that the shadow side of the face is toward the camera. Because the light is illuminating what appears to be a narrower area of the face (the side turned away), this light is 'shorter' than broad light.



area highlighted here is broad light

BROAD LIGHT

BROAD LIGHT is a lighting scenario where the side of the face closest to the camera receives the most light. Shadows are falling away from the camera's view.

▽ A LOOK AT REMBRANDT LIGHT

Let's take a look here comparing two samples of Rembrandt Light.

As we will talk about in the next section, Rembrandt light is when there is just a small triangle of light beneath one of the subject's eye. This happens when you move the light to the side so much that the shadow of the nose meets the shadow of the cheek.



broad light situation, rembrandt light (triangle)

In the previous broad light example, the side of the face closest to the camera is fully illuminated, and the small triangle of light for Rembrandt is away from the camera.



short light situation, rembrandt light (triangle)

However, in the previous short light situation, the side of the face closest to the camera has the triangle for Rembrandt. Here's how I remember it: *The area of the face that is illuminated in short light appears shorter or smaller to the camera.*

The keywords we've just discussed aren't intended to make lighting more complicated and you don't necessarily need to memorize them all. However, they will become useful tools as you describe light and learn more about it.



A DRIVE THAT'S JUST YOUR TYPE

Introducing the G-DRIVE® mobile USB-C™

G-DRIVE mobile USB-C is the fast portable drive featuring a USB Type-C port geared towards users looking for speed, a sleek design and Time Machine® compatibility.

Inside its thin, beveled aluminum case is a high-performance 7200 RPM hard drive with versatile USB Type-C connectivity for up to 1TB of video and photo files.

Find out more at g-technology.com.



WORKS WITH TIME MACHINE®,
PLUG-AND-PLAY SETUP ON MAC OS



THIN, BEVELED ALUMINUM CASE, IN
GOLD, SPACE GRAY OR SILVER



HIGH-PERFORMANCE 7200 RPM
HARD DRIVE



REVERSIBLE
USB-C CONNECTOR



LIGHTING PATTERNS

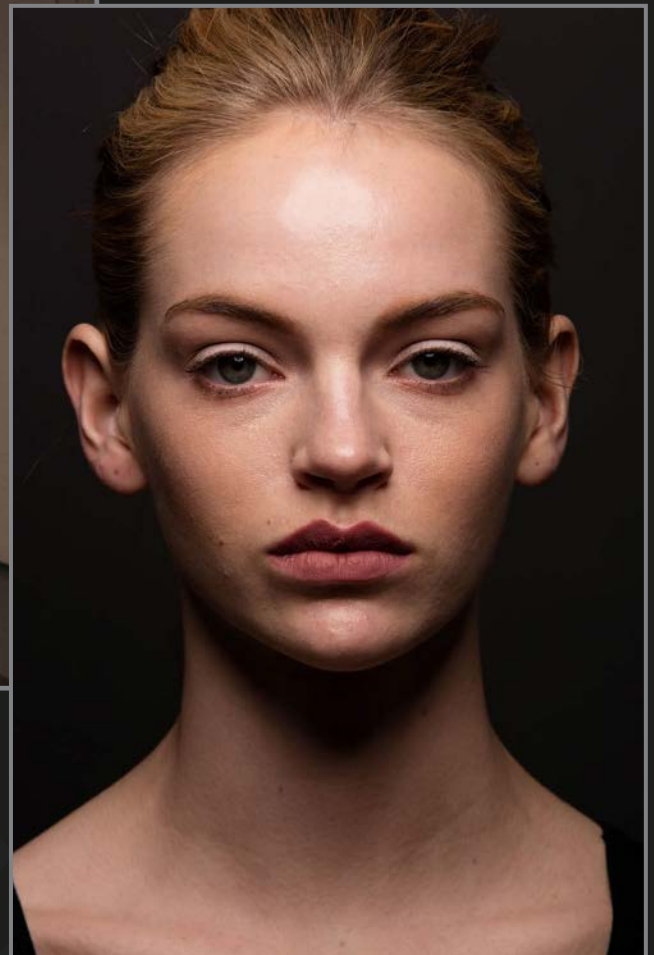
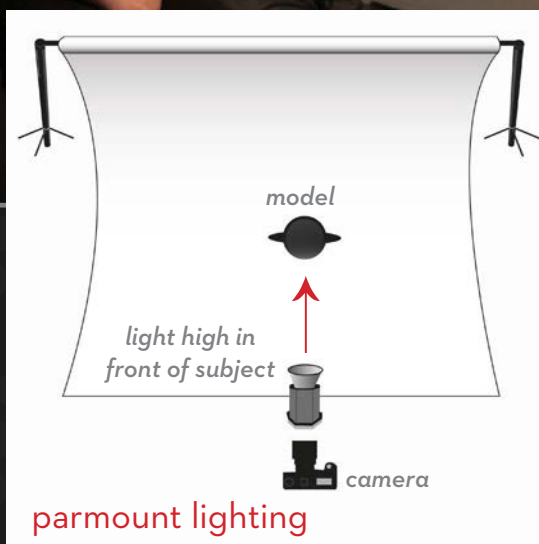
To help better discuss light and lighting setups, photographers often use terms to describe certain patterns of shadows on a subject's *face*. If the subject turns, *the lighting pattern will change*. Again, knowing these terms does not automatically make you a better photographer.

Instead, it will help you to describe what you see. Don't fixate on these definitions too much, but they may be useful as you try to decode and describe the light in a photograph.

PARAMOUNT



The shadow is directly beneath the subject's nose, creating an even and centered shadow. This is sometimes referred to as 'butterfly lighting' because the shadow at times may resemble the shape of a butterfly.



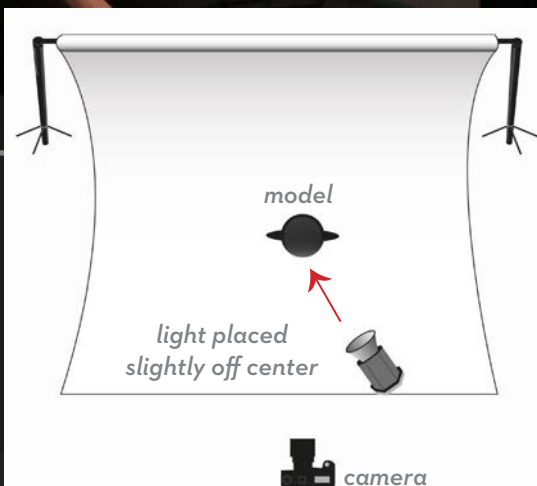
butterfly shape shadow under nose

LOOP

The light is placed slightly off center so that the shadow created by the nose is a 'loop' shape. The size of the loop shadows may vary, depending on placement of the light.



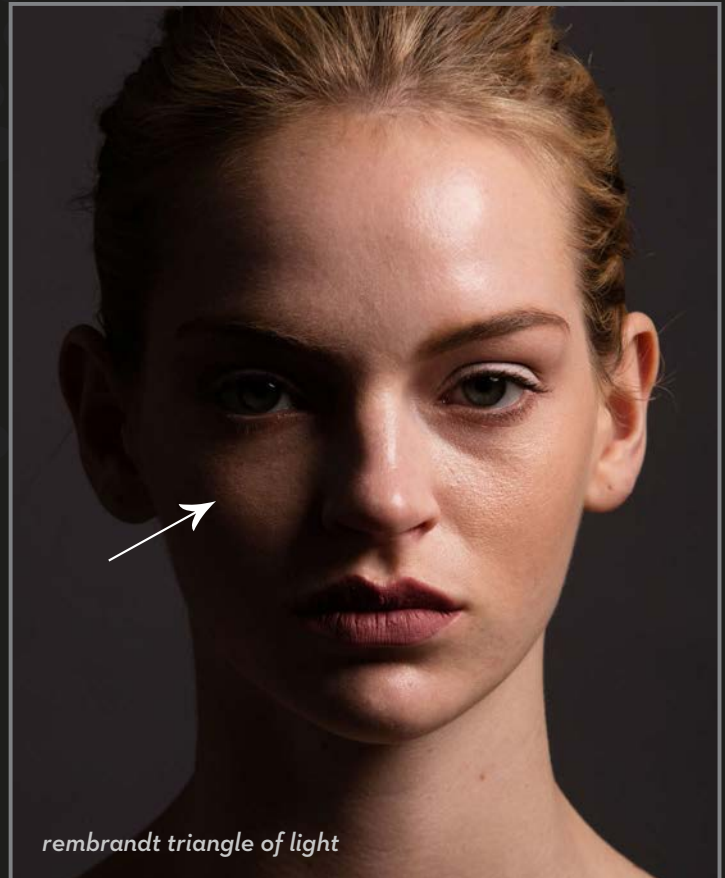
*loop shape shadow
under nose*



loop lighting

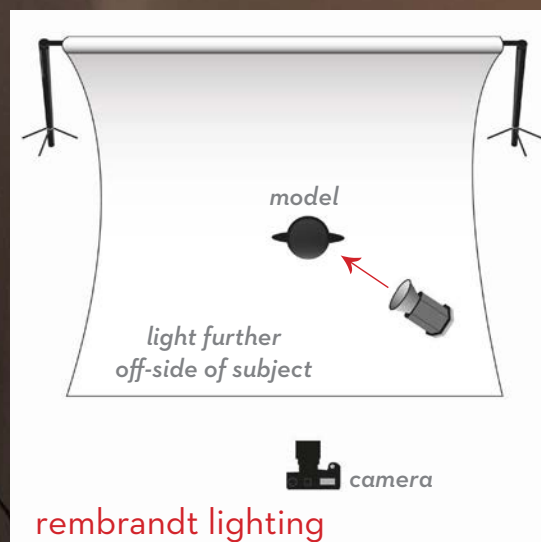
REMBRANDT

The shadow from the nose meets the shadow from the cheek, creating a triangle of light beneath the eye. As you may know, this lighting pattern gets its name from the painter who so often utilized this light in his work. This type of shadow is created when the light is even further off to the side, creating longer shadows.



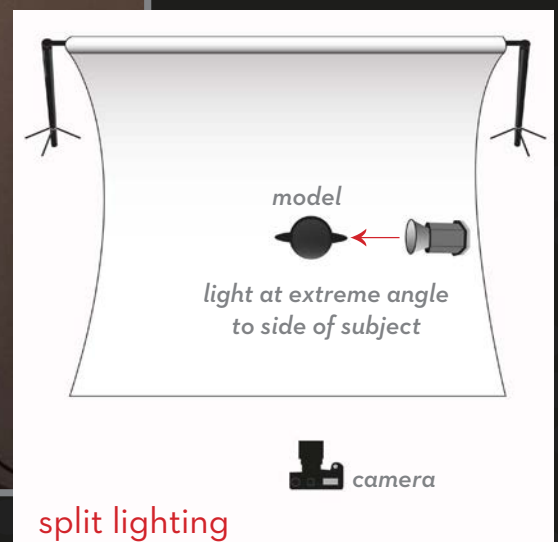
rembrandt triangle of light

*light further off to side,
creating longer shadows*



SPLIT

Half of the face is illuminated, while the other half is in shadow. The light on the face is 'split' between darkness and light. This is caused when the light is at an extreme angle to the side of the subject.



THE SCIENCE OF LIGHT

without getting “science-y”

There are many rules of physics in photography including the “Inverse Square Law”, the “Law of Reflection”, and many more. But don’t worry; this is not a science lesson at all. Often photographers are intimidated and bogged down by the science of their process.

That being said, there is one rule that will become useful as

you learn to read the light, and I’d like to take a minute to share it.

*“The larger the light source is
relative to the subject,
the softer the light.
The smaller the light source is
relative to the subject,
the harder the light.”*

THE SCIENCE OF LIGHT

Think of it this way. The sun is huge. MASSIVE. But relative to your subject outside, it is quite small because it is far away. Because of this, it creates a very harsh light source.



Now, take a big shoot-through umbrella between the subject and the sun. When the sun hits that umbrella, now the umbrella becomes the light source. Because of this, it is much bigger RELATIVE to the subject and therefore creates much softer light. Sure, the sun is bigger in actual size, but the umbrella is relatively big due to its distance from the subject.



smaller light source, the light



larger light source, softer light



Let's take a look at this in practice.

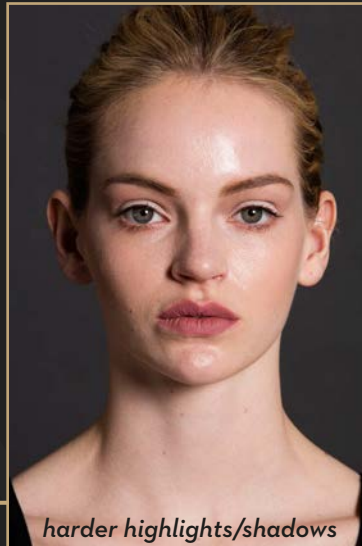
Compare the light from the two soft boxes here: first, a 3 ft octabox and then a 4x6 soft box. The light from the large softbox is, in fact, much softer.



3x6 octabox vs.
4x6 softbox



Now, suppose I bring the smaller softbox very very close. The light now becomes much softer as well. Because the light is closer to the subject, its relative size is larger and therefore the light softer. It is all about relative size!



*octabox farther vs.
octabox closer*

So why does this rule matter to you as you try to read the light? Think of it this way. If the light is very soft on a subject's face (meaning subtle transition from shadow to highlight), then the light is relatively big to the subject. This could be created by either a large softbox OR a smaller softbox very very close. If the light is harsh, it is likely a smaller light source or a midsized light source further away.



As you study the light, the quality of light will help you make judgments on the modifiers used as well as the relative size of the light compared to your subject.



LEARN to READ the LIGHT

Now we will begin our journey to learn to read the light. We are going to examine three main elements that will reveal a great deal about the light in a scene. In the end you will have gathered a checklist of what to study in each image to learn to see the light. We will also examine the catchlights, shadows and highlights in photographs, and how to study them carefully to reveal the many secrets they tell.

Let's get started!

The SpiderPro Camera Holster

The most ergonomic way to carry a professional camera.



LINDSAY
ADLER
SPIDER AMBASSADOR

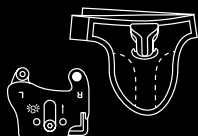
20% OFF

Use coupon code

LINDSAYADLER20

at spiderholster.com to
claim your 20% discount
on all Spider gear.

Promo code valid for one use only. Expires January 1, 2017.
Not good for sale items. Cannot be combined with other
promotions or discounts.



**SPIDERPRO
HOLSTER**

Shoot from the hip
and free yourself from
camera straps!

SPIDER
CAMERA HOLSTER

SEE OUR COMPLETE PRODUCT LINE AT

SPIDERHOLSTER.COM



Study the Catchlights

One of the first steps I take in reading the light is to examine the catchlights a subject's eyes. Catchlights can reveal a lot about the placement of the main light, the modifiers used, and any fill lights in the scene. Let's take a look at what you should analyze in order to begin unraveling the mystery of lighting in a photograph.

NUMBER OF CATCHLIGHTS

How many catchlights (bright highlights) do you see in the eye? Is there just one main catchlight, or are there multiples? This will give you insight into if there is just a main light, or if there is also a fill light or other light sources in the scene.



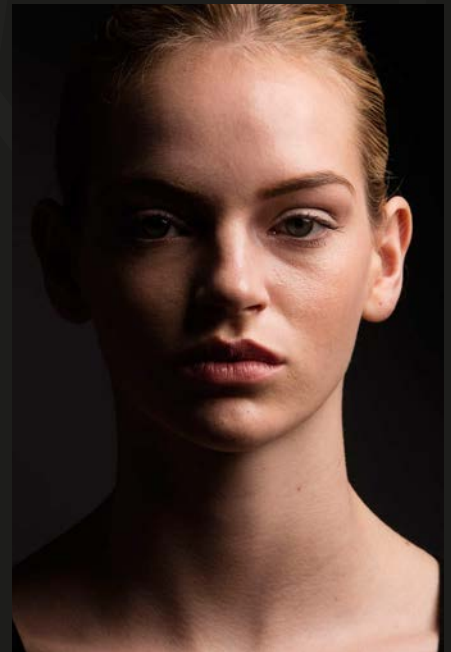
In the photograph in this example, I see two bright catchlights in the eyes. This tells me that there are two lights illuminating the face. I'll need to study closer to learn more.

PLACEMENT OF CATCHLIGHTS



Where are the catchlights located in the eye? Are they centered, very high up (barely visible), far off to one side?

A catchlight's location can reveal important clues about the placement of the light source.



light source high and most centered

For example, if the catchlight is far off to the right of the eye with a subject facing straight on, then the light source is to the right of the frame as well. →



light source far off to right



If the catchlight is centered but very high in the eye (barely visible), this may mean that the light is high relative to the subject's face. In some instances when there is no top catchlight visible, this means that the light was so high (or the subject's chin so low) that that catchlight could not be seen.



Or perhaps you see an instance like this (shown right), where you only see a catchlight in the bottom of the eye. This may mean that there was no main light above OR that the main light was so high that a catchlight wasn't visible. This lower catchlight could be another light source OR a reflector bouncing light back into the subject's face.



REFLECTORS

Sometimes you may see a highlight in the eye that is NOT from a main light source or strobe. Often irregular in shape, these catchlights may be caused by reflectors - often silver, white, or perhaps another type of reflection. With practice you will learn to identify catchlights from reflectors.

Be aware that a catchlight from a white reflector may be very dim and subtle in the eye, and may be difficult to spot. They do not create a specular highlight (pure white) and instead result in a dull reflection.



white reflector



silver reflector



octabox



SHAPE OF CATCHLIGHTS

One of my favorite tricks for studying catchlights is that they often reveal the modifier being used on the subject. While you cannot always see catchlights clearly in a photograph, when visible, they help uncover a major part of the mystery of lighting. Through years of practice I've come to identify the shapes of several common modifier catchlights. You can see them here below:

MODIFIERS USED:



octabox



softbox 3x4



beauty dish



softbox 4x6



silver umbrella



STUDY THE CATCHLIGHTS



white umbrella



strip softbox



large umbrella with diffusion



barehead



zoom reflector



telezoom reflector



snoot



shoot through umbrella



SIZE OF LIGHT SOURCE

The size of a catchlight in the eyes may also tell you about the light source. For example, if you see a small catchlight it either means the light/modifier was very small (perhaps like a small zoom reflector) or that the light source was very far away. Similarly, a larger catchlight like a softbox either means there was a larger softbox utilized OR that a smaller softbox was brought relatively close to your subject. While observation of size may not be the most revealing of clues from the catchlight, it is yet another provided advantage to take note of.

top image: softbox far away; below: closeup of resulting catchlight



STUDY THE CATCHLIGHTS

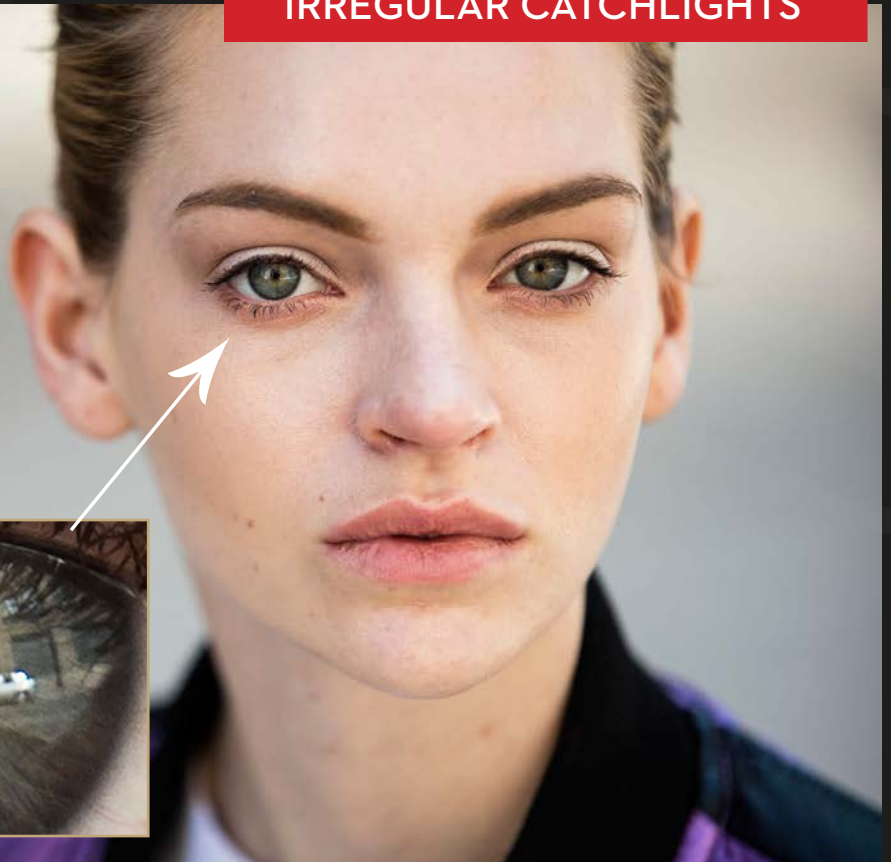
NATURAL LIGHT



Natural light catchlights are often very irregular in shape and location. Because the source of light may be light bouncing off a building, or just the open sky, you will not see the same sort of easily identifiable catchlights as you would in the studio. You may, however, see these catchlights when studio strobes are mixed with ambient light on location. By studying natural light catchlights you can still uncover clues about the direction of the main light source, the relative size of that light source, as well as any reflectors in the scene.

IRREGULAR CATCHLIGHTS

In this image you can see irregular catchlights created by reflections off of a nearby car and building.





This image was taken using
Auto White Balance



Same image using
ColorChecker
Custom White Balance



Final image using
ColorChecker
Custom Color Profile

“When I shoot, I always use my **ColorChecker Passport** for Custom White Balance and Color Profiles. It ensures accurate colors in my images which is critical in my work.”

Lindsay Adler, Fashion Photographer, Educator & Author



colorchecker
The innovator in color perfection



Celebrating Our 40th Anniversary

learn more at: **xritephoto.com**



xritephoto



xritephoto

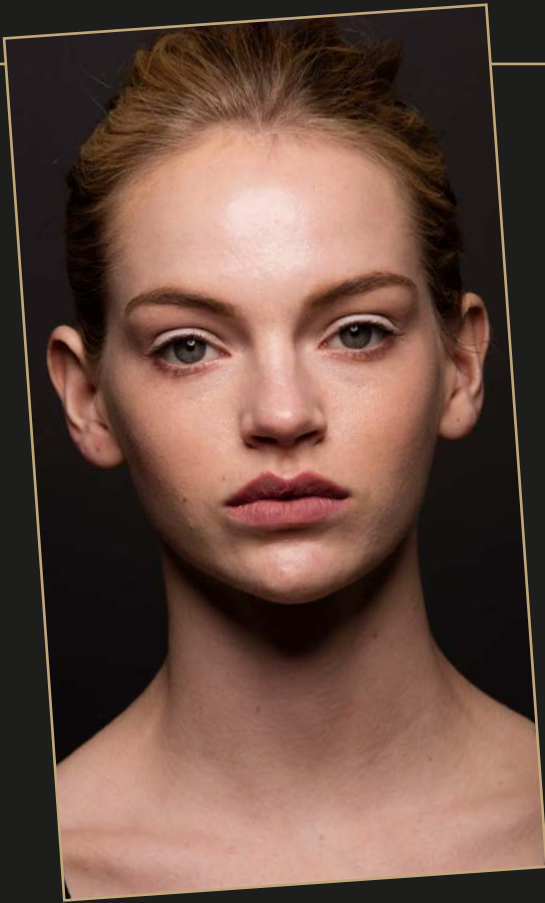


xritephoto

Examine the **SHADOWS**

The shadows on a subject's face and in a scene can reveal a wealth of information about the quality of light, direction of light, and fill light present in your photograph. There are several secrets that can be uncovered by the shadows if you learn to read them. I typically begin by looking at the shadows created by the nose and chin. These two shadows help get me on the right path for identifying the main light and possible fill light within a scene. From there, I'll begin to examine any other shadows cast in the photo.

EXAMINE THE SHADOWS



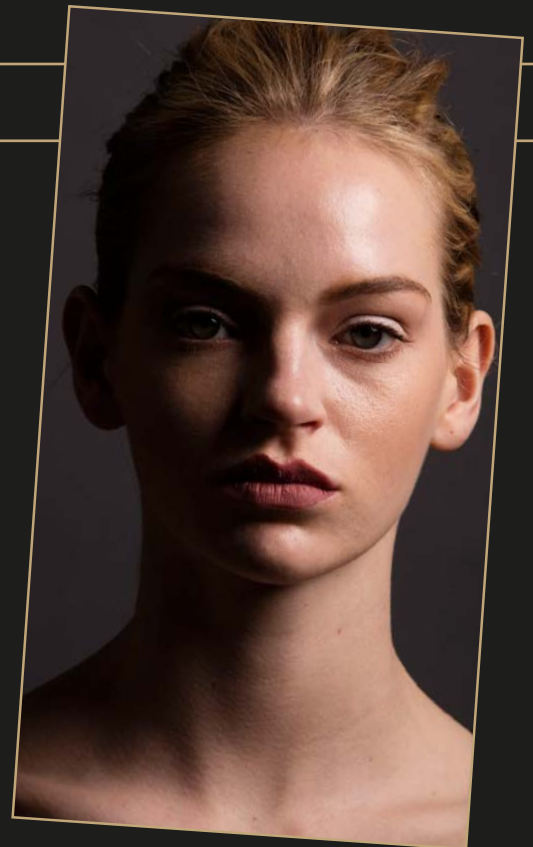
Shadows appear opposite the main light source in a photograph. If I am examining the shadow from the nose and find that it is directly beneath the nose, then I can assume the light source is centered above the nose.



DIRECTION OF SHADOWS



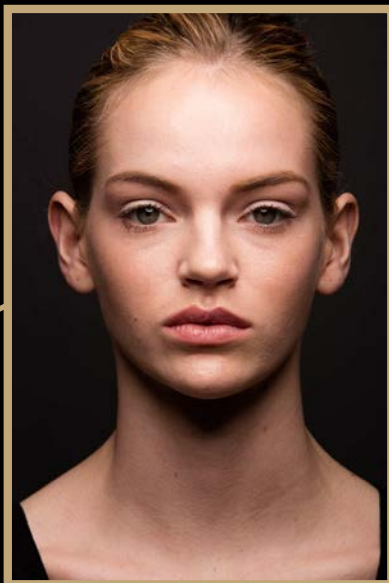
If, however, the shadow is cast to the left side of the face, then I know that the main light source must be opposite that shadow, and therefore illuminating from the right side of the face.



As you are studying shadows on the face, keep in mind that shadows are created based on the light relative to the face (not to the camera). We discussed loop and Rembrandt as patterns of shadows. What does this mean to you? The placement of the light for Rembrandt lighting (the triangle of light beneath the eye) will stay the same relative to the face, not to the camera.

For example, take a look at the light placement to the right with the subject faced straight on toward camera (A). Note the location of the light used to create a Rembrandt pattern (B). Now when the subject turns toward the light, she has nearly paramount (flat) light on her face (C). To achieve Rembrandt again we must move the light in the scene (D).





In other words, as you are studying a photograph's shadows, if you see a specific lighting pattern on the face, you must consider that the light is placed relative to the direction of the subject's face. *The pose and angle of the face will impact how the light appears--keep this in mind when decoding light placement!*



The length of shadows can be incredibly informative when determining the placement of light.

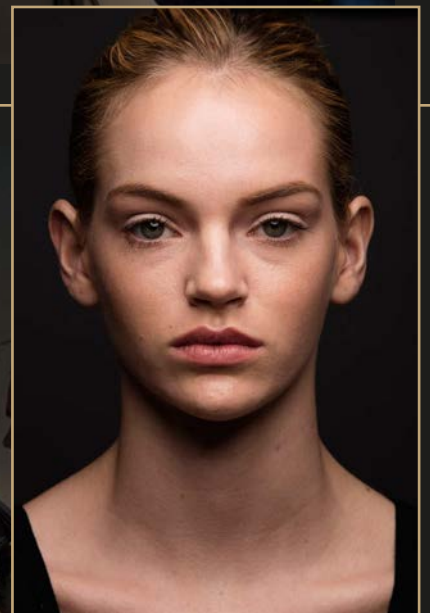
LENGTH OF SHADOWS

Let's start by looking at the length of the shadows vertically (up and down) on the face. A long shadow down the face indicates a high placement of light. For example, if the shadow is directly below the nose, this means that the light is centered. Yet this shadow may be very long and nearly reach the lip suggesting that the light is very high relative to the subject's face.

If the shadow under the nose is very short, this indicates a relatively low height of the main light.

V
E
R
T
I
C
A
L

long shadow directly below nose



short shadow directly below nose



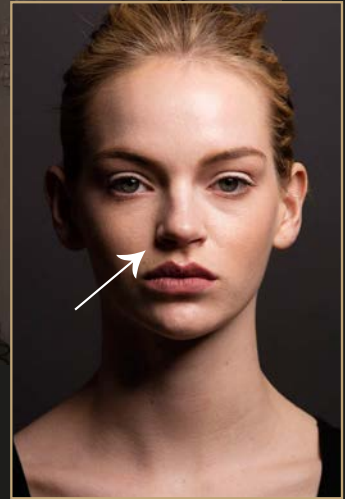
You will also want to pay attention to the shadows appearing horizontally (left and right) on the face. The longer the shadow across the face, the further the light is off axis to the model. A long shadow doesn't necessarily mean the light is far away necessarily. Instead, it means that the light is further to the side of the model (off center) in a 360 circle around your subject.

The further off center the light, the longer the shadow by the nose will be. Earlier we discussed some of the common labels for lighting based upon shadows on the face. The light created by loop light is a shorter shadow and therefore the light is not too far off to the side. Conversely, the light created by Rembrandt lighting requires a longer shadow and a light source to be further to the side.

HORIZONTAL



loop light: short shadow to the side of the nose



rembrandt light: long shadow to the size of the nose



Of course the direction of the shadow can vary based on both the height of the light and the angle off center at the same time. With practice you will come to identify the approximate placement of the main light to create shadows from the nose and face, and then be able to recreate them yourself. Granted, you may not be able to determine the exact distances in angles and inches, **HOWEVER** if recreating the setup yourself you can identify what moves to make to mimic that same directionality of light.

Notice, the further off center (up or down, side to side), the longer the shadow! So far from the shadows we have been able to determine the height and placement of the light relative to the subject's face. Not too bad!



DEPTH OF SHADOWS

The darkness of the shadows helps you determine if there is any fill light in the scene. Fill lights can take many forms. A fill light could be a strobe, a reflector, a nearby wall reflecting light and much more. On location, endless surfaces may reflect the light and fill in shadows.

We must use clues to determine if there is a fill light and what that light source is. If the shadow is very dark with limited detail, it can be assumed that there is no fill light. In fact, negative fill may be utilized to ensure darker, richer shadows and prevent reflections off of any nearby surfaces. Negative fill means placing a dark surface (like black foam core) close to the subject to block bouncing light.





A

no fill

FILL LIGHT

Fill light can be subtle, simply by lightening up some of the shadows or fill light can be very strong, almost completely eliminating shadows in the image.

We can tell by the darkness of the shadows if there is fill light, and use other clues (like the catchlights) to determine what type of fill light is being used.



B

subtle fill



C

strong fill

you can see the affects different fills have on shadows: (A) no fill, (B) subtle fill using a white fill and (C) strong fill by bringing the white fill in closer to the subject.

When using reflectors, a silver reflector often fills in more shadows and creates a bit more texture. A white reflector, however, is a bit softer and usually more subtle.



silver reflector fills in shadows and creates a bit more texture

REFLECTORS



white reflector is a bit softer and bit more subtle

EDGES
OF
SHADOWS

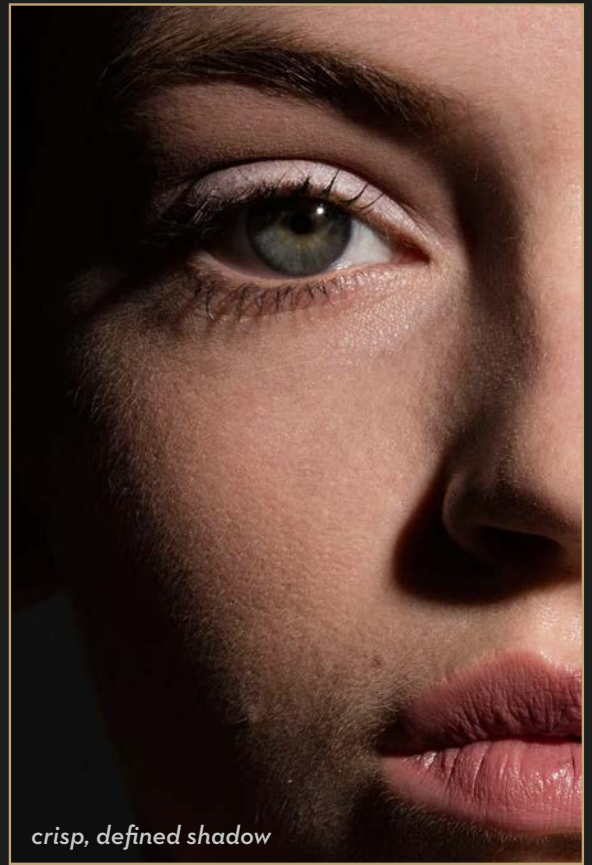
How crisp is the shadow? Is there a defined line separating shadow from highlight, or is it more of a subtle transition? Let's take a look at what I'm talking about.

Crisp and defined shadows indicate a harder, higher contrast light source. The shadow has a definitive separation from the highlight. This could be created by a harsher or more focused modifier, or from a modifier very far away (remember, the further the light relative to the subject, the harder the light).

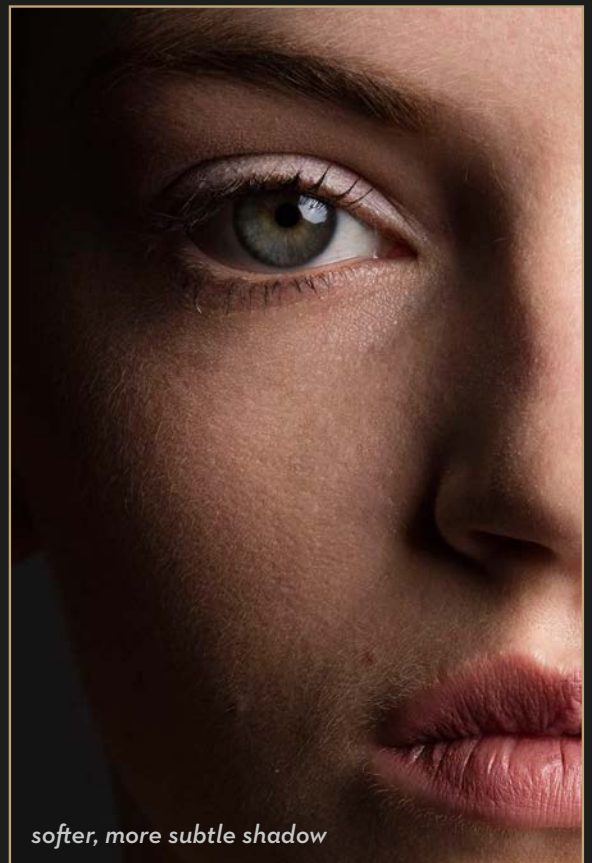
In the studio, harder modifiers are considered things like zoom reflectors and grids

Conversely, if there is a subtle gradient between highlight area and shadow area, this is created by a more diffused or softer light source.

In the studio a softer light source would be softboxes or large umbrellas (shoot through or with diffusion).



crisp, defined shadow



softer, more subtle shadow

And, of course, there is every variation in between! You can have extremely crisp and defined shadows, extremely subtle and gradual shadows, or something in the middle.

Also important to note, crisp shadows do not have to be completely dark. For example, you can have a shadow with defined edges that has also been filled in by a reflector. The main light source is harsher, but the fill has given more detail to the darker areas.

As you can see, the shadows provide a great wealth of knowledge when determining the placement of light, the type of modifiers used, and the presence of fill light. With shadows and catchlights, we've got a lot of bases covered, but there's more!



*above:
defined shadows
filled in with reflector*



*right:
crisp, dark,
defined shadows
before using reflector*

Fall in Love

with new **DEEP MATTE PRINTS**

Featuring rich colors, beautiful tones and a dreamy fine art feel, Deep Matte Prints deliver a timeless and refined vibe to your treasured photographs.



MILLERSLAB.COM

HIGHLIGHTS *and* RIMLIGHTS

We've already given ourselves tools for studying the main lights and fill lights. Now, let's take a look at other light sources in the scene.

As mentioned before, a rim light is typically a backlight of some sort that creates a highlight on the subject. Most often you will see this highlight on the hair, jawline or side of the body.



NUMBER OF RIM LIGHTS

When you are analyzing the light in a photo, check for rim lights. Check the jawline. Check the hair. Rim lights may be very defined or extremely subtle, so you'll have to look closely. There may even be multiple in a scene.

This photo has two rim lights, one on either side of the face. Compare the qualities of the two highlights. On the left side of the face the highlight is dim and relatively soft. This is created from light bounced from a silver reflector back onto the jawline.



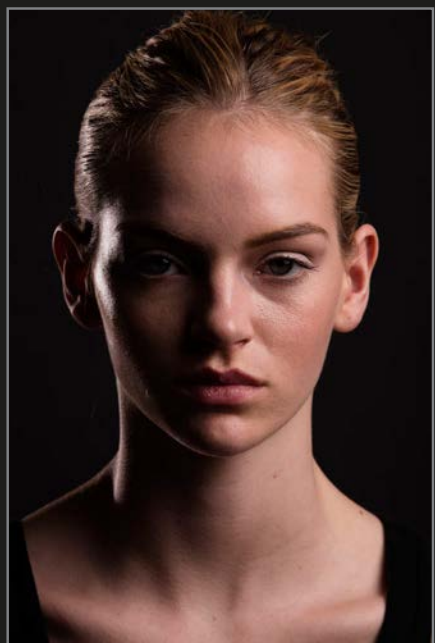
NOTE: While you may not always be able to tell exactly which light source was used to create a rim light, your goals are to identify that there is a rim light in a scene and ways you could mimic the qualities of this light should you aim to recreate it.



above: rim light created by strip light; top right: strip light

RIM LIGHT MODIFIERS, SOURCES

below: rim light created by barn door; bottom right: barn door light



Rim lights can come from many different sources. In the studio, the most common rim lights are created by strip lights, zoom reflectors, or barn doors. These are not the only modifiers that may be used, but they are some of the more common tools. In addition to direct light sources as a rim light, you

could even accidentally get a subtle rim light from light bouncing off a white background or nearby wall.

Zoom reflectors and barn doors tend to create crisp highlights with more contrast. Strip softboxes, however, result in a softer highlight though they can certainly be bright.



HIGHLIGHTS AND RIM LIGHTS



RIM LIGHT PLACEMENT

Once you've identified that there is a rim light, take a look at how far it wraps around your subject. If it is a very narrow highlight, typically the light is at an angle further behind the subject. If the highlight starts to wrap around the subject, this means the light is more to the side. Let's take a look at what I mean by moving a strip softbox.

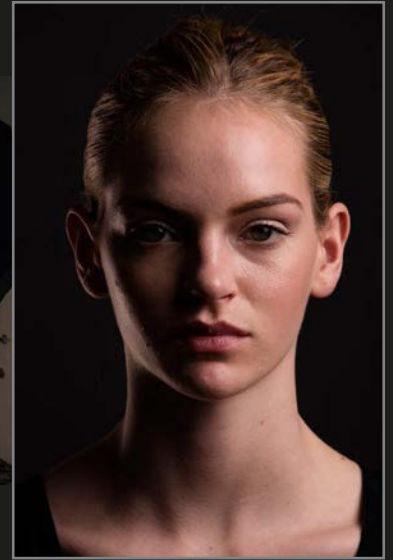


In the first photograph, the stripbox is at an angle behind the subject and therefore very narrow. Watch as the light is moved further to the side. The highlight created begins to wrap more around the subject, creating a broader highlight.

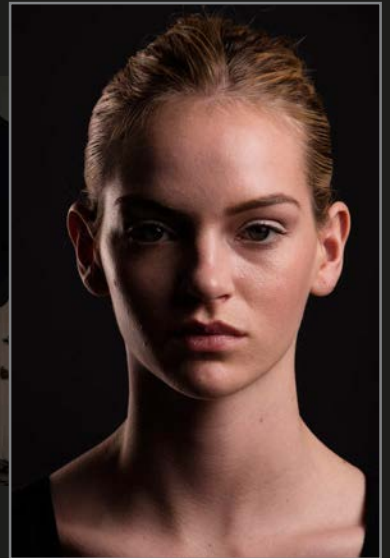
If you study the rim light, it can also reveal secrets about the height of the light. When the light is low, it likely will not illuminate the top of the shoulder. As the rim light is raised up it will begin to light the neck more and further up onto the hair. A very high rim light will also act as a hair light. Paying attention to where the rim light falls on the body can certainly reveal something about the placement of its height relative to the subject.



low rim light placement



mid height rim light placement



high rim light placement



Outside of the studio, many different things can act as a rim light. Rim light could be created by light sources in the scene, like a street lamp. It could be created by the sunlight bouncing off a wall behind the subject. It could also be a speedlight or strobe added to the ambient light. A soft rim light usually implies light bounced off of a light surface, whereas a crisp rim light usually implies a light source directly hitting the subject.

*bright, bounced
rim light*



NATURAL RIM LIGHTS

For example, the sun directly hitting a subject's shoulders creates very bright and crisp rim light. On the other hand, the sun bouncing off a white wall near to the subject creates a much more subtle rim light.



*light source,
wall lit by sun*



Background lights are just like they sound... they illuminate the background behind a subject. This is typically used to create some separation so the subject and background don't merge.

BACKGROUND LIGHT

When analyzing light in the scene, take time to see if there is any light on the background and how it is being used in the scene. Is it for texture or interest? Is it to whiteout a white background? Does it create a spotlight behind the subject for a glow effect? Either way, you can't overlook this important element of light in the scene.

above: focused background light



before: no background light



*after:
using background light;
notice how the subject
no longer merges with
the background*

SEEING THE *Natural Light*

The same rules of seeing the light apply whether in the studio, in an indoor location, or outdoors lit by all natural light. Typically, however, the clues of light may be a little more subtle or disguised in natural light situations. The catchlights may not be completely recognizable shapes – the shadows may be diffused and nearly nonexistent, and the light sources themselves may be general areas of a scene, like the sky. For example, the main light on a subject's face could simply be an opening in the trees where more light gets through, or it could be a reflection of light off of a large moving van.

With practice you'll be able to study the light on your subject's face to determine the main light, as well as any fill or rim lights. Eventually you'll be able to analyze the scene to determine the source of these lights. Of course, this comes with continued practice. Walk around with a fellow photographer, and stop them every so often to study the light on their face. Then, take the time to survey the scene and break down how each highlight and shadow is being created.

“COMPLICATIONS” AND GETTING MORE ADVANCED

Of course, there are ways to make this all a bit trickier. For example, you could introduce gels to the equation, or bring studio strobes out on location to combine multiple sources and types of light. You can mix constant light and studio strobes together to create ghostly blurs and unusual behaviors of light. That being said, if you can truly master reading the essential language of light, the rest will come in time.

Be aware that in some instances images are heavily modified in Photoshop and the light is transformed. This can make reading the

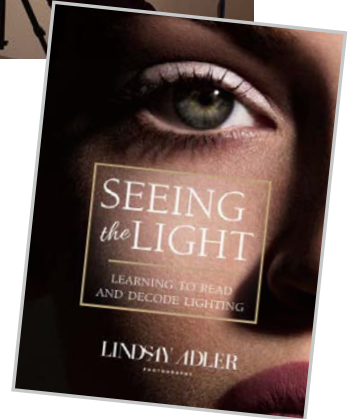
light a lot trickier, but with practice you'll be able to more clearly identify scenes or subjects with extreme Photoshop manipulations.

As you become more advanced in lighting, you will also learn about specialty modifiers that apply unusual qualities or shape to the light, such as a grid, snoot, or spot projector. These specialty modifiers may throw in a few complications to the mix, but the more you experiment and the more you learn, the more knowledge you'll have to pull from when trying to decipher the light.

Now that we've talked through all of these essentials, let's take a look at some photographs and test out your new knowledge and skill set.



SEEING THE LIGHT

CHECK
list

After all of that information we have just covered, here is your simplified checklist!

When reading and decoding the light, here are the questions you should ask yourself.



✓ CATCHLIGHTS

- ☐ How many catchlights are there?
- ☐ Where are the catchlights located in the eyes?
- ☐ Are there any catchlights in the eyes caused by reflectors?
- ☐ Can you see the modifier used by studying the catchlight?
- ☐ Is the catchlight big or small?
- ☐ Is the catchlight a defined shape, or is it irregular?
- ☐ Does the catchlight look like light from a strobe or natural light?

✓ SHADOWS

- ☐ What direction do the shadows fall?
- ☐ Are the shadows long or short?
- ☐ Are the shadows very dark, or filled in?
- ☐ Are the edges of the shadows crisp and defined, or soft with a gradient?

 ✓ HIGHLIGHTS
 ✓ RIM LIGHTS
 BACKGROUND LIGHTS

- ☐ How many rim lights do you see?
- ☐ Are they crisp and more defined, or are they softer?
- ☐ Are they small or do they wrap around the subject more?
- ☐ Are the rim lights hitting the shoulders and/or hair?
- ☐ Do they appear to be direct light sources or bounced?
- ☐ Are there any background highlights or light on the subject?



Tethering with Tether Tools is an integral part of my workflow. My entire creative team works together to bring our concepts to life, and tethering allows us to discuss the success of the shoot as it's going. **No more worry if we 'got the shot'... we KNOW when we've got it!**



Lindsay Adler

TETHER TOOLS PRO

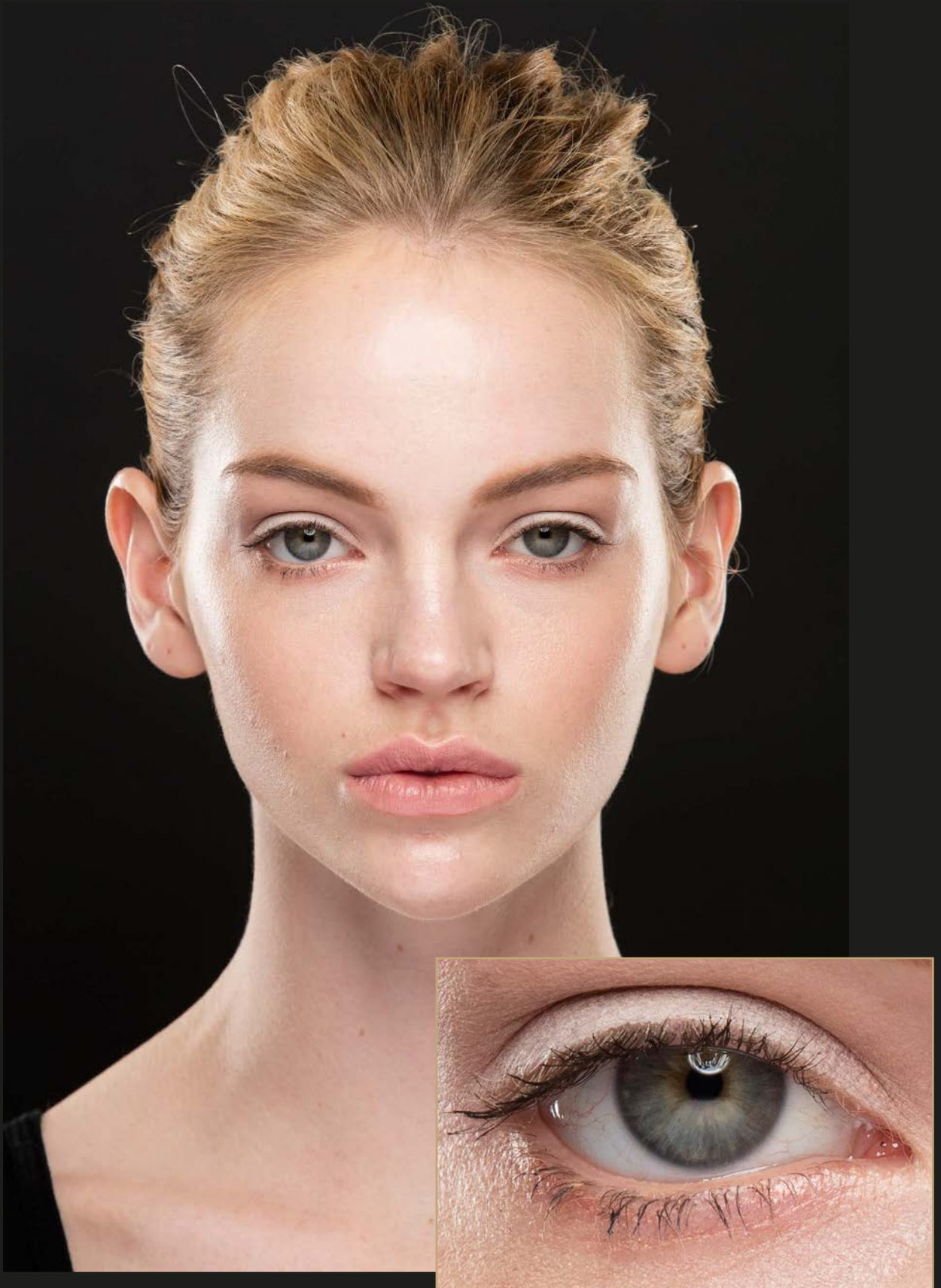
#betterwhenyoutether

BACKLIGHT
rembrandt
natural **TEST** *beauty dish* CATCHLIGHT
YOURSELF
octabox REFLECTOR RIM

Now it is time to put your knowledge to the test.

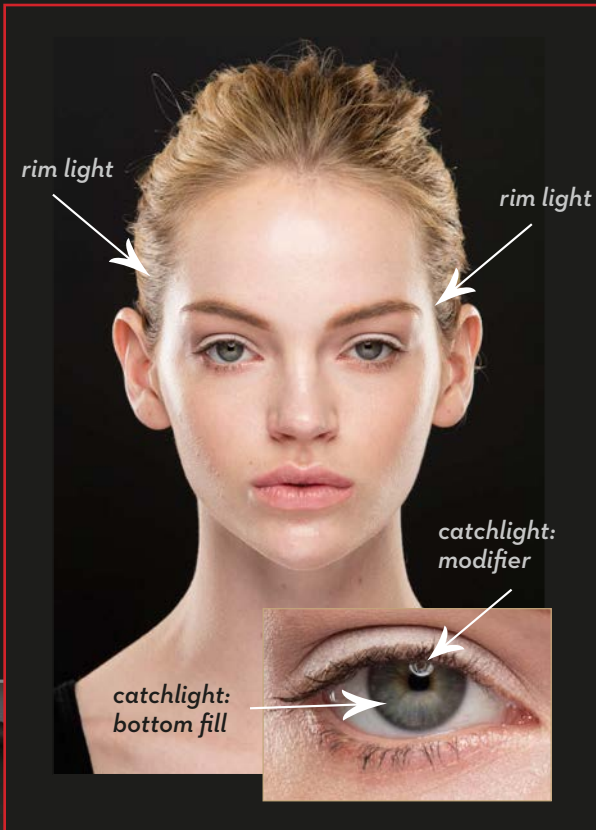
Let's test our your new skill of seeing and reading the light. We'll start with some simpler examples, and then move up to more advanced.

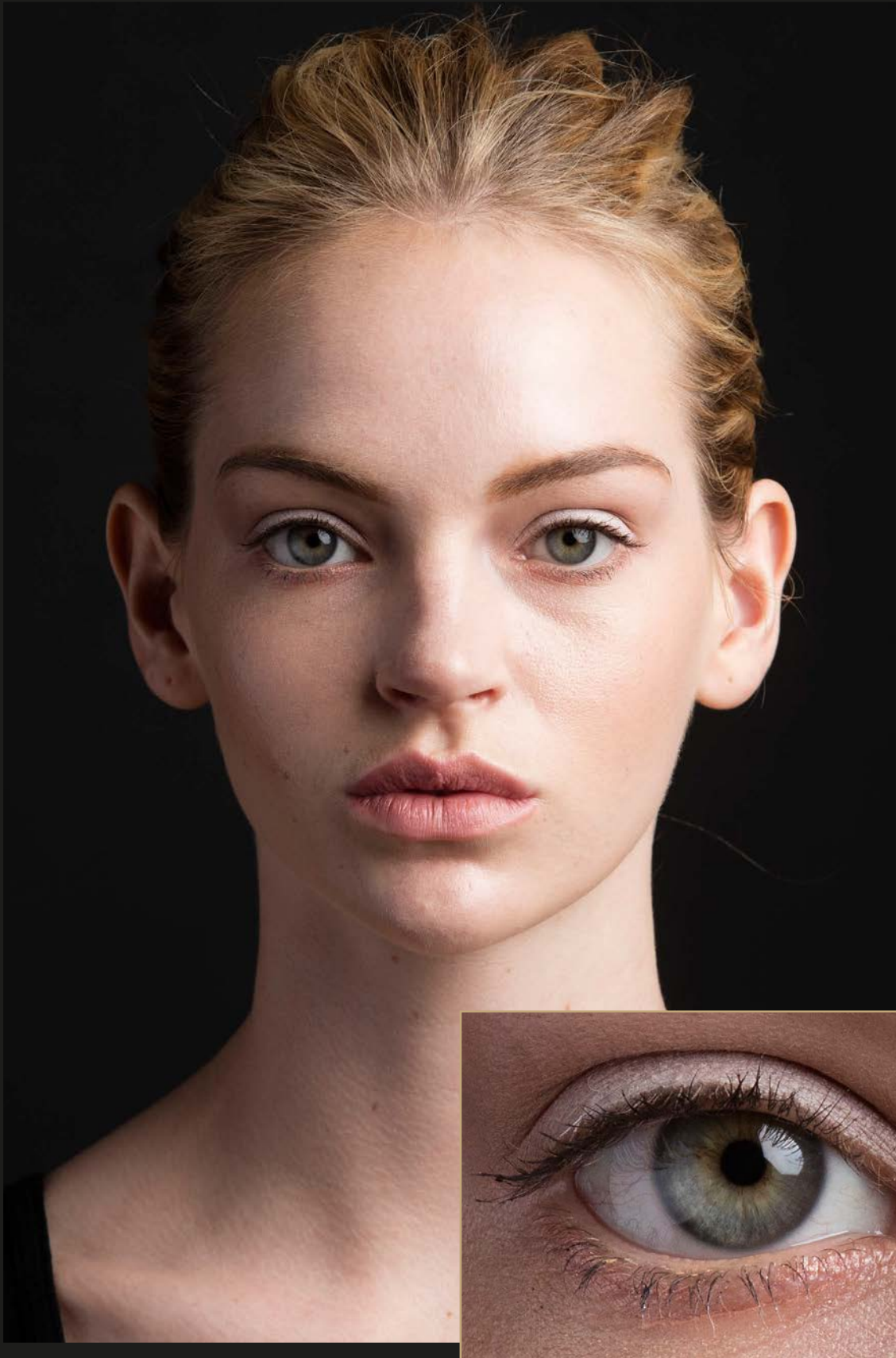
Don't worry... this is just the beginning! Now you'll be challenging yourself to see and read light everywhere!



EXAMPLE #1: REVEAL

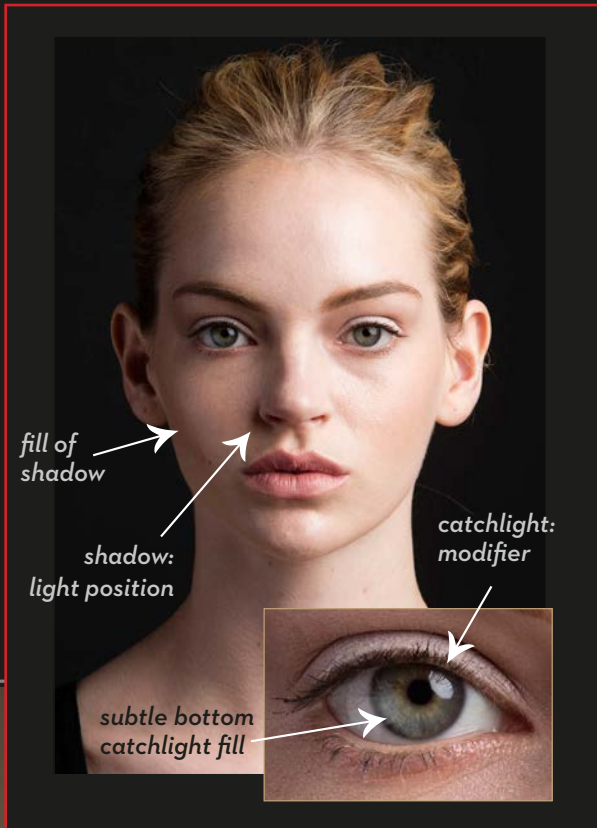
- Beauty Dish in Paramount
- White Reflector
- Two Strip Softboxes

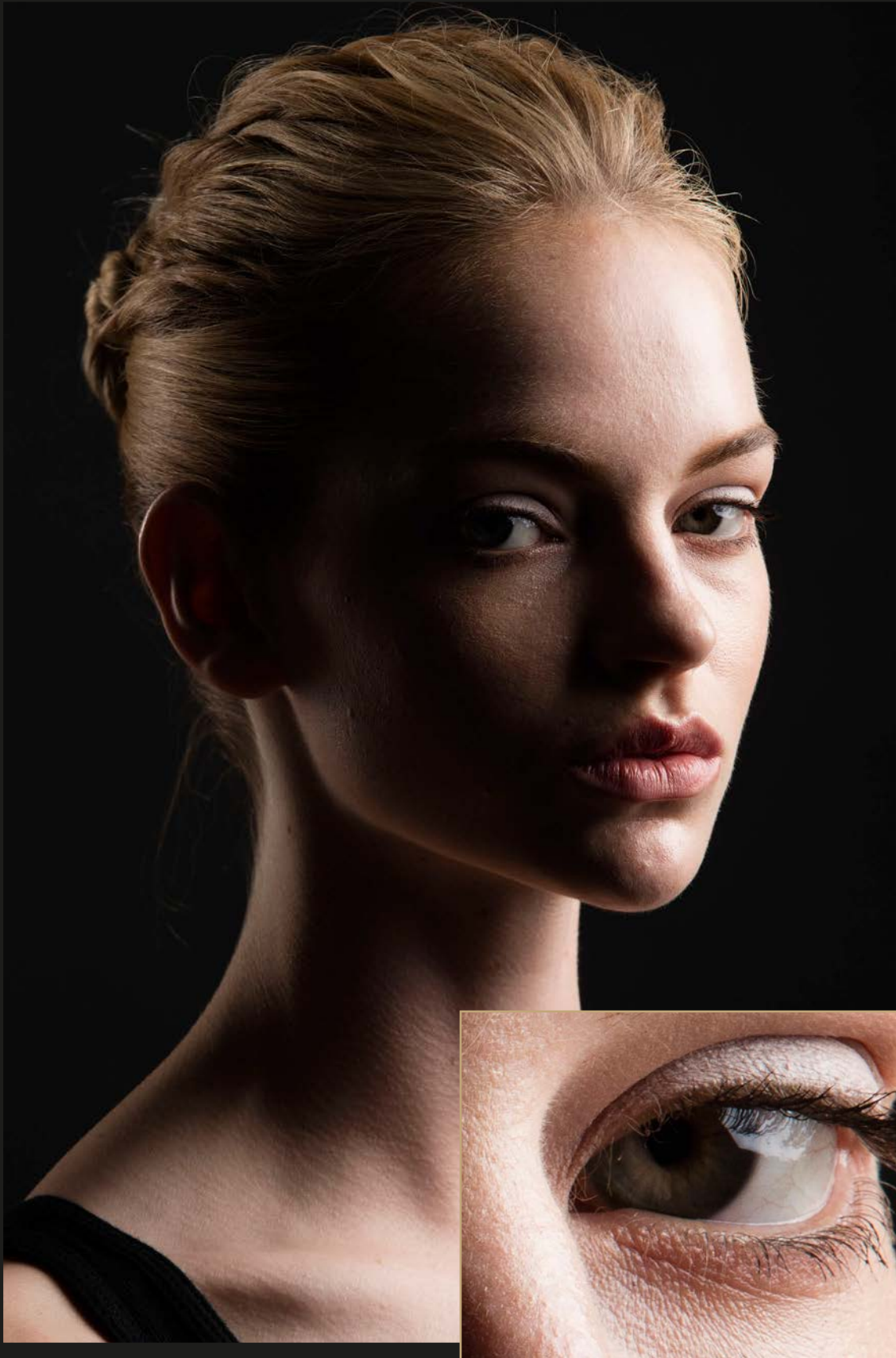




EXAMPLE #2: REVEAL

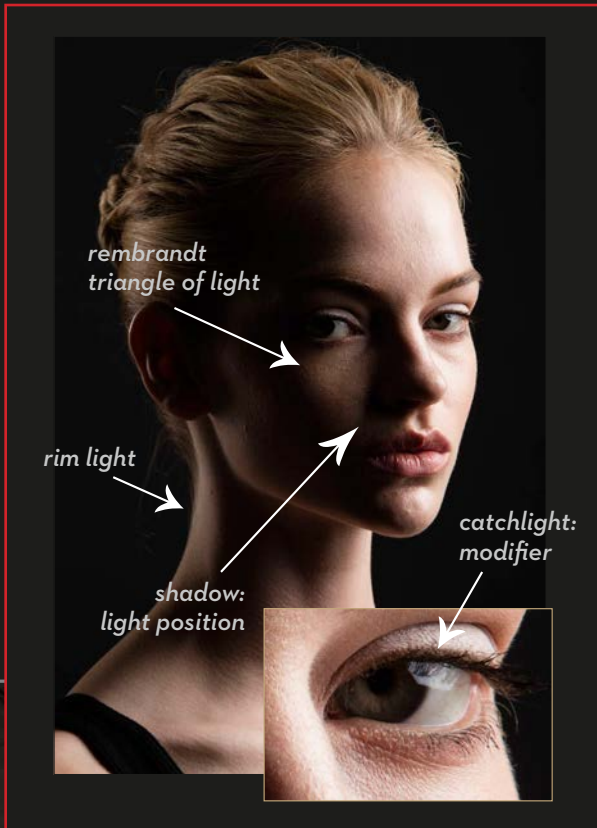
- Octabox in Loop
- White Reflector Fill

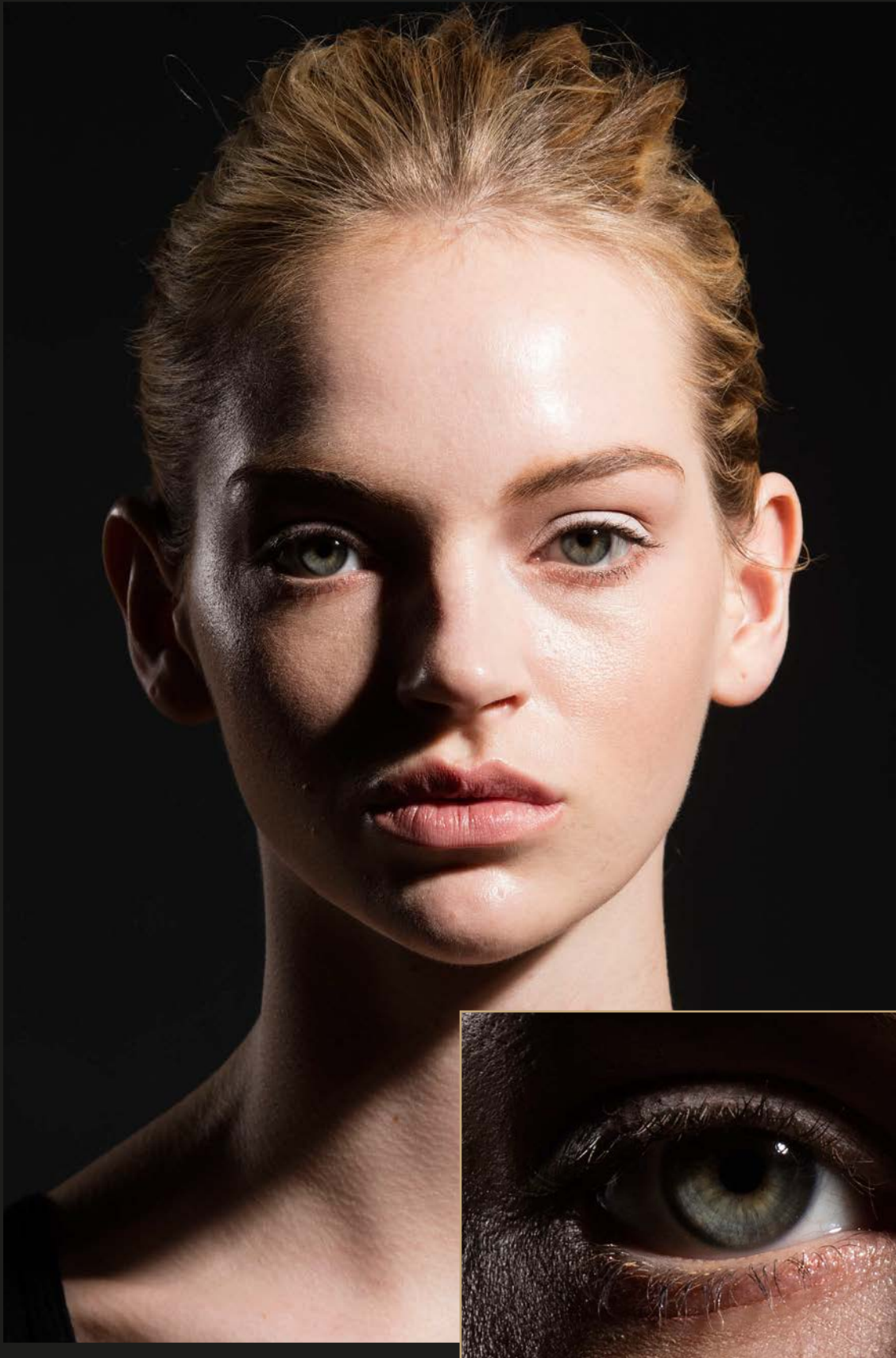




EXAMPLE #3: REVEAL

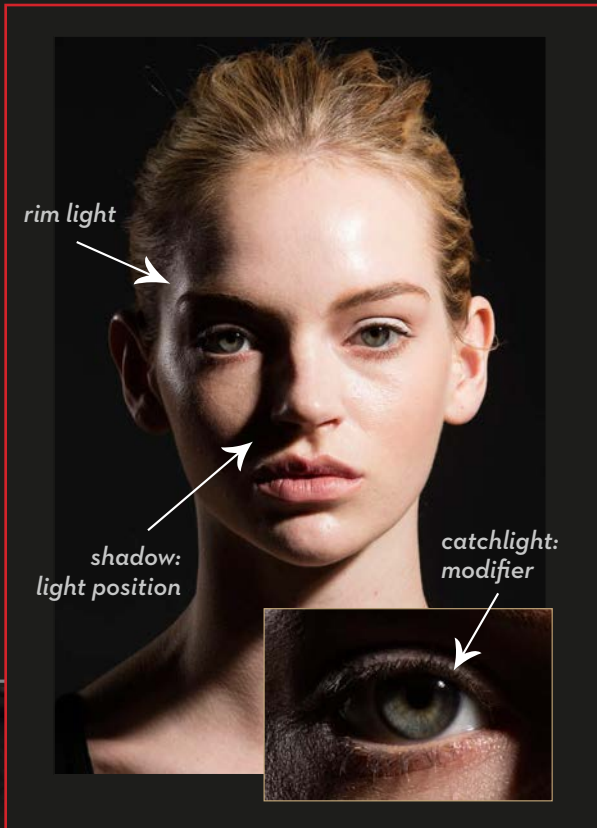
- Octabox Shortlight Rembrandt

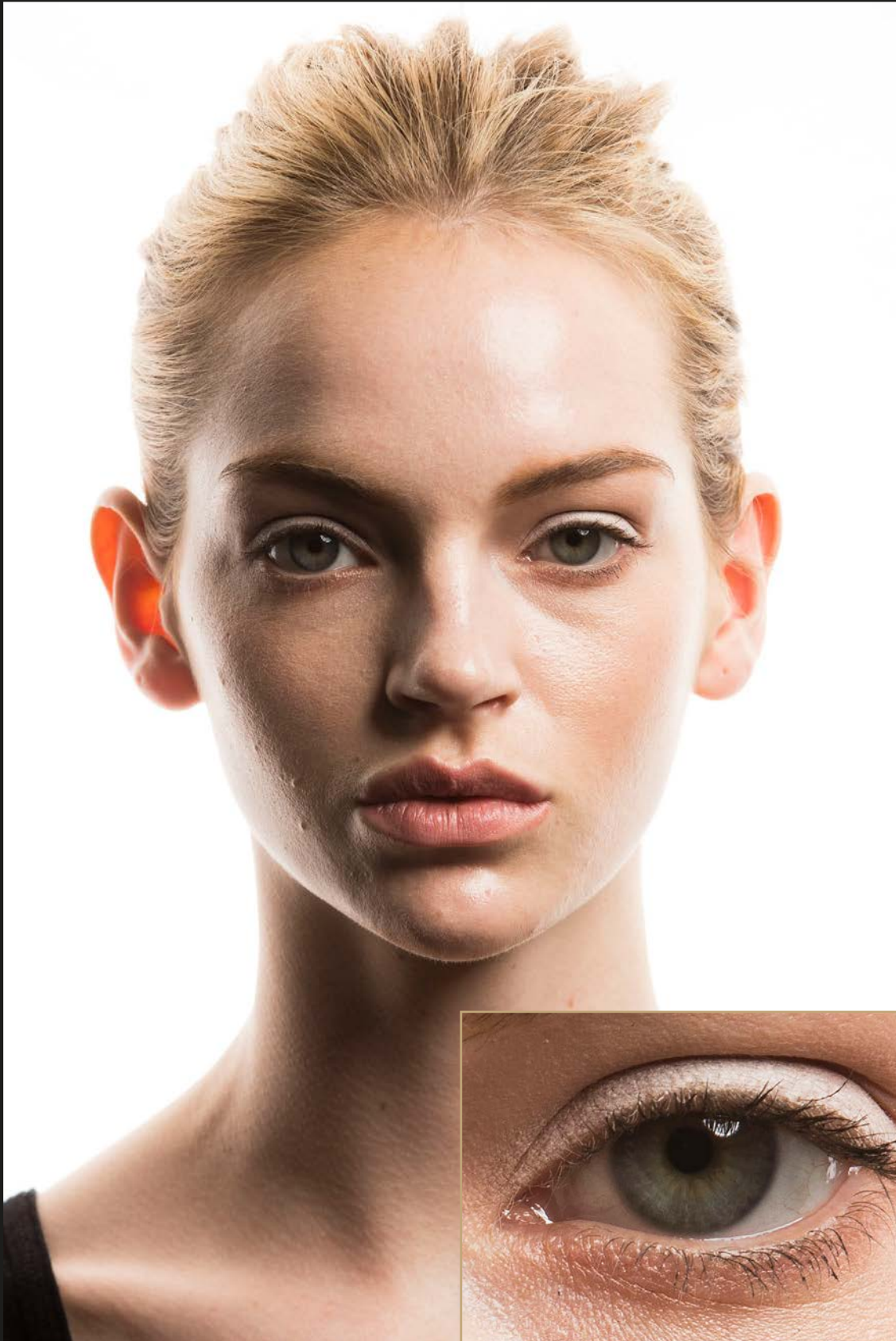




EXAMPLE #4: REVEAL

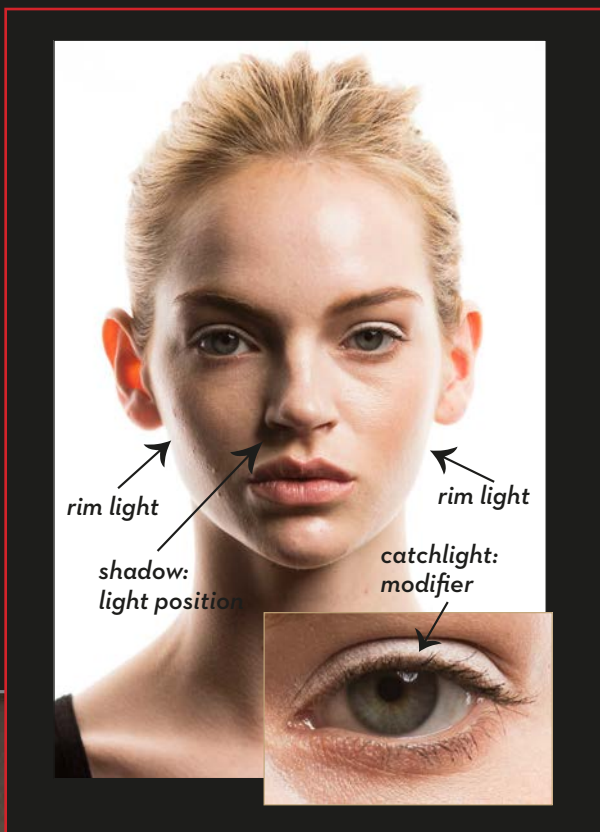
- Zoom Reflector
- Silver Reflector Rim Light

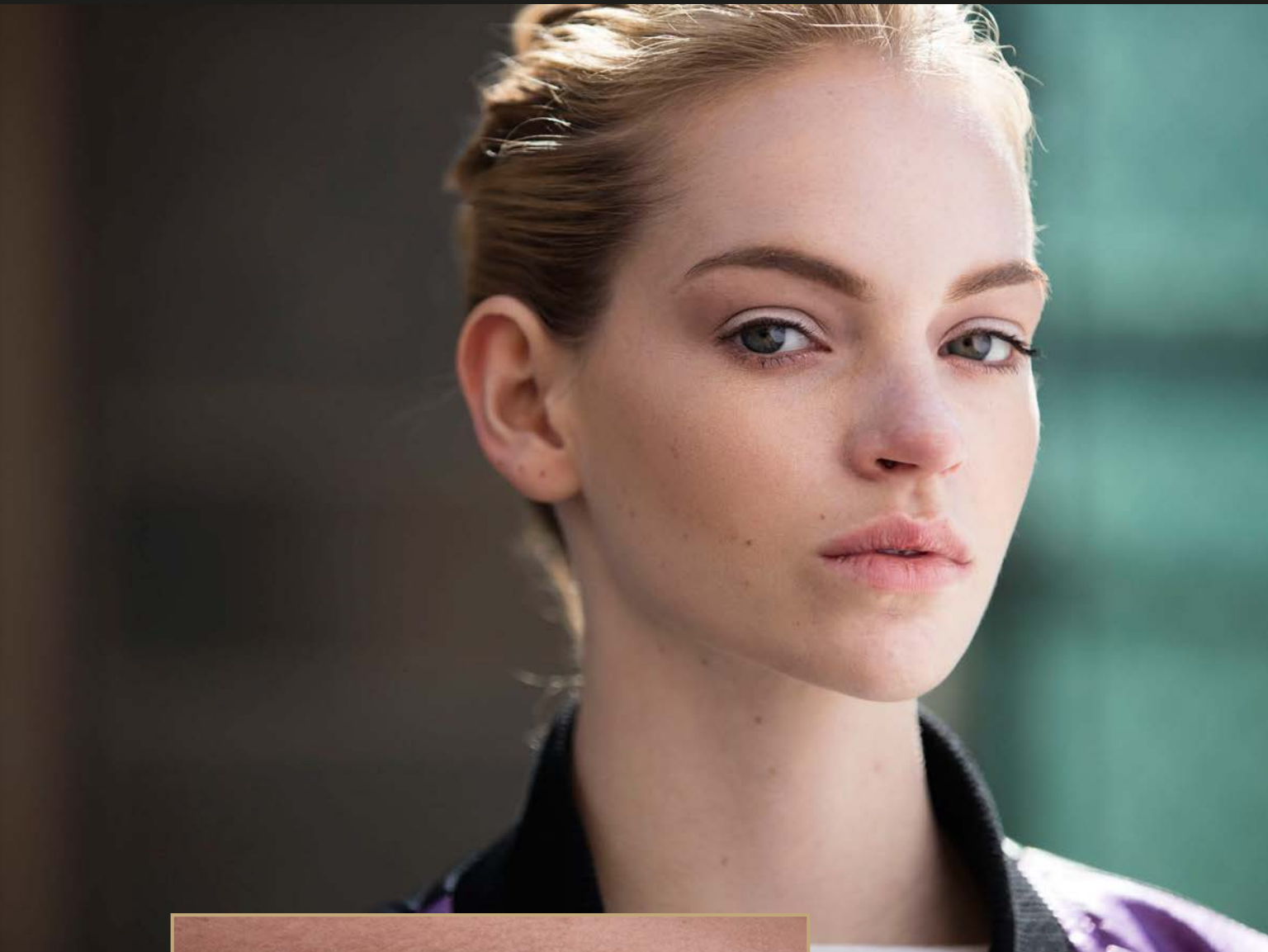




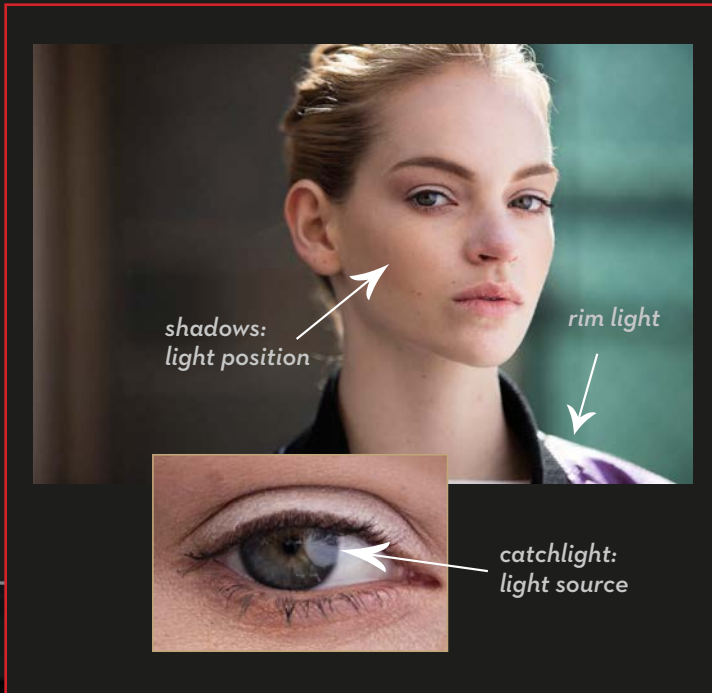
EXAMPLE #5: REVEAL

- Beauty Dish Loop
- 3x4 Softbox behind subject



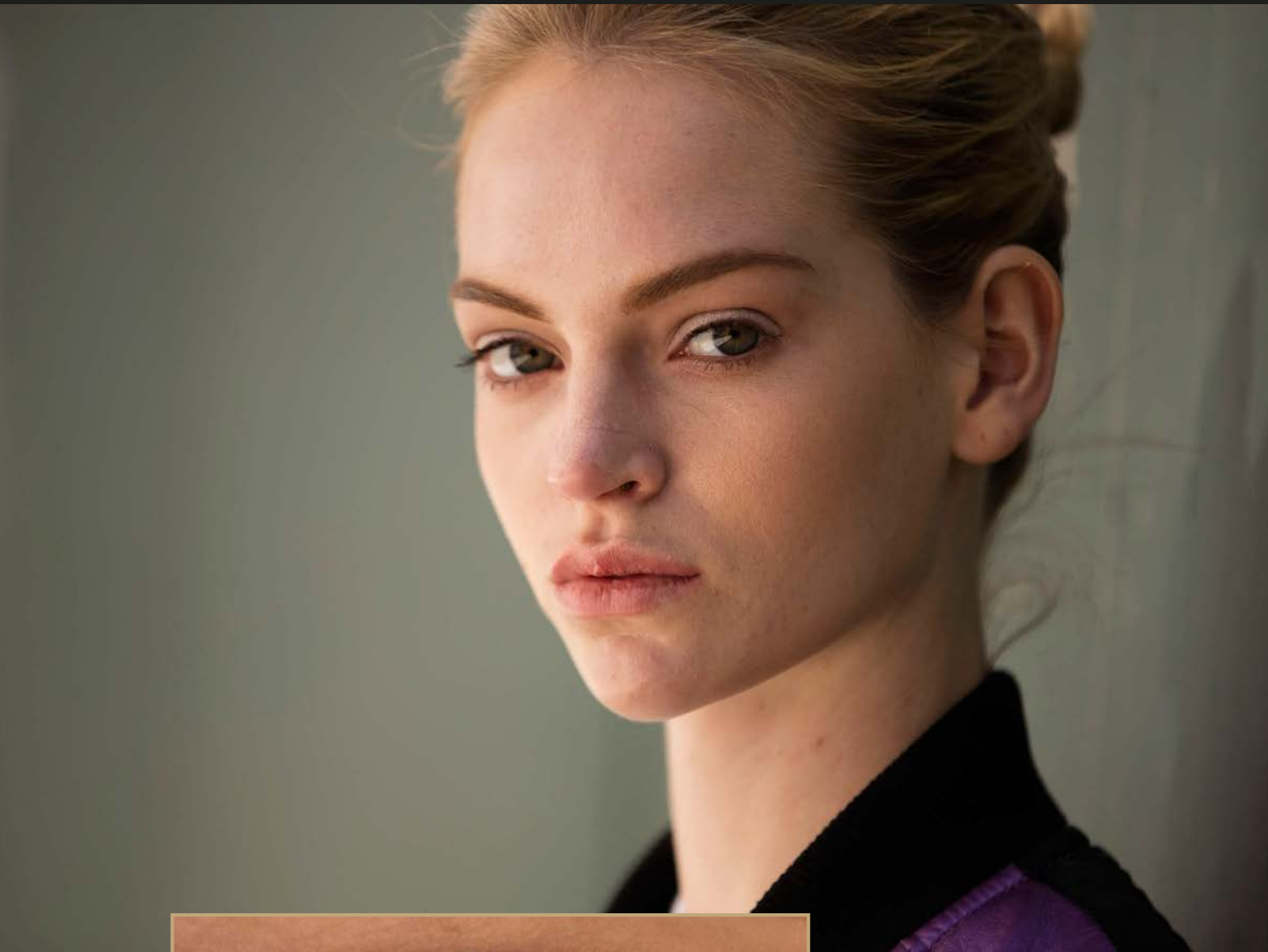


EXAMPLE #6: REVEAL

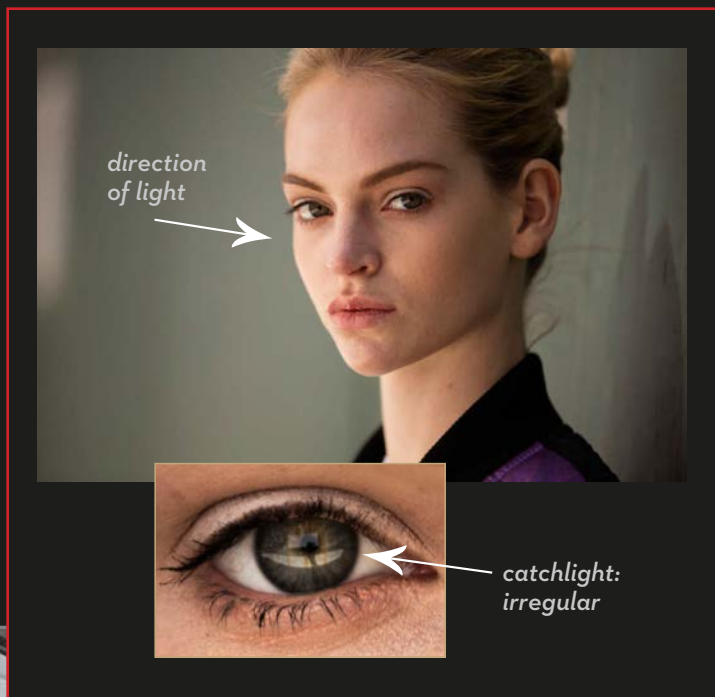


- Outdoors Backlit by Sun
- White Reflector (main light source)



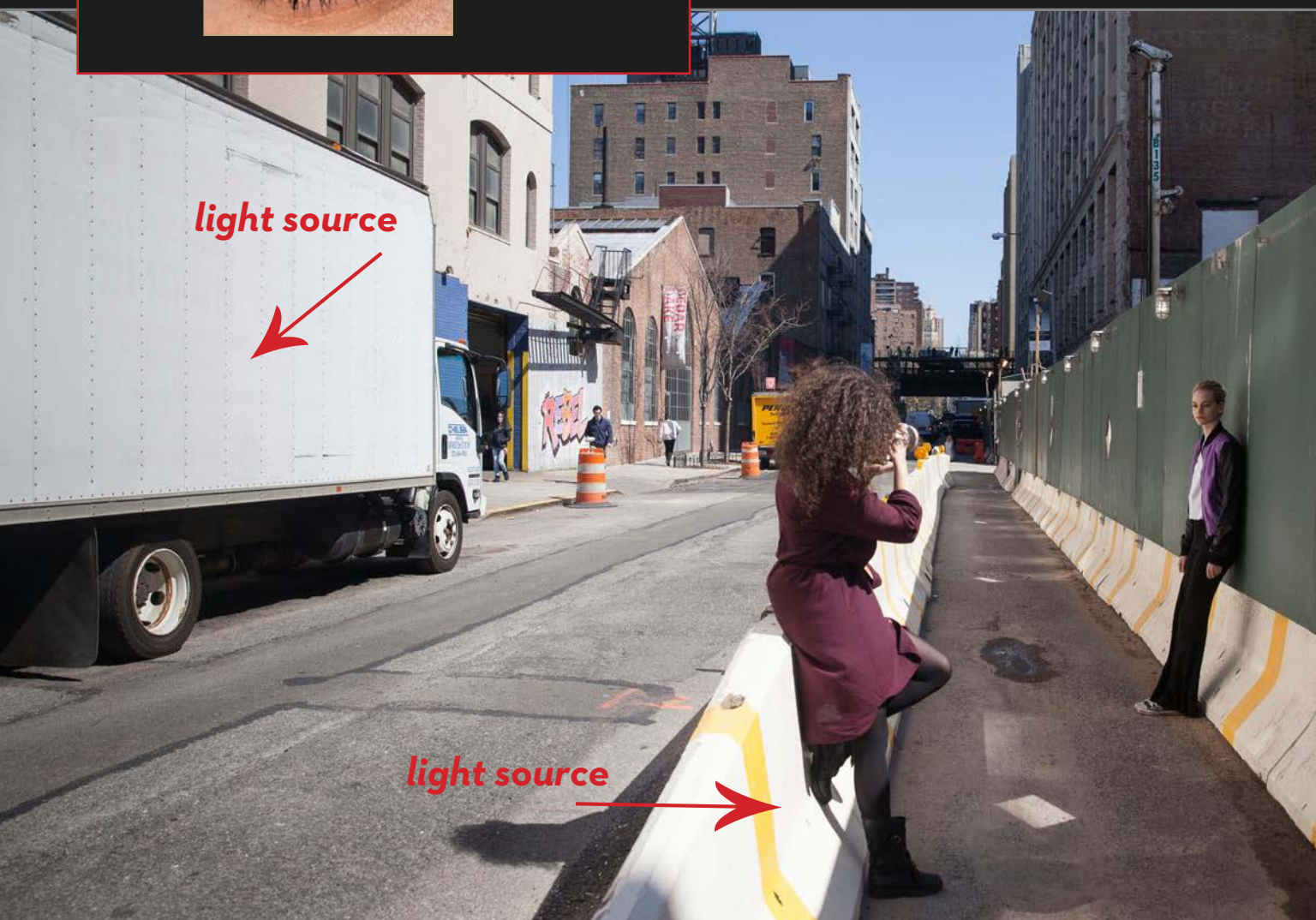


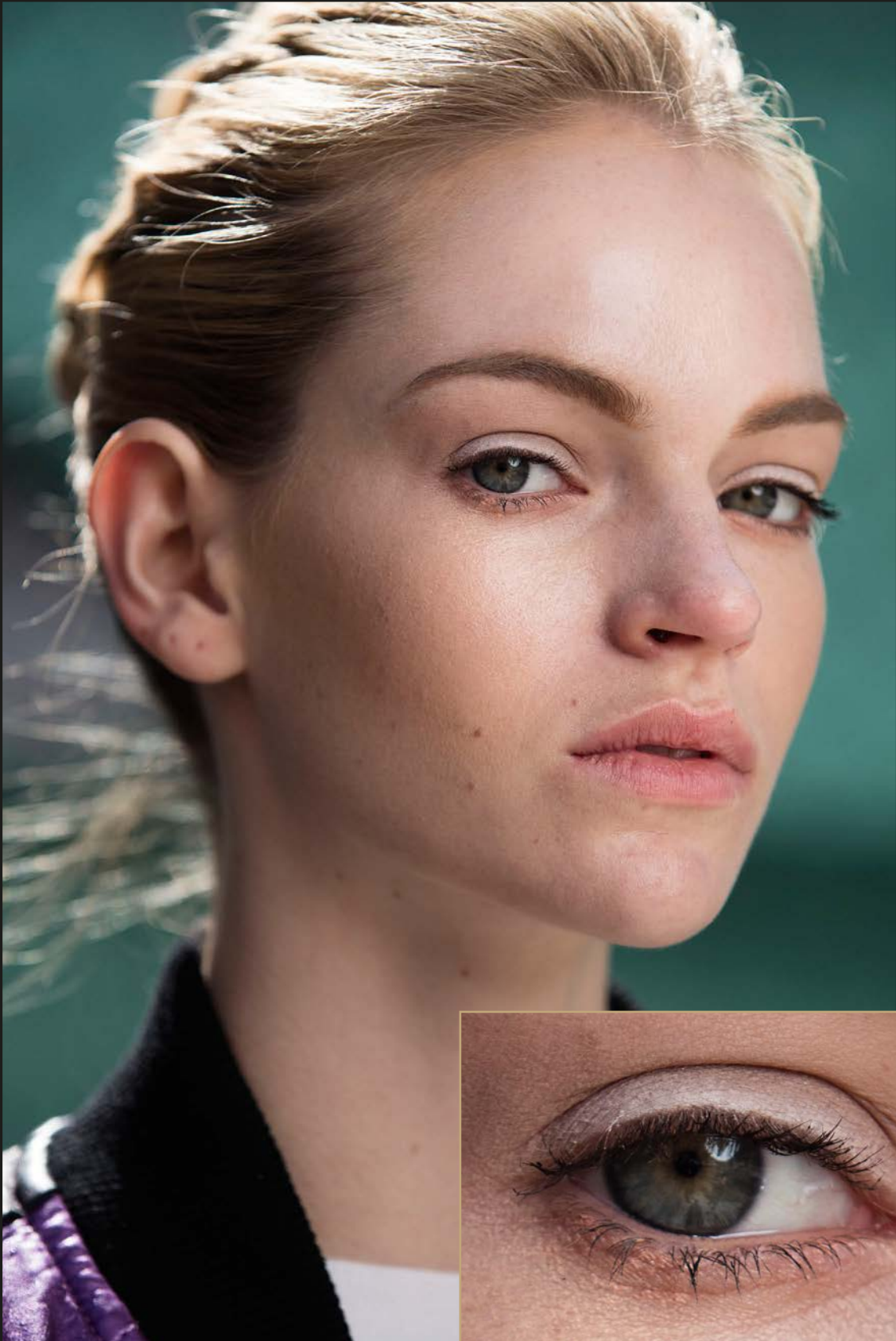
EXAMPLE #7: REVEAL



- Outdoors
- Natural Reflector (white truck, concrete divider)

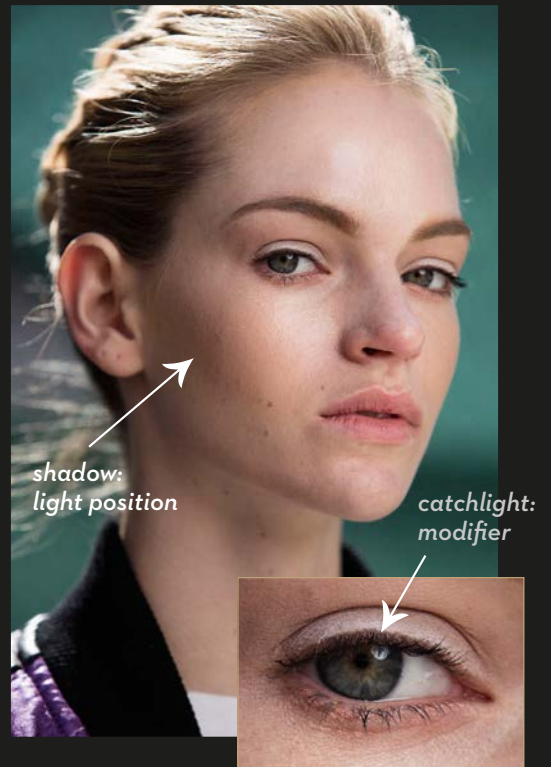
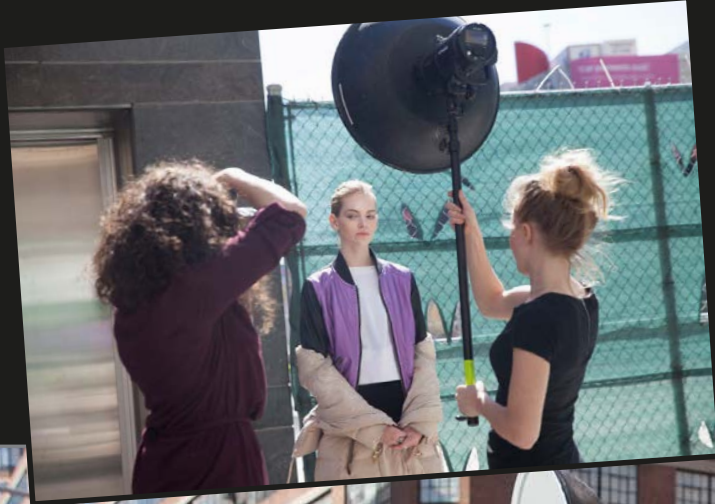
NOTE: direction of light and shadows are dependent on subject and camera position.





EXAMPLE #8: REVEAL

- Outdoors
- Beauty Dish
- Sun Backlight



how DID **YOU** DO?

The more you practice, make mistakes, and try lighting yourself, the more fluent you'll become in this language of light!

If you enjoyed the exercises, and want to continue to test your light-reading abilities, visit:

<http://learn.lindsayadlerphotography.com/seeing-the-light>

I've got more videos and a quiz with more lighting scenarios to test yourself, improve your knowledge and have fun!

takeaways

Here you have learned dozens of tips and tricks to begin to read and decode lighting in a photograph. Whether studying all the clues of catchlights, shadows or rim lights, there are endless secrets to lighting hidden right before your eyes! I hope you feel driven to deconstruct the light in stunning images you come across, and challenge yourself to push your knowledge and technical

skills to recreate this light. By seeing the light, you are now one step closer to becoming fluent in visual communication through the amazing language of light.

Lindsay





LINDSAY ADLER



Fashion photographer Lindsay Adler has risen to the top of her industry as both a photographer and educator. Based in New York City, her fashion editorials have appeared in numerous fashion and photography publications, including, *Marie Claire*, *ELLE*, *InStyle*, *Noise Magazine*, *Zink Magazine*, *Rangefinder*, *Professional Photographer*, and dozens more. As a photographic educator, she is one of the most sought after speakers internationally, teaching on the industry's largest platforms and at the most prestigious events, having been named one of the top 10 best fashion photographers in the world. Lindsay has worked with some of the top brands in the photographic and related industries, such as Canon, Adobe, and Microsoft.

A clean, bold, and graphic style has become the hallmark of her work, whether shooting advertising campaigns, designer look books, jewelry, hair campaigns, fashion editorials, or professional athletes. Lindsay is renowned for her creativity and collaborating with designers and stylists in order to create fresh looks.

An author of four books, she is always working on new ways to share her passions and knowledge with others. Each year she teaches tens of thousands of photographers world-wide through prestigious platforms such as creativeLIVE, KelbyOne, and the industry's biggest conferences.

LINDSAY ADLER

PHOTOGRAPHY

lindsayadlerphotography.com

© 2016 All images are the property of Lindsay Adler Photography