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Notes on Light

Along with composition, light quality is the most important attribute of a fabulous photograph. A big part of becoming a really good photographer is learning to distinguish various lighting conditions and use them to your advantage when making images.

Direction:

Axial Light (Behind the photographer) washes out texture and detail and can leave a photograph looking “flat.”

Top light can create harsh shadows. Think of a portrait in which the model’s nose casts a long shadow on her face. A similar phenomenon can occur when photographing landscapes.

Side Light is often preferable and emphasizes textures

Back light can be theatrical, especially with a wide angle lens. It gives the photographer options to create silhouettes and sun stars. Exposure can be tricky with backlight, though.

Quality:

Direct Light is self-explanatory. It varies in character depending upon direction.

Diffuse light is seen on cloudy days and can also be created by modifying direct light with a diffuser. It can be particularly flattering for portraits and can give a nice, saturated look in macro (close-up) photography. Diffuse light on cloudy days may have a blue cast. Sometimes that’s a good thing, and sometimes you’ll want to correct it in post-processing.

Reflected (or indirect) Light is particularly lovely. Think of the luminance of a slot canyon or the reflection of a brightly lighted red canyon wall in a shaded creek. A hand-held reflector can create very nice indirect light. Pre-dawn and post sunset light is also reflected.

Sweet light is a photographer’s term for the quality of light shortly before sunset and after sunrise. Some people refer to this as the “Golden Hour,” but (especially in summer when the sun climbs higher, faster) the best light may not last nearly that long. This light tends to have an orange character which is often desirable but (particularly with portraits) sometimes should be corrected in post-

processing. It is also less harsh, allowing the photographer to work with shadows and highlights more effectively.

Exercises:

1. Photograph an object or landscape feature from 3 or more different angles. Notice how the direction of light alters the appearance of the photograph.
2. Photograph the same scene under many different lighting conditions. Notice how the shadows change, along with the quality and character of light.
3. Photograph a small object like a flower outdoors with direct light, then light modified with a diffuser (you can improvise with a thin white cloth) and then a reflector (again, aluminum foil wrapped around cardboard will do.) Think about how these different conditions create a variety of effects.