

Columbia Graduate School of Journalism
Photo elective
Flash Assignment

Flash, sometimes referred to as strobe, is part of a news photographer's basic toolbox. In recent years flash equipment has become much more sophisticated and capable of very subtle light effects as well as the very dramatic.

One key elements of using flash well is the ability to balance flash output with existing light (ambient light) to create more natural looking lighting. Below is an example of an image made with the flash and camera set on full auto (left) and an image made moments later with the camera set to manual and the strobe output reduced, the shutter slowed and the aperture all the way open (right). In auto the camera will set the shutter at its flash synch speed (typically 1/250th a sec), cutting the ambient light dramatically.



In the example below (left), taken at an asylum for the mentally ill in the Republic of Georgia, I reduced the flash output (and bounced it) to light the woman in the foreground to balanced against the window light illuminating the background. In the image of Cheech Marin directing 'Latinologues' I balanced the strobe against the stage lights in the background.



Flash can also be used effectively as fill light in well-lit environments to reduce harsh shadows or correct for mixed light temperature issues. Note the difference in the two images below. I used a strobe on the left and none on the right.



Strobe or flash in combination with a slow shutter speed can create interesting motion/light trails. The technique is called 'dragging the shutter.' Below are two examples (not my photos). NOTE: If a subject is moving across the frame and you wish to have the trails following the subject you need to set the camera on rear-curtain synch so the flash fires at the end of the shutter cycle. Neither of the pictures below illustrates the technique, but we discussed it in class.



The assignment is as follows: Post two image to Flickr of each:

- 1) Images that balance a poorly lit interior or background with flash to maximize ambient light.
- 2) Images that are examples of fill flash in which strobe is used to balance against harsh shadows and/or the digital camera's limited dynamic range in moderate to high light.
- 3) Creative application of flash in which you demonstrate dragging the shutter or using flash in interesting ways to create shadows or other unusual effects,

Think bounce flash. Experiment with the flash unit's diffusers and/or make your own bounce card. You will likely have to reduce the flash output either by using exposure compensation in E TTL mode or doing it with the toggle in manual mode. The important thing, the take-away for you, is to begin to understand and control flash as a part of your photo skills set.