

# Facial lighting techniques

**John Black** takes a closer look at three specific lighting techniques: broad/short, butterfly and split

## IN THIS ARTICLE, WE'RE GOING TO

step back a bit from stage lighting and, instead, look at some facial lighting techniques that come from the world of studio photography. Many houses of worship put time and effort into producing promotional and marketing materials for their worship services, special programmes, mission opportunities or other special events. Often, these materials are produced in-house and may be put together by a team of willing volunteers who may or may not know some of these techniques that can take their photos to the next level.

We're going to look at three specific facial lighting techniques that can be easily achieved through the physical positioning of a subject, camera lens and light source. Understanding how these techniques work can help you achieve well-lit shots without necessarily needing high-end, expensive professional equipment as you can achieve all of these using natural light. They rely on an understanding of the direction a light source is illuminating a subject in relation to the direction the photograph is being taken from. It is also important to remember that the camera lens is capturing the existing light, so an understanding

## MEET THE AUTHOR

John Black serves as the theatre manager for Seoul Foreign School in Seoul, South Korea. Holding a degree in Theatre Design, he provides technical production support and design in three state-of-the-art performance venues on campus for over 40 major concerts and productions a year in the areas of sound, lighting, video and staging. John especially enjoys sharing his passion for entertainment technology with high-school students each year through his student production team, *Crusader Live!*, giving students the opportunity to learn and work with professional-level technologies in a demanding production environment.



**John Black, theatre manager for Seoul Foreign School**

of these techniques during the shoot will provide a better foundation when editing and assembling your materials. Let's dive in.

## Technique 1: broad/short

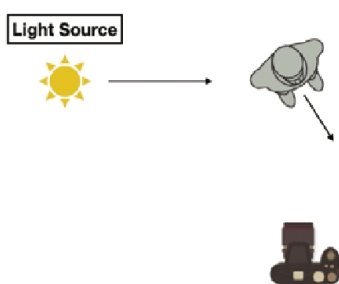
The broad – and its opposite, 'short' – technique actually has more to do with the position of the subject to the lens than moving the position of the light source itself. When using the broad facial lighting technique, the subject's face will be turned slightly away from centre and away from the light source. As a result,

feature they would prefer not to be highlighted in the photo, you can use the broad lighting technique to avoid your subject looking too thin or hiding the unwanted facial feature in shadow. The flip side of the coin is that many subjects would rather not appear too broad or wide in the shot. If your subject has a wide face or is heavier, using the broad technique would highlight this, which may not be the most flattering result.

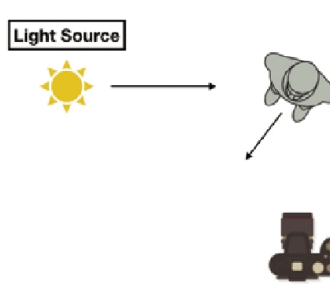
In these situations, you could use the short lighting technique, which has the subject's face turned slightly away from centre as well, but facing towards the light source. This results in a smaller area appearing to be lit with a larger portion of the face appearing to be shadowed. In relation to the camera, the portion of the face facing the camera will be in shadow, while the portion of the face farther away from the lens will appear to be lit. The short technique is more common in that it often appears more flattering.

Both the broad and short lighting techniques don't necessarily necessitate the moving of the light source, but rather simply repositioning the subject in relation to the light source and camera lens to achieve the desired effect.

## Broad lighting



## Short lighting



## Technique 2: butterfly

If you search for a definition of the butterfly lighting technique on Google, pretty much every definition will say something with regards to the butterfly-shaped shadow that is created just under the subject's nose. This is because there really is a butterfly-shaped shadow created when using this technique. In this situation, the light source is positioned above and directly behind the camera. The result is that both sides of the face are evenly lit and shadows are created just under the nose, chin and sometimes brow. When the light source is placed correctly, this technique produces the fewest shadows.

Butterfly lighting is also referred to as the 'glamour style' as it is often used in glamour photography. The downside of this technique is that it doesn't allow you to cover up any blemishes or unflattering facial features, though these can be taken care of in the editing and retouching process.

One of the things to be careful about when using the butterfly technique is to make sure that the light source is not positioned too high or too low. If the light source is positioned too high, the shadows created will be

quite long. An example would be if the shadow created under the nose extends to the top lip. Alternatively, if the light source is too low, the shadows may be so short that there is little shadowing at all, which can result in your photo looking flat and two-dimensional.

If the shadows produced from the light source are too strong and you are unable to adjust the light source to be lower, you can use a reflector under the subject's head, tilted back up towards the face to fill in the strong shadows. This will take some experimentation with the angle to achieve the correct balance.

## Technique 3: split

The third and final technique we will look at regarding facial lighting techniques is split lighting. As the term alludes to, a situation using split lighting divides the subject's face into two equal halves, one that is well lit (or highlighted) and one that is shadowed. Achieving this is relatively simple – just make sure that the light source is positioned at approximately 90° to the subject.

You may be wondering why I use the term 'approximately'. It goes without saying that there is a wide

variation in human facial features, such as the height of the nose or the depth of inset eyes. Therefore, when positioned at exactly 90° from the light source, the shadowing and highlighting will vary from subject to subject. The goal of split lighting is to create two equal halves, so that is where the placement of the light source may need to be adjusted accordingly.

Split lighting is a great tool for creating dramatic images. There are numerous examples in mainstream media photography of the use of split lighting, such as headshots of music artists for advertising materials. Split lighting is not a technique that you would use of a guest speaker making a presentation at your house of worship on a serious topic, but it may be a technique used when promoting a special music or drama event, for example.

If you are finding that the shadowed half of the face is too dark for what you are looking for, you can use a reflector opposite the light source to reflect light back onto the subject's face. The shadowed half will still be darker than the highlighted side, but this can help the camera capture some facial features but at lower intensity than the highlighted side.

## In conclusion

These are just three facial lighting techniques that you can easily take advantage of when photographing subjects using a single light source or natural lighting. In effect, all that you are doing is adjusting the direction of the light source and the positioning of the subject and camera to control or manipulate the highlighting and shadowing on the subject's face. Once you have mastered these techniques, you can add additional light sources or experiment with alternative arrangements of these elements to come up with other creative lighting techniques for your projects.

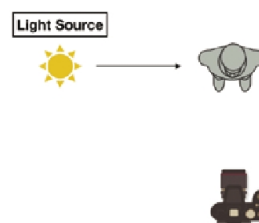
Finally, these techniques can also be used as basic techniques for facial lighting for your video projects. If you are shooting on location or don't have access to a full lighting rig, these techniques will help you consider the balancing of shadows and highlights to help create depth and prevent your subjects from appearing flat and two-dimensional.

I hope that this brief overview has provided some helpful tips for you as you approach facial lighting. As I always say, lighting is a creative endeavour, so feel free to experiment to get the specific look you are seeking.

### Butterfly lighting



### Split lighting



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