



# Fashion: Three Simple Natural Lighting Techniques

by Lindsay Adler

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**Direct light:** This image was taken in the park next to my house about 45 minutes before sunset. The light was rich and directional, and I looked for the light pouring through the trees. The light created dark shadows that helped shape the model's contours.

**Technical:** [Canon 5D](#), [Canon 45mm Tilt shift lens](#), 1/250 at 1/250, ISO 100

you plan to shoot in direct sunlight, the first two hours or last two hours of daylight are the most desirable. The lower the angle of the sun, the more flattering it will be on the model's face. With early morning and later evening light, you will have beautiful directional light with a warm, glowing quality. Direct sunlight is also very attractive when you're using interesting shadows. These may be lines created by a fence, leaves through the trees, or another pattern.

When people think of fashion photography, they often envision big studios with lots of expensive lighting setups. However, expensive setups aren't necessary. In fact, many images in my portfolio are naturally lit. There are lots of ways to manipulate natural light to create flattering effects. The following are three key lighting techniques that I frequently use in my fashion images: direct sunlight, window light, and shade with reflector.

## Direct Sunlight

Direct sunlight can be very beautiful in the way that the light sculpts the face, but there are several pitfalls. If



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**Direct light:** This image is the same model taken about 30 minutes earlier than the first image (about 1 hour 15 minutes before sunset). I put the model into direct sunlight instead of in the broken light of the trees and slightly overexposed the skin to give this creamy, smooth complexion.

**Technical:** Canon 5D, Canon **85mm** , 1/80 at 2.0, ISO 100

Once the sun is high in the sky, the shadows are harsher. The models begin to squint, and the light loses its warm quality. You must be aware of the model's eyes and also the hot spots that direct sun may create on clothing or skin. The sun may cause light-colored clothing to burn out and become an unpleasant distraction in the image. At this point, you can either move the model into the shade or hold something in the light to shade the problem spot on the clothing. Furthermore, when the sun is high in the sky (top lighting), it creates unsightly shadows under the model's eyes that should be avoided.

## Window Light

Window light is some of the most beautiful, soft light for portraiture and beauty images. You can move the model in relation to the window to help choose how the light affects her face. When the model directly faces the window and you shoot her straight on, shadows are nearly eliminated. If you then turn the model perpendicular to the window, the light begins to add shape and shadow to her face. If the shadows are too dark, simply put a reflector on the other side of the model.

When you're using window light, be sure that it's not direct light coming through the window and hitting the model, or the light won't have soft qualities. You must wait until the sun is high in the sky or choose a window that doesn't receive direct light.

Be careful not to have the model too close to the window, because it might create the effect of top lighting and cause shadows around the eyes. If you pull the model back just a bit from the window, the light becomes more frontal.

Incidentally, doorway light is similar in quality to window light. Using doorways or archways outside will create a similar lighting effect and can be very useful to achieving a softer look on bright, sunny days.



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**Window Light:** Here the model was posed with the window off to the left of the frame, slightly to the front, with the window about five feet from her face. The soft light wraps around her face, and you can see the shape of the window reflecting in the highlights of her eyes. I had a black cloth draped over some furniture in the background to give the dark background effect.

**Technical:** Canon 5D, Canon 85mm, 1/200 at 5.0, ISO 400.



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**Window Light:** Here the model was posed with the light mostly to the front and slightly off to the left side. A black backdrop was hung behind the model, and we simply used the large windows in my living room as the main source of light.

**Technical:** Canon 5D, [Tamron 28-300](#) at 60mm, 1/200 at 5.0, ISO 400



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**Window Light Reflector:** Here the model is posed with the window just out of the right side of the frame. An assistant was holding a gold reflector to fill in the shadows on the left side of her face. This image was shot in a worn warehouse located in my town. The window light was rich and soft and created a beautiful effect as it filtered through the dusty air.

**Technical:** Canon 5D, [Canon 50mm](#), 1/200 at 2.0, ISO 400.

## Shade with Reflector

Shooting a model situated in shade by using a reflector is the lighting technique I select most often when I'm shooting on location, because it solves many of the problems of location shoots. First, by reflecting light into the model's face, I have the ability to avoid top lighting that creates unpleasant shadows in his eyes. Second, I love the quality of the light I achieve when I shoot in the shade and add in reflected sunlight. I don't have to deal with the problems of direct sunlight, but I can still get a bright and glowing quality from my reflector choice.



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**Technical: (left) Canon 5D, Canon 85mm, 1.8 at 1/250, ISO 100. (right) Canon 5D, Canon 50mm, 3.0 at 1/250, ISO 100.**

**Shade Reflector:** This image (of my roommate) was taken in a small park in our town. It was a bright day, and I had her sit in the shadow of the trees on a beautiful set of stairs in the parkway. I had her boyfriend stand just out of the frame, reflecting the sunlight outside of the row of trees. I had another assistant use a piece of foam core (board) to flap wind into her hair (and away from her face).

There are dozens of reflectors out there to use. They come in different shapes, sizes, and colors. I typically use two types, [reflector disks](#) and foam core. I have several 5-in-1 reflector disks that include silver, gold, black, a silver/gold mix, and a [diffuser](#). Having these different options allows me to employ different lighting techniques. I choose silver reflectors most often, and sometimes silver/gold if I want to add a bit of warmth to the photo.

I'm also fond of using foam core to reflect light into the images. Foam core is very useful, because when I travel, I can pick it up at any arts and crafts store in most places. It's very inexpensive and available in an array of different sizes. It reflects a neutral color of light into the shadow of my images (neither cool like silver nor warm like gold). These boards reflect much less light than a reflector, but during a bright day (or in the studio) they're more than sufficient for filling in shadows.

**Shade Reflector:** For the image, the model is standing in an open stairwell of an old building.



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**Light was filtering in from the ceiling above (it was open to the sky), and the model stood in the shadows while an assistant reflected light into her face (eliminating shadows under her eyes and giving a bit of glow to her face).**

**Technical: (left) Canon 5D, Canon 50mm, 5.6 at 1/250, ISO 400 (right) Canon 5D, Canon 85mm, 2.0 at 1/100, ISO 400.**

When you're shooting in the shade, however, there are some issues to keep in mind. First of all, if you're shooting in the shade but the background is in the sun, watch out for distracting highlights that may be created. Second, shooting in the shade will give you a slightly cool image (more blue) that you might want to warm up in post-processing or by correctly setting your white-balance to shade.

Try practicing these different, inexpensive and effective natural lighting techniques on your next model shoot (even if it's family and friends) and you will see your model photography skills improving dramatically.

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