

Avoiding the Black Hole

Joe Kane

As professional photographers in the digital age, the uncertain economy and challenges of doing more with less, we sometimes seem unable to distinguish ourselves from others less qualified. We become content with the 'it's good enough' mentality that is pervasive today.

The Black Hole

We've all been there before. It's another reception, another presentation, another speaker standing at a podium. The photos all look alike after a while. Why does this happen? It's quite simply really. They all tend to be photographed with on-camera flash. How many photographers, professional photographers, rely on a single, camera-mounted flash to produce quality portrait images? Few, if any I imagine. Yet, without fail, most events of this nature are photographed exactly like this, with predictable results. This approach also creates a less than desirable effect that I call the "black hole" (Figure 1).

No, this isn't a supernatural occurrence nor is it a sci-fi illusion. It is real. It's what happens when the sensor-controlled output of the automatically set, on-camera TTL flash decides that enough light output has reached what you hope is your main subject. What may be in the foreground is mercilessly over-exposed and the area behind your subject is rendered dark and underexposed, a victim of the black hole. You can keep adding light in that direction, but inevitably all of this light is drawn



Figure 1. Example of using a single, camera-mounted flash to photograph speaker at the podium.



Figure 2. Photograph of the same speaker using the multiple strobe approach.

into the void, never to be seen again. It's flat looking and definitely looks anything but three-dimensional.

A Better Approach

But it's possible to avoid this black hole phenomenon. The approach came to me about 8-10 years ago, in part due to my frustration with the results and in part a belief that I could be doing this better. One evening I was scheduled to provide photographic coverage of an event that culminated in presentations to a small group of individuals. Instead of simply bringing my usual camera bag with a lone SB-28 flash, I brought along three additional heads, accompanied by Pocket Wizard transmitter/receivers. While the dinner was still in progress, I placed two strobes, one on either side of the podium and the remaining two at the back of the room. Each was set with the head adjusted straight up and the small built-in white card extended. The strobes were set to manual mode and in practically no time at all, I arrived at a usable exposure setting (Figure 2).

Since that time, this approach to photography has been based on the lessons learned from that night. Basically, it involves placing multiple strobes on manual power output in a staggered arrangement that results in relatively even exposure throughout the area to be photographed. With multiple strobes, it takes a little more effort to avoid getting one of these strobes appearing in your final shot, but it can be done. Higher ISO settings of 400-800 need to be used, since my choice of manual settings involve 1/4 – 1/2 power in order to keep recycle time to a minimum (Figure 3).

This approach to lighting is not dependent on specific equipment. My preference has been Nikon, as it has been for

my entire professional career. As previously mentioned, Pocket Wizards are my choice for remotely firing the strobes. That being said, it is not necessary to replace your existing photo gear. Your preference may be for infrared or photo-electric slaves. You may feel more comfortable with Canon or Olympus. What is needed is a willingness to experiment, to challenge yourself and work just a little harder. We are professionals working for organizations trying to present themselves in the best possible light, shouldn't we do the very best we can by doing the same?

Author

Joe Kane is an Editorial Photographer at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, where he has been providing a diverse range of photography since 1985. Prior to coming to Mayo, he had been a medical photographer at the University of Minnesota Hospital. kane.joseph@mayo.edu.

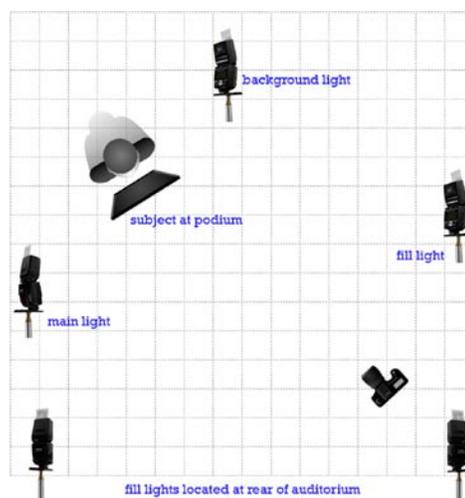


Figure 3. Lighting diagram for typical multiple strobe photography set-up.

Showcase

Joe Kane – Multiple Flash Location Photography

