

11: Direction of light

Light is a separate element of your photograph

Photography means, "painting with light". Light is your raw material, your unmoulded clay, your box of paints.

In this chapter

You are used, by now, to look for the subject, the foreground and the background of each photograph you take. Now I want you to start looking for the light in each image as well.

Light is what will bring your photograph alive, and you should take control of it - don't leave its influence to chance.

There are 2 aspects of the light you need to look for: the direction and the quality. Each will affect your photography, and each can be controlled. In this chapter we'll look at direction, and in the next, quality.

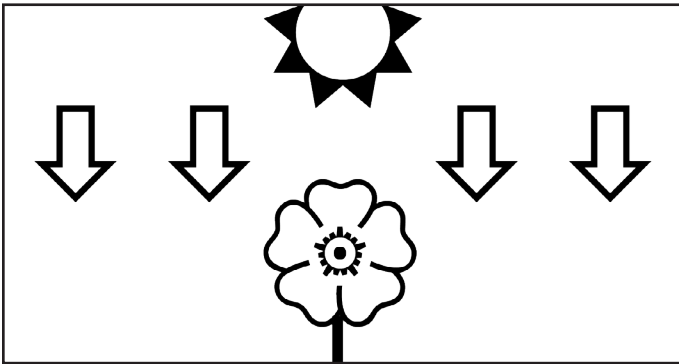
The direction of light, and the effect it has on your image

There are 6 main directions light can come from:

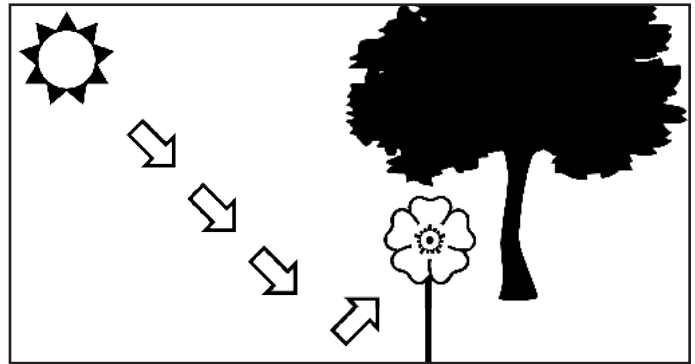
- top down
- bottom up
- directly in front
- directly behind
- from one side
- from the other side

There are variations and subtleties (eg. from the top but slightly to one side), but for this chapter, just think about these 6 directions.

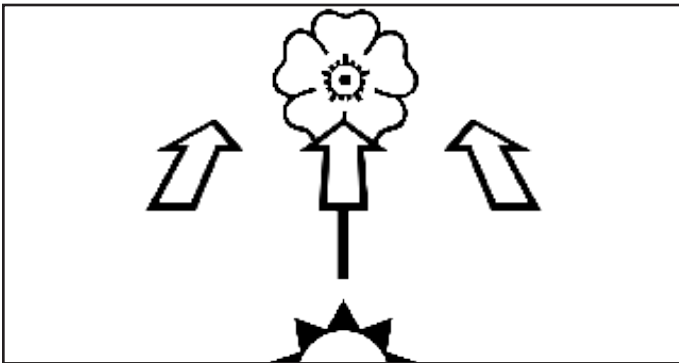
top down



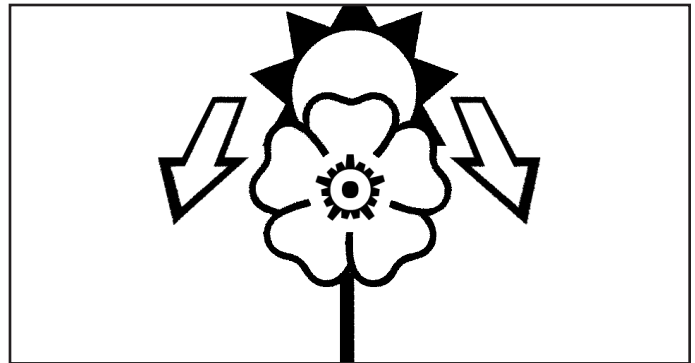
bottom up



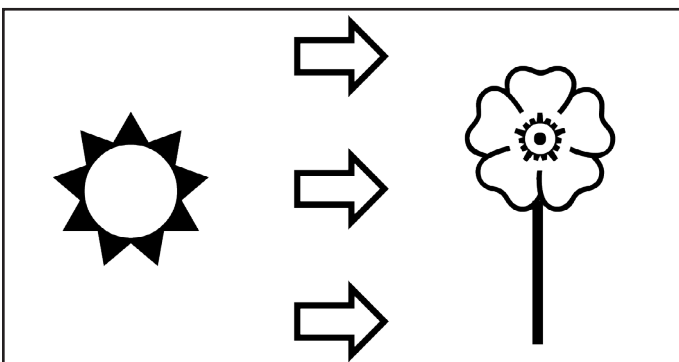
directly in front



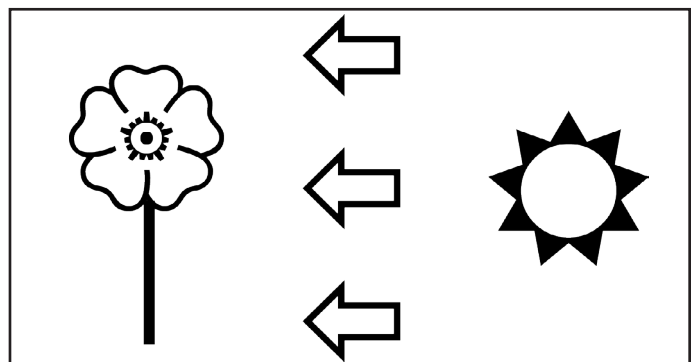
directly behind

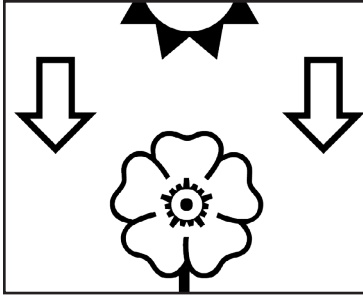


from one side



from the other side

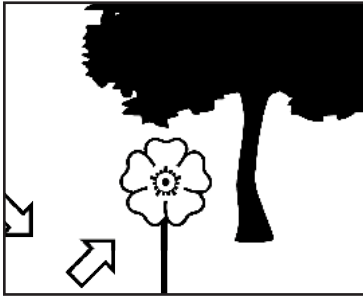




Top down light

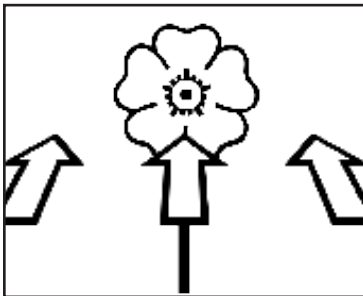
Typically this is what you get when you shoot outdoors at midday. The sun is overhead and, unless it is behind a cloud, you will get bright, harsh, contrasty light.

Look out for hard shadows and washed-out colours.



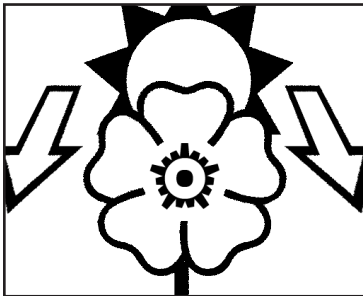
Bottom up light

Humans are used to the main light coming from somewhere on an arc that starts on one side of the horizon, goes up above, and comes down the other side. The sun's path, in other words. Anything that deviates from this looks wrong and unnatural. Horror films are shot with the light coming from below the baddie's face to make them look sinister. Avoid this for day to day images.



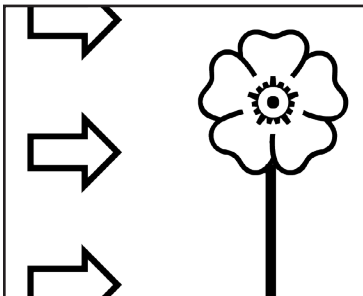
Front light

Imagine you are the subject and the sun is blazing straight into your face. What do you do? Squint. That's the first downside to front lighting. Another is that, like top lighting, it tends to wash out colours and gives a very flat feeling with no depth. Lastly, it gets rid of all texture by blasting the shadows to nothing. Good, if you want to eliminate wrinkles; not so good if you want an interesting landscape.



Back light

The old fashioned advice used to be, "never shoot into the sun". Ignore that advice from now on. Back lighting is one of my favourites - it creates depth, interest, and you'll often get a gorgeous rim light around your subject to help pop it out from the background. It fools the camera's auto exposure though, so make a note that you'll need to *overexpose by 1-2 stops*.



Side light

Side light brings out all the texture in your subject by creating shadows right across the image. It's the landscape photographer's preferred lighting set up, and also adds depth and interest to still life and character portraits.

Homework

Pick any subject, something that you can move around, and light it in each of the 6 ways described in this chapter:

- from above
- from below
- from the front
- from the back
- from the left
- from the right

Try the homework inside, using artificial light, and also outside, using daylight.

For the indoor version you can use any kind of light - a desklight, a torch, the light on your phone.

Make sure your flash is turned off, otherwise all your images will be front-lit. If your camera is struggling to take photos on P or Auto modes, it may be because it is too dark. Go back to the chapters in Part 1, and put your camera on shutter priority mode. Choose a shutter speed of 1/60th or 1/125th, and let the camera pick the aperture. Use a high ISO if it's still struggling - as high as you need to go.

You should notice that it's easier to make all 6 photos indoors, because you can move the light around your subject. But once you head outside you will need to move yourself all around the subject to change the position of the light. And you might not be able to finish all the photos at the same time - you might need to come back later when the sun has changed position.

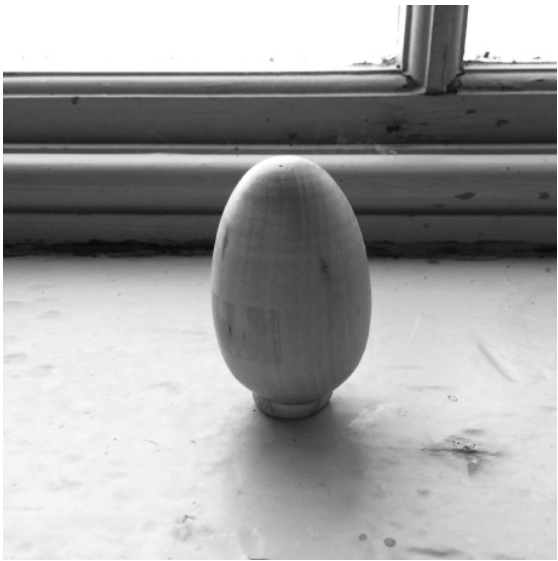
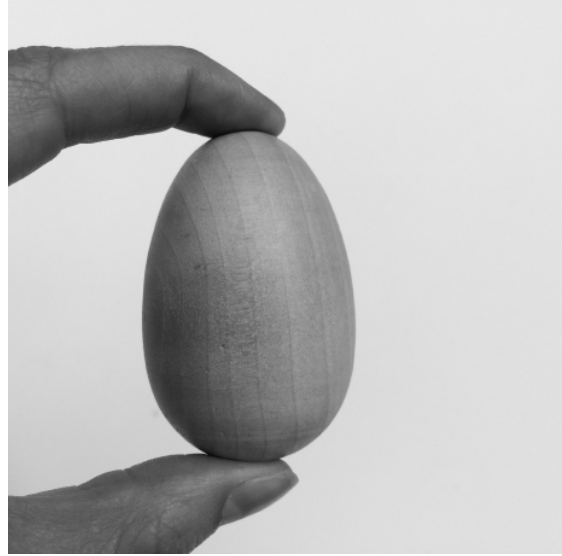
If you're working with short days, or cloudy weather, bookmark the outdoors homework to come back to when you have a sunny day.

Indoors

- above
- below
- front
- back
- left
- right

Outdoors

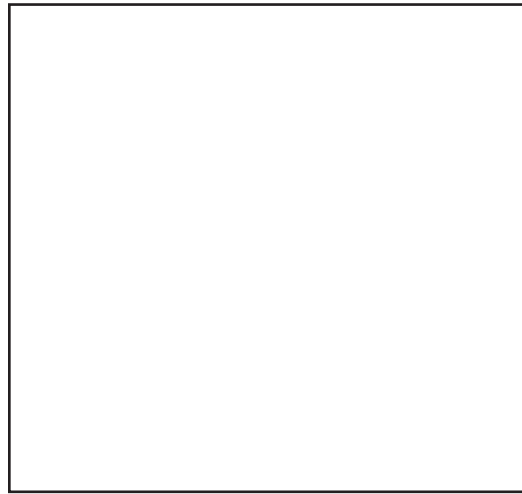
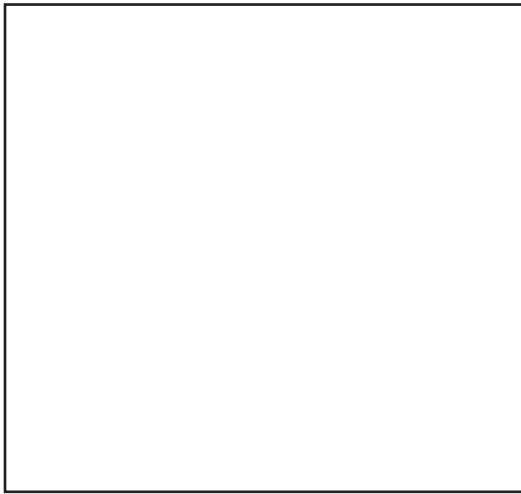
- above
- below
- front
- back
- left
- right



Things to remember:

1. Imagine the light is a separate element that you need to consider for each photograph you take
 2. The direction the light is coming from will influence the feel of your photograph
 3. You can control the direction of the light by either moving the light, or moving yourself
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Stick your homework photos here:



Checklist for Chapter 11

- I will look on light as an element all to itself in each photograph I take from now on
- I understand that light falls on a subject from a definite direction
- I understand that I can control the direction of light, either by moving the light or by moving myself
- I've made a start on the homework, even if I've not finished all of it

In my own words...

Why is the direction of light important?

TAKING A NEW STEP, UTTERING
A NEW WORD, IS WHAT PEOPLE
FEAR MOST.

~ FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY

