

# High Key / Low Key Photography Introduction

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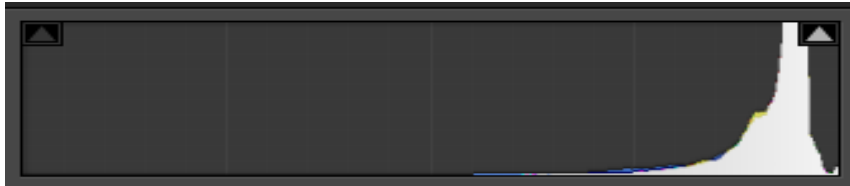


# February High Key or Low Key Competition

High-Key or Low-Key Photography encompasses images that have been exposed or manipulated post-processing, so that:

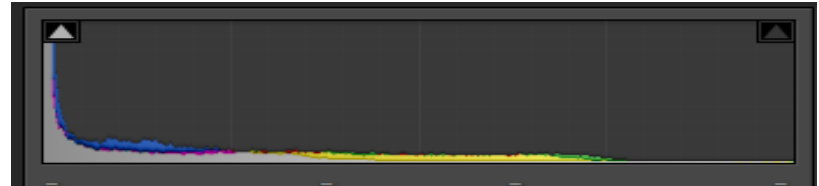
- **High Key:** The key tones are lighter than the mid-tone ideal, (meaning that shadows are brighter and more open, usually conveying to the image a light airy feel);
- **Low Key:** The key tones are darker than the mid-tone ideal (meaning the highlights are dimmer, the shadows dense and the overall image looking darker and more brooding).

# High Key

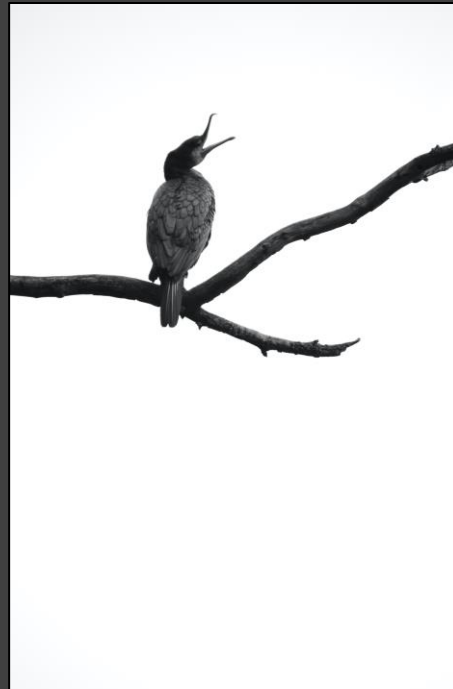


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# Low Key



# High Key Examples



# Low Key Examples



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# Low Key Beneficial Indoor Gear

- Camera – larger sensor better for noise control in shadows, i.e. full frame
- Fast lens (e.g. f/2.8, but f/1.8 or f/1.4 are better) or a flash
- Tripod (can compensate for slower lenses with stationary subjects and long shutter speeds)
- Light source such as a flash
- Dark background (e.g. black drape)
- Light modifier (such an umbrella or softbox), although bouncing flash off ceiling or wall can work. Complimentary portraits. Can use single source for harsher light and shadows to highlight textures.

# Indoor Low Key Settings

- Ideal camera settings: Lowest ISO and wide-open aperture – good starting point
  - ISO ~100, and best combo of aperture & shutter speed for subject.
  - Can use auto-exposure: spot metering on subject to avoid averaging in the dark background.
  - Then apply negative exposure adjustment
- Lighting
  - Minimize light reaching the background
  - Can move subject and light together, both further from background
  - Can use side lighting for more contrast, 3D, and for darker background – experiment with angles.
  - Flash, candles or flashlights are options. Totally dark room with light entering through a partly open door.

# Outdoor Low Key Settings

- Landscapes
  - Look for bright, high-contrast subjects on a mostly dark background
  - Clouds darken scene and create light patterns on ground
  - Low ISO
  - But smaller apertures for greater depth of field
  - Tripod and slower shutter speeds
  - Consider conversion to B&W for more drama
- Macro (indoor or outdoor)
  - Small subjects
  - Use tripod
  - Adjust exposure to remove natural light
    - Manual mode, lowest ISO and narrow aperture (e.g. f/18 or f/22). Shutter speed - use the normal speed for flash synch (such as 1/180 – 1/250 sec)
  - Use flash to light up just your subject



# Processing Low Key Images

## 1. Brighten Your Subject

- Can brighten your subject a bit more, especially if no flash. Adjust the Exposure, Highlights and Whites in Lightroom.

## 2. Adjust White Balance

- White balance may be off – cool flash or warm indoor lighting.
- Consider B&W conversion for drama

## 3. Reduce Noise

- Low ISO is a goal, but you may have needed to increase it. Use noise reduction carefully because it can soften the subject.

## 4. Play With The Colors

- If image contains both cool and warm tones, you can play with the colors by using the HSL panel in Lightroom. Can shift the colors and emphasize contrast between cool and warm parts of your image.

## 5. Add A Vignette

- Low key photographs, especially portraits, are ideal for vignettes. Try the Radial Filter in Lightroom to create vignettes – better than the Vignette Tool.

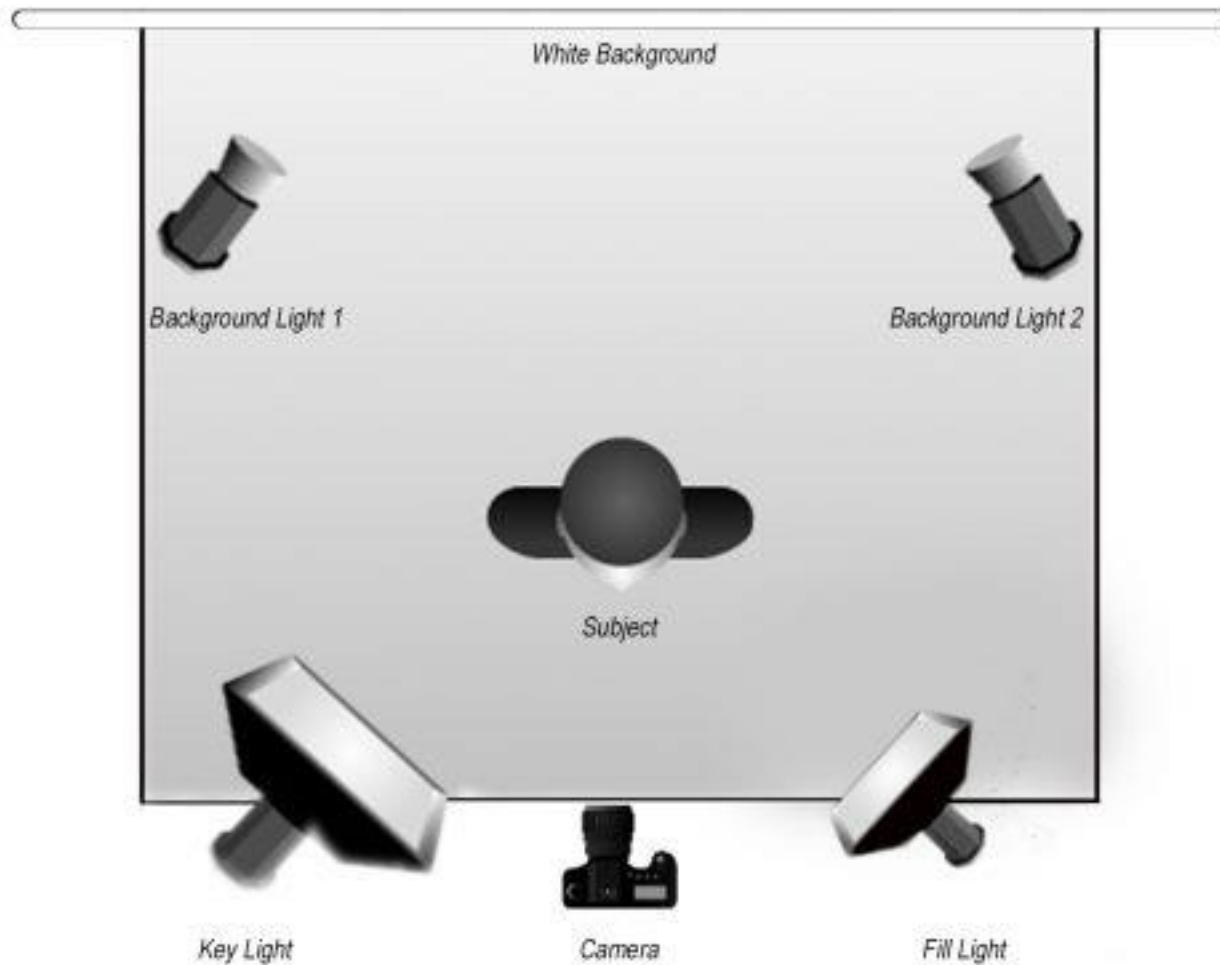
## 6. Fix Backdrop Pleats /Wrinkles – Remove Distractions

- If using a dark backdrop adjust the Shadows and Blacks sliders in Lightroom until you get a wrinkle-free black background. These will affect the subject too – you might need to use the Adjustment Brush to bring back some details. Can use Photoshop's burn and Adjustment Brush to remove unwanted objects.

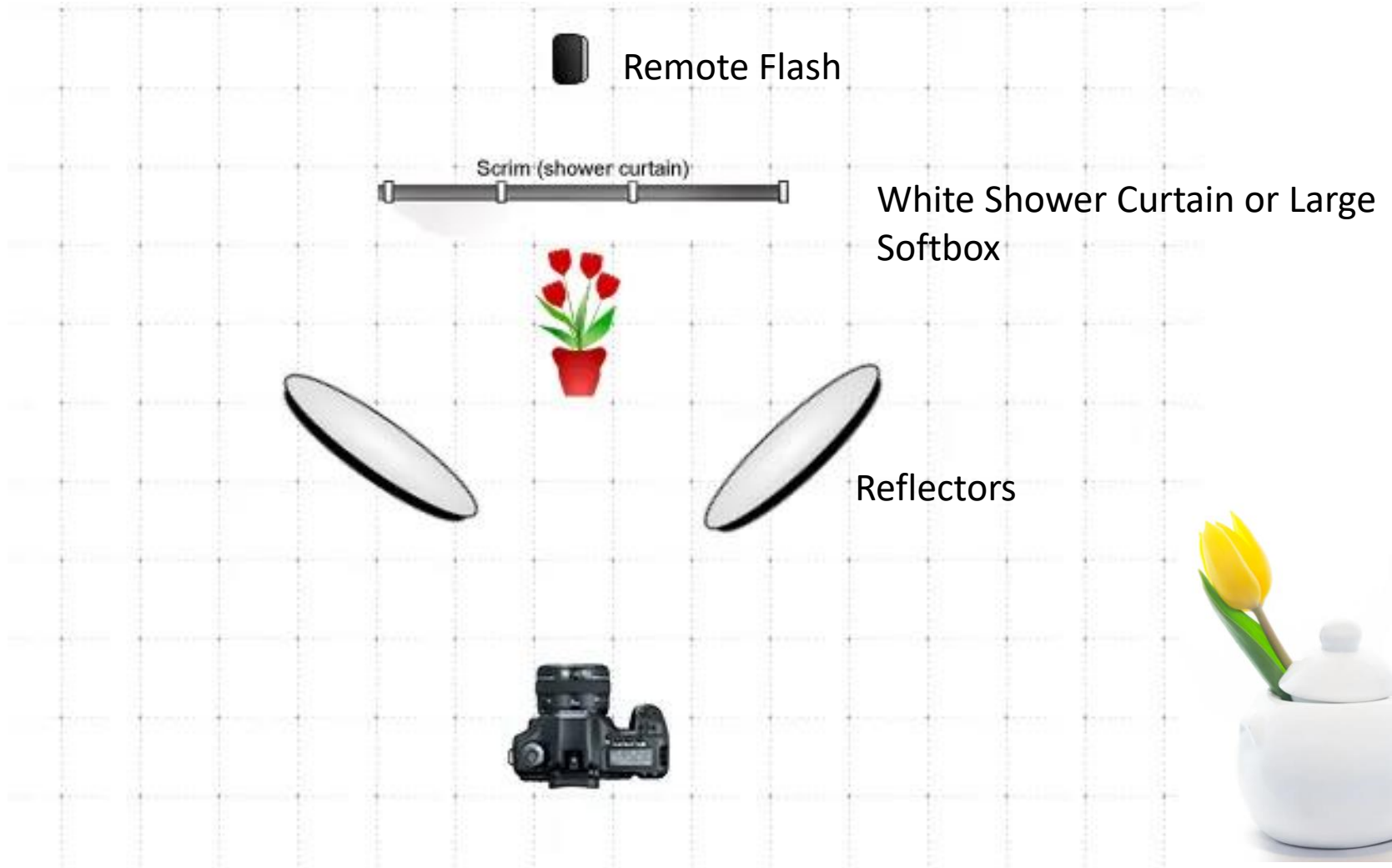
# High Key Overview

- Produced by using a background that's far brighter than your subject—while still exposing for your subject.
- Reduce or eliminate shadows
  - Key & fill lights nearly equal power
- Diffuse lighting on main subject to avoid harsh shadows or contrasts
- Some darker spots add depth

# Ideal Studio Setup – 4 Flashes



# Minimal Studio – 1 Flash



*Actual Example*

# High Key Landscapes

- Bright, white backgrounds – Snow and bright sand often work well, as do flat cloudy skies
- Low contrast lighting – Cloudy, foggy, flat-light days are a good time to consider making high-key shots
- Back-lit subjects where you can overexpose the background and fill in the subject with fill-flash or reflected light
- Consider spot or center-weighted metering of the subject, allowing good exposure of the subject but a blown-out background.
- Using the Live-view feature of your DSLR or mirrorless cameras can be your friend as you can see your exposure and lighting effect before you make the shot.

# High Key Landscape Examples



# Post Processing Touchup of High Key



A screenshot of the Adobe Lightroom adjustment panel. At the top is a histogram showing a peak in the highlights. Below it are camera metadata: ISO 200, 90 mm, f/11, 1/8 sec. The adjustment sliders are: Contrast (0), Highlights (0), Shadows (0), Whites (0), Blacks (0), Clarity (0), Dehaze (0), Saturation (0), Sharpness (40), Noise (0), Moiré (0), Defringe (0). The Color section is collapsed. The Brush section is expanded, showing: Size (12.0), Feather (90), Flow (89), Auto Mask (checked), and Density (100).

Straight out of the camera, this shot needed to be white balanced and there were portions not evenly lit.

Turning on the Highlight Clipping feature in Lightroom allows painting in more brightness with the Adjustment Brush and Auto Mask turned on. Easy way to get a completely white background.



A screenshot of the Adobe Lightroom adjustment panel, identical to the one in the top panel. It shows the histogram, camera metadata, and various adjustment sliders for contrast, highlights, shadows, whites, blacks, clarity, dehaze, saturation, sharpness, noise, moiré, defringe, and color. The brush settings are also visible.

# A Post Processing Conversion in Lightroom

(<https://digital-photography-school.com/how-to-light-shoot-edit-high-key-photography/>)



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- **Exposure** up to +1.00, **Highlights** down to -100, **Shadows** up to +100, the **Whites** up to +44, the **Blacks** down to -56.
- Converted to **Black & White. Black & White Mix dropdown** and used the Targeted Adjustment Tool. Sampled different spots in the image and brought up the luminance of those colors. Tweaked sliders to adjust brightness of each color.
- Readjusted **Exposure** to +1.46, the **Contrast** to +38, **White** down to +38, **Clarity** to -7 and **Dehaze** down to -9.
- To make the background full white, and remove distracting elements, used the **Adjustment Brush** tool. The **Exposure** was turned all the way up to +4, checked the **Automask** checkbox, and used the brush to “white out” the background.