



# Continuous Lighting in Photography: Your Ultimate Guide

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# LIGHTING IN PHOTOGRAPHY: A GUIDE

Looking to get started with continuous lighting in photography? You've come to the right place.

Continuous lights are often overlooked by studio and [portrait photographers](#) – yet they offer a host of benefits. And by applying a few simple techniques, you can get *incredible* results (no matter your level of experience).

Below, I explain everything you need to know about continuous lighting, including:

How continuous lights differ from strobes and speedlights

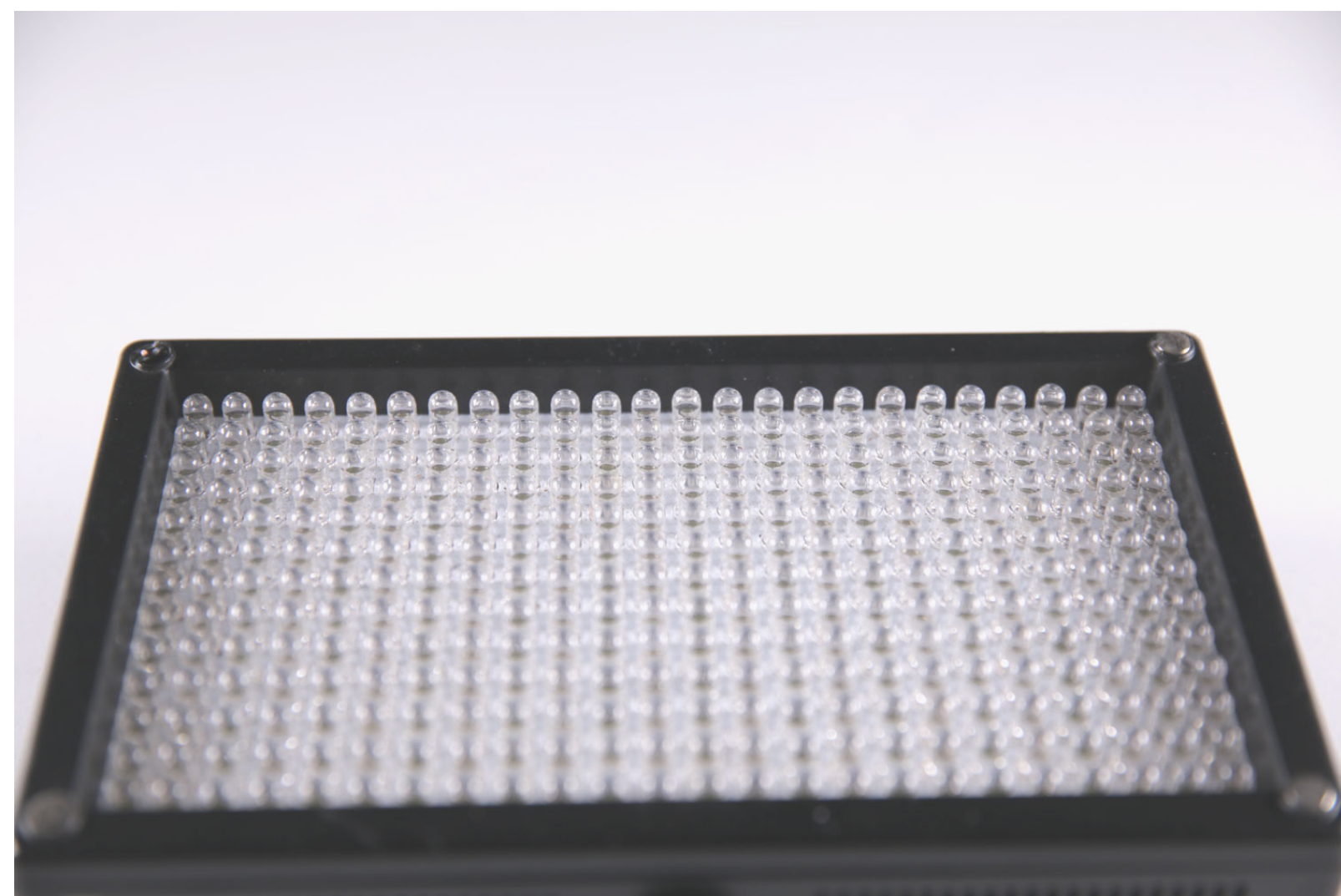
What makes continuous lights so much better (or worse) than alternatives

How to work with continuous lights to achieve *amazing* portraits, product photos, and more

Let's dive right in.

## What are continuous lights?

Continuous lights refer to **artificial lighting** that *continuously* illuminates the subject. They don't flash on and off as you take photos; instead, they remain bright throughout the shoot.



Technically, we encounter continuous lighting all the time. It's what we use in our houses, stores, streetlights, and more.

But continuous lights in the studio are designed specifically for photographic (or video) applications. You can mount them on a stand, move them around the room, and add modifiers to diffuse or focus the light. They're a tool used by some professional photographers, though they face stiff competition from two alternative sources of artificial illumination:

Studio strobes and speedlights.

## Continuous lights vs studio strobes vs speedlights: What's the difference?

While continuous lights work constantly to illuminate the subject, studio strobes and speedlights create bursts of light *only* when fired by the camera. They're what most people think of when they hear the word "flash."

Now, **speedlights** are portable, battery-operated lights that attach to most cameras via the hot-shoe mount. They can also be used off-camera, though you'll generally need some sort of wireless trigger setup to make them fire.



**Studio strobes**, referred to as *strobes* throughout this article, are larger, more powerful lights that are mounted on light stands and are always activated through some sort of corded or



wireless setup. They're infinitely less portable than speedlights, and they're *far* more expensive.

Compared to continuous lights, both speedlights and strobes emit a more powerful burst of light – so if you need to overpower strong ambient lighting (e.g., a harsh sun at midday), speedlights and strobes are the better options.

However, because speedlights and strobes only create a momentary flash of light – as opposed to continuously illuminating the subject – they're much tougher to use. Speedlight photographers, in particular, tend to work blind; they set up their speedlights, take a test shot, evaluate the result, and make adjustments. There's no way to know exactly how the flash will look until *after* the shot has been taken, so it requires a lot of experimentation to get beautiful images.

(Studio strobe photographers do run into similar problems, but most strobes include *modeling lights*, which allow you to preview the quality and direction of the illumination before taking a shot.)

Bottom line: If you don't have much experience visualizing lighting effects, or you simply like the idea of capturing what you *see*, then continuous lights are a great buy. On the other hand, if you need very powerful lighting, strobes (and to a lesser extent, speedlights) are the better pick.

## Why you should use continuous lights in your photography

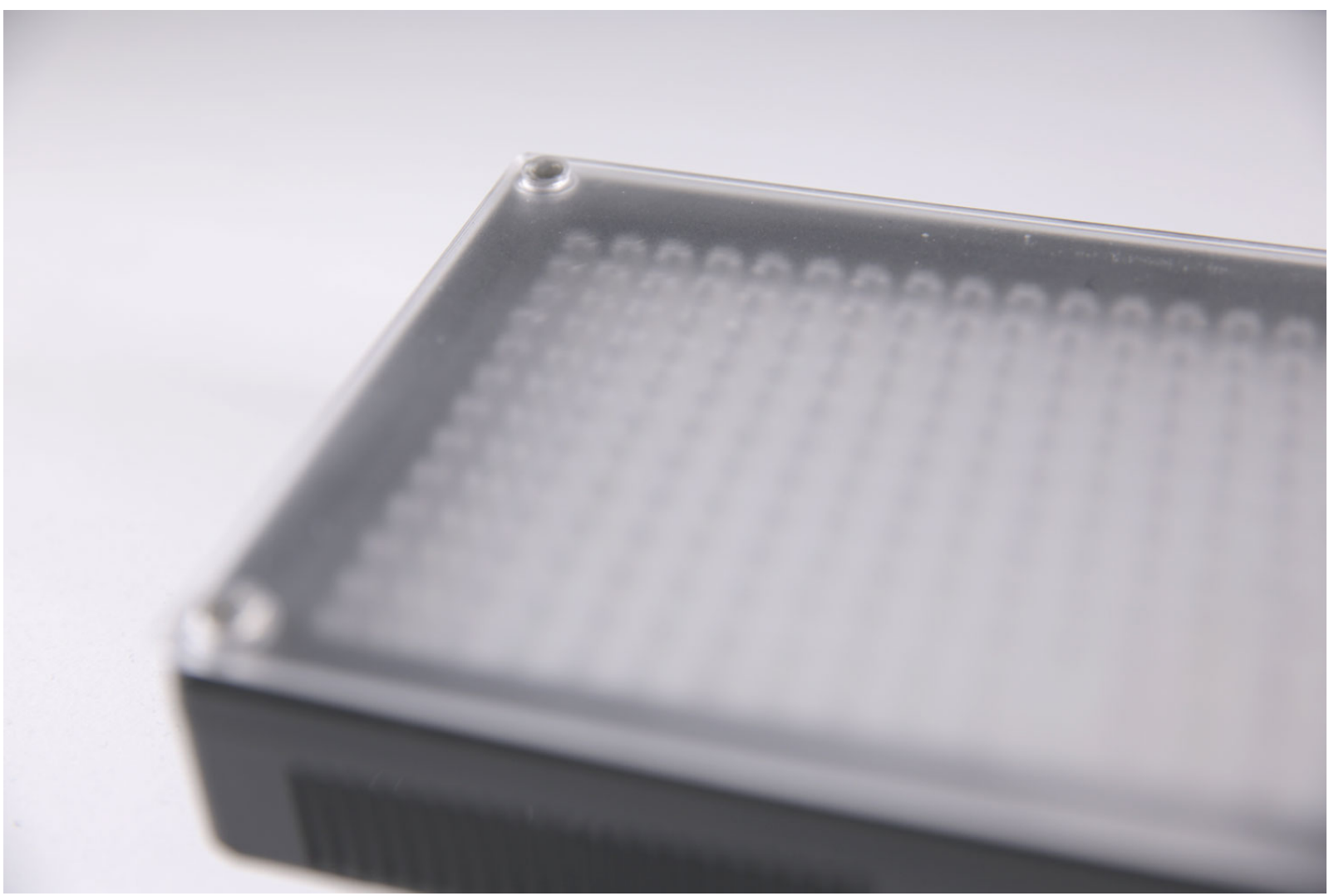
Continuous lights offer many benefits, and so if you're on the fence about pursuing continuous light photography, I certainly encourage you to give it a try.

For one, as I explained above, continuous lights allow you to see both the direction and quality of illumination *before* you ever take a photo. That means you can set up your lighting, see how it interacts with your subject, make tweaks, observe your subject some more, and so on – until

you get the exact effect you want. It's difficult to overstate how helpful this is, especially for beginners (but also for more seasoned photographers, too).

And continuous lights offer a helpful workaround when shooting in a venue that doesn't allow flash photography. You should always ask to be sure, but even if flash photography is banned in a location, continuous lighting may be permitted (thus allowing you to get the shots you envisioned).

Plus, continuous lighting is far less disruptive than speedlight and strobe photography. If you're shooting at a sensitive event, you can set up your continuous lights, then leave them on for the entire photoshoot. You'll get great images, and you won't have to worry about disturbing your subjects.



# 5 tips to improve your continuous lighting photography

In this section, I offer a handful of quick tips to level up your continuous lighting, starting with:

## 1. Get the strongest lights you can afford

Continuous lights offer beautiful illumination – but they're not as powerful as speedlights and certainly can't compete with studio strobes.

Which means that, if you want the best results, you should get the strongest lights you can find.

Unfortunately, stronger continuous lights do tend to cost more, but they really are worth it, especially if you'll be shooting in areas with heavy ambient lighting. (Strong continuous lights will also let you keep your **shutter speed** at a reasonable setting when working indoors.)

I'd recommend an LED with at least 1000 bulbs, and if it turns out to be a little too strong, you can always turn down the power. Better to have too much than too little!

## 2. Soften the light as much as you can

Continuous lighting generally looks nice. But if you want outstanding images, you must adjust the lighting *quality* – that is, how **hard or soft the light appears**.

Specifically, when doing standard portraits or product photos, you should work with soft lighting, which features limited shadows and subtle gradations. Soft light is flattering, plus it will help prevent unpleasant hotspots on your subjects.

How do you create soft light?

You put a **modifier** over your continuous light, such as a **softbox** or an umbrella. Personally, I like softboxes, but umbrellas tend to be cheaper and easier for beginners to use. Either will

soften the light, so don't get *too* hung up on the decision; just make sure you're producing soft light, and you'll be good to go.

### 3. Check the color temperature

While speedlights and strobes generally have a *fixed* color temperature, some continuous lights let you *modify* the color temperature as you work.

And while this can be an interesting way to create cool effects, and it can also help you match your continuous lights to the ambient light, it's generally best to keep the color temperature set to a very *natural* value.

What would I recommend? A daylight setting (around 5600K) is a great starting point. Of course, you're always free to tweak this, but if you aim for the most realistic look possible, you'll definitely improve your result.

Then, if you decide you want a different effect, you can always make adjustments when editing.

### 4. Block out all other lighting

This is a *huge* continuous lighting tip, and it's one that you *absolutely must remember* if you want to get the best photos.

While you can shoot strobes and speedlights without adjusting the ambient lighting, that just isn't true for continuous lights. Instead, as soon as you bring out those continuous lights, you should turn off any lights in the room. And you should cover the windows with curtains, too.

The goal here is to make your continuous lighting your camera's *only* source of illumination. Otherwise, ambient lighting may contribute different lighting qualities and directions to the scene, and you may also end up with problematic color temperatures in the mix.

### 5. Use more than one continuous light



While you *can* capture excellent photos with a single continuous light...  
...the best portrait and product setups often require two, three, or more lights.  
After all, the more lights you have, the more you can carefully sculpt your subject.  
If you're photographing portraits, I recommend a three-point lighting system. Position a light in front of your subject (and off to the side, so it's hitting the face at a 45-degree angle). This is the *key* light.  
Then position a second light, the *fill* light, on the other side of the subject (so that it's filling in the shadows created by the key light). Make sure that this fill light is at a lower power setting than the key light.  
Finally, position a light behind your subject. This can either point at your subject to create a rim light – or point at the backdrop to create subtle background illumination. In fact, why not try both and see which you prefer?

## Continuous lighting in photography: final words

Now that you've finished this article, you're ready to work with continuous lights.  
After all, you know what they are, why they're great, *and* how to modify and position them for amazing results.  
So grab your continuous lights. And get shooting!  
Now over to you:  
*What do you plan to shoot with continuous lights? What setups will you use? Share your thoughts in the comments below!*

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