

# How to Light, Shoot, and Edit for High-Key Photography

A Post By: [Rick Ohnsman](#)

High-key lighting originated in the early film and television days. Early cameras and film with limited dynamic range, forced [lighting](#) techniques to reduce contrast intentionally. Today, with its use of bright light and an emphasis on whites which give an almost ethereal feel to a photo, the high-key look has become the desired style for some photographers. Let's explore when you might want to choose the high-key photography style and how you can achieve it both when shooting and in editing.





Emulating the look of early television was the goal for this photo and a high-key monochrome was a great way to do it.

As with all art, individual interpretation plays a big part in what photographers consider a “high-key” image and how the technique should be used.

## A few things that typify a high-key photo:

- Bright lighting that greatly reduces and sometimes eliminates shadows
- A dynamic range that is predominately toward the right side of a histogram.
- Images where the “mood” is typically upbeat, light-hearted, ethereal, “airy” or beautiful.
- Typical uses are in high-fashion, product, or studio-produced images. Lesser so, but not totally non-existent, are high-key outdoor and [landscape](#) photographs.
- Lighting where the ratio between the key and fill light is very close, thus the root of the term “high-key.”
- Distracting elements in the background get eliminated, and typically high-key images contain only the main subject. High-key images are often Minimalist. Many times, the background is entirely white.
- [Monochrome](#) high-key is more prevalent, and when there is color used, it is typically subdued or used as an accent.



Images of babies and children often benefit from the bright, happy feel of high key.

## Two basic approaches to creating high-key images:

- 1) Light, expose and shoot the photo with high-key in mind from the beginning, or
- 2) Rework a photograph in editing so that it takes on the attributes of the high-key style.

Often the final image, even if initially shot with high-key in mind, may still require some post-processing to achieve the best result. So let's first look at how to light and create a high-key image.



## Creating the high-key look in the studio

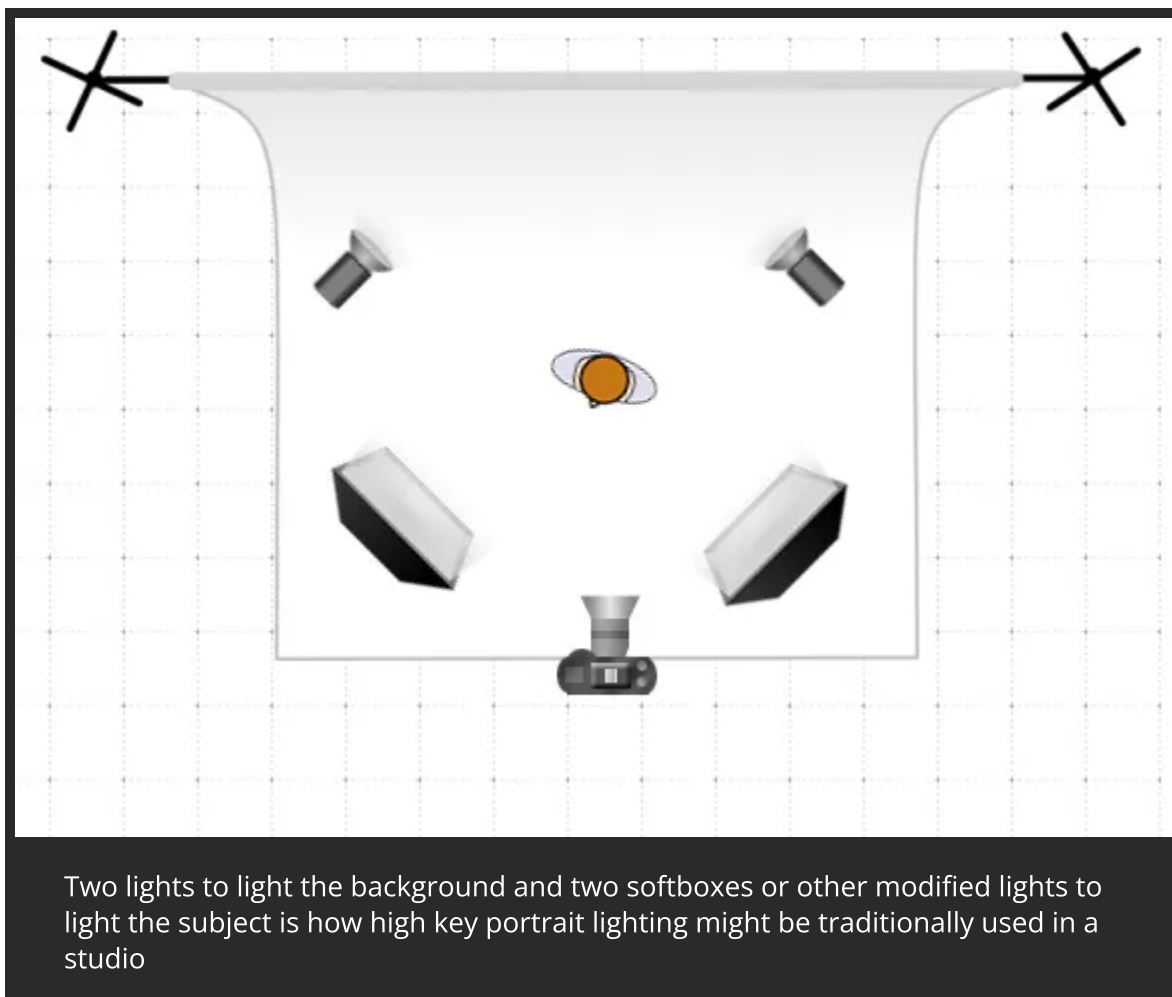
I use the term “studio” here to reference the use of artificial lights in an indoor environment where you can control lighting. This may be but is not restricted to a traditional studio. For smaller still-life subjects, the kitchen counter works just fine. How you light the subject is what creates the high-key look.

### The background

The first objective is to light the **background** in such a way that it is entirely white with no detail. The choice of background material is up to you. If you are shooting a model full-length in a studio, you might traditionally use something like a large piece of seamless paper. A plain white wall can work too. In fact, you can use most light-colored backgrounds if you can put



enough light on it to bring the levels up to a “255” totally white level. The lighting diagram below shows how you can set up for a high-key shot in the studio.



Once you have your lights set up, make a shot and adjust your **exposure** so that the background goes as close to all white as you can make it. Sometimes, depending on the lighting equipment you have available, you may not be able to get even lighting across the background. Getting it right in-camera is, of course, optimal; however, you can clean things up in post-processing.

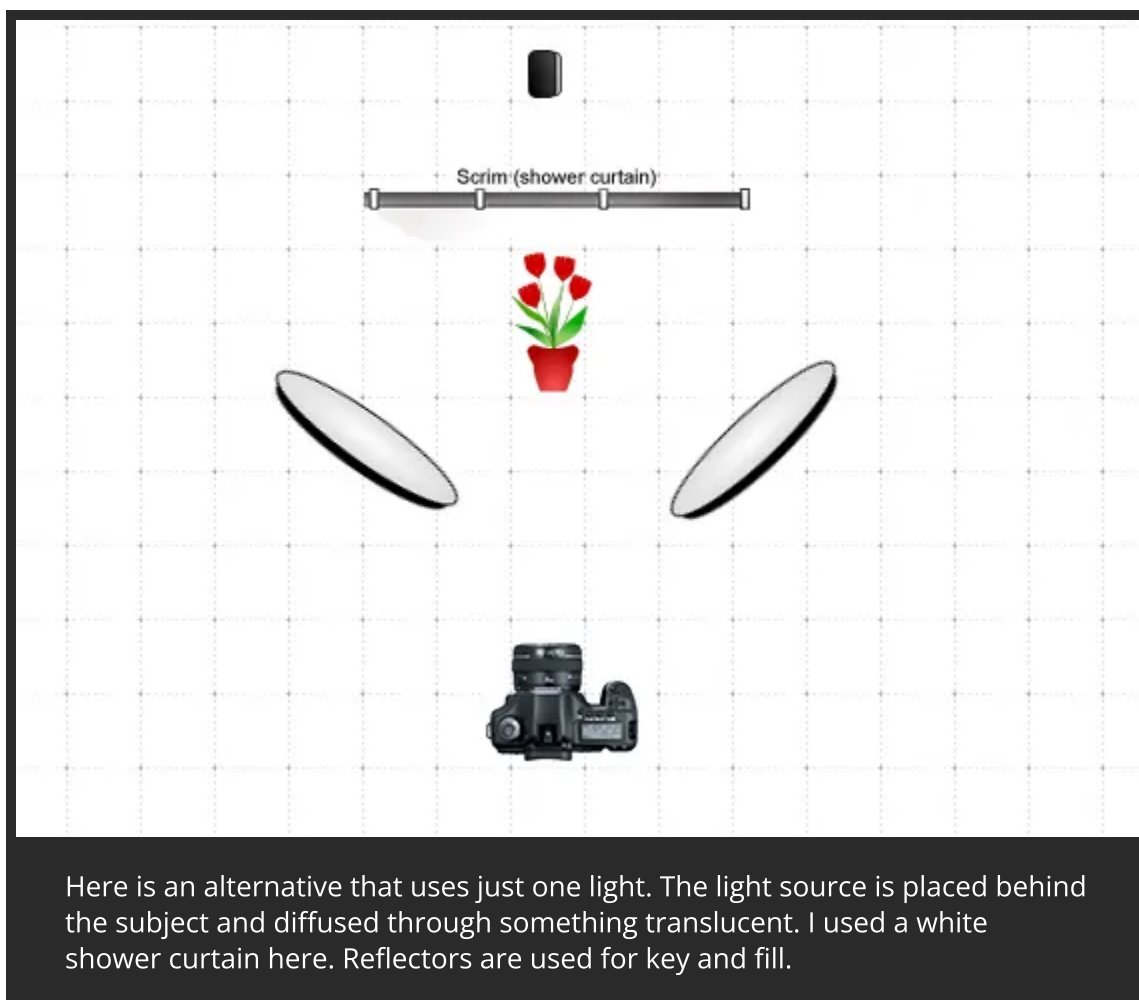
Professionals who make many high-key shots during a studio session may take the time, and have the equipment, to light the background evenly, thus avoiding extensive editing of each shot later. If you are a beginner though, lack of more expensive **lighting** equipment should not prevent you from giving high-key lighting a try.

## Lighting the subject

Lighting the subject is done in the same kind of standard style you might use when doing portrait photography with a key and fill light. You’ll see from the diagram above the key and fill lights have been placed on opposing sides of the subject. For traditional portrait or studio still-life shots, the fill light is typically slightly dimmer than the key light. This allows some shadows to create modeling and depth to the image. (The difference in intensity between lights is called the “lighting ratio.”) In the high-key lighting style, the key and fill lights are usually closer in intensity with the objective being to lessen shadows and give a “flatter” look, minimizing contrast.

In the first diagram above, the background is front-lit with light shining on the background. An alternative is to back-light the background, placing whatever lighting device you're using, (studio strobe, continuous light, flash or whatever) behind a translucent background so the light shines through and illuminates it. As before, you should light this to be even, and bring its brightness as close to full white as you can get. Take a look at the diagram below to see this alternative lighting method.

Another often used variation of this style is to use a large softbox behind the subject and pointed at the camera.



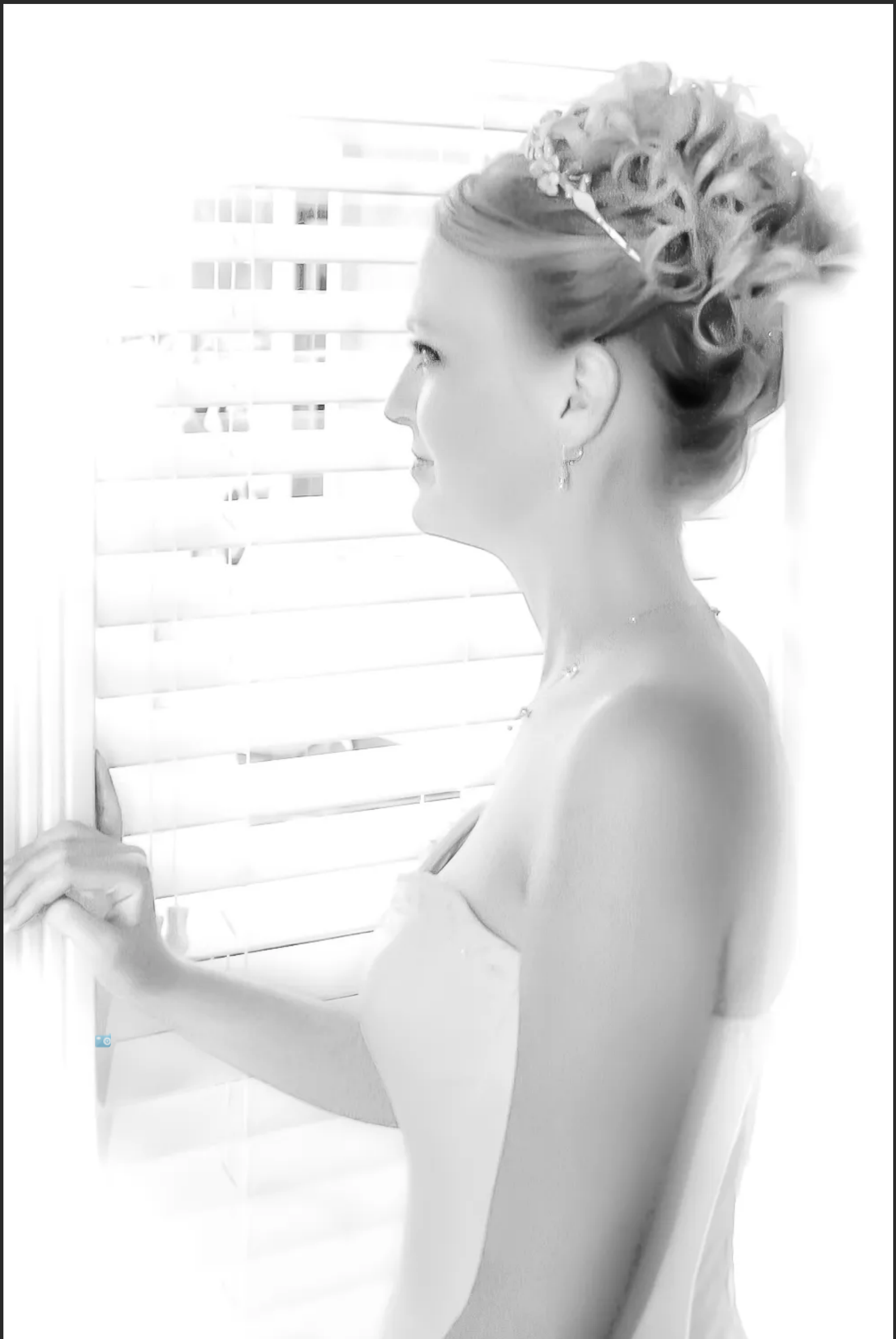
This lighting style brings in another option of how you light your subject. Because the light used to illuminate the background is pointed at the camera, it might be possible to substitute reflectors for the key and fill lights, bouncing that backlight back onto the subject. This technique can work well for smaller subjects where the distances between the background, subject, and reflectors can be smaller and less light is required.

It may be possible to create the entire effect using just one light source. The photo below was done using this technique.



## Using window light

Understanding the concepts above can help you create high-key images using window light and a reflector or fill-flash. **Portrait** and wedding photographers often take advantage of this style of creating high-key shots with a minimum of lighting equipment. The same principals apply – overexpose the background and light the subject with fill lighting.



An easy way to make a high-key shot at a wedding is to put your subject in window light, overexpose the light coming in the window and fill the subject with your Speedlight.





This was done using the same technique with the backlit shower curtain, but a Speedlight was used to fill the subject.

# High-key in landscape photography

High-key images are relatively easy in an environment where you have full control of the lighting. Being able to make high-key shots outdoors with only the available light is more of a challenge. You have to work with the light that is available, have an eye for subjects that lend themselves to the high-key look, and then use your camera settings to get the best in-camera shot you can. Also know that almost always, you need to do some extra work in editing to achieve a good high-key look with your landscape images.



This bitter cold day in Yellowstone National Park had a high-key look already, and minimal editing was needed. High-key needn't always be monochrome.

## The look that typifies high-key photography

Consider the look that typifies high-key photography and what subjects and conditions in landscapes might lend themselves to that look:

- 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.

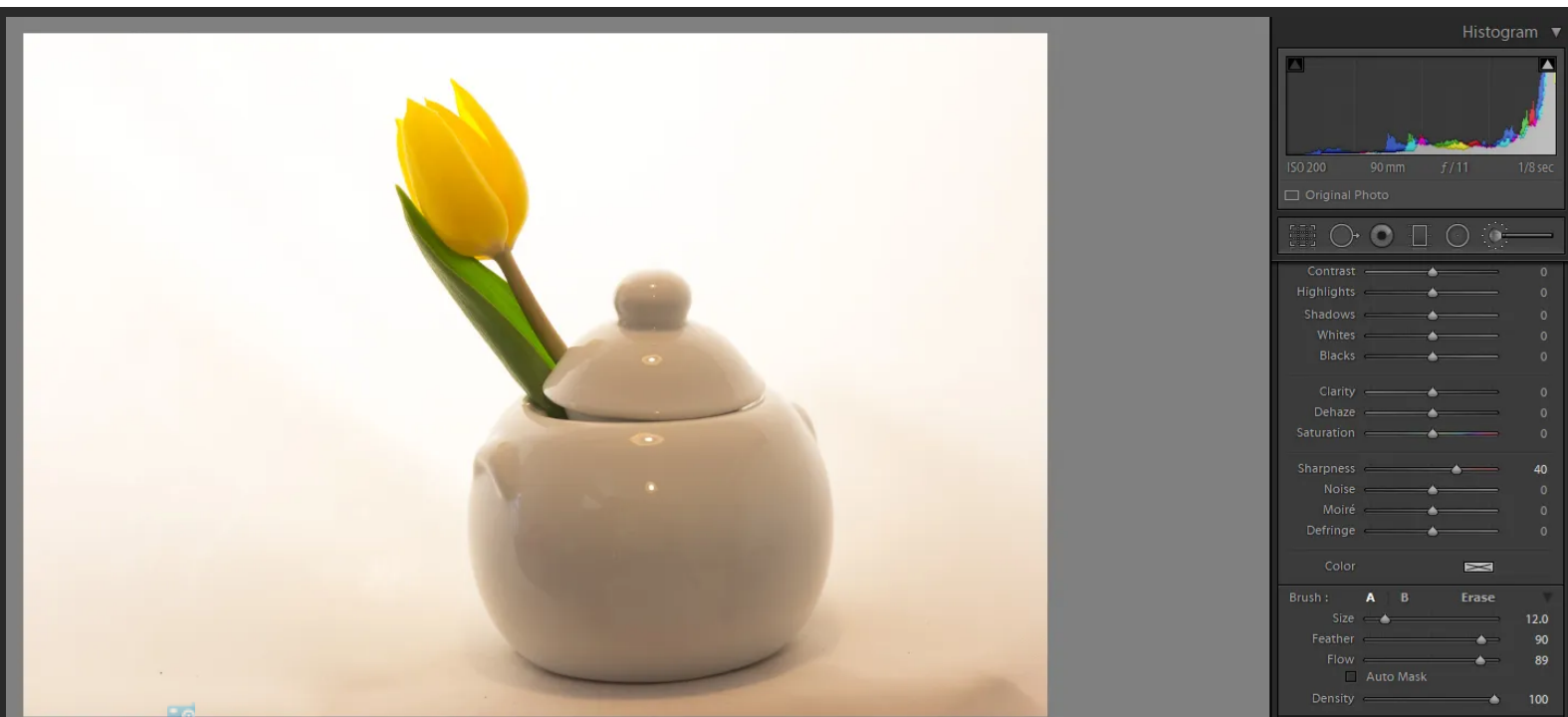
- Using the Live-view feature of your DSLR or mirrorless cameras can be your friend as you can see your exposure and lighting effect before you make the shot.



Snowscapes Can take you most of the way to a high key image right out of the camera.

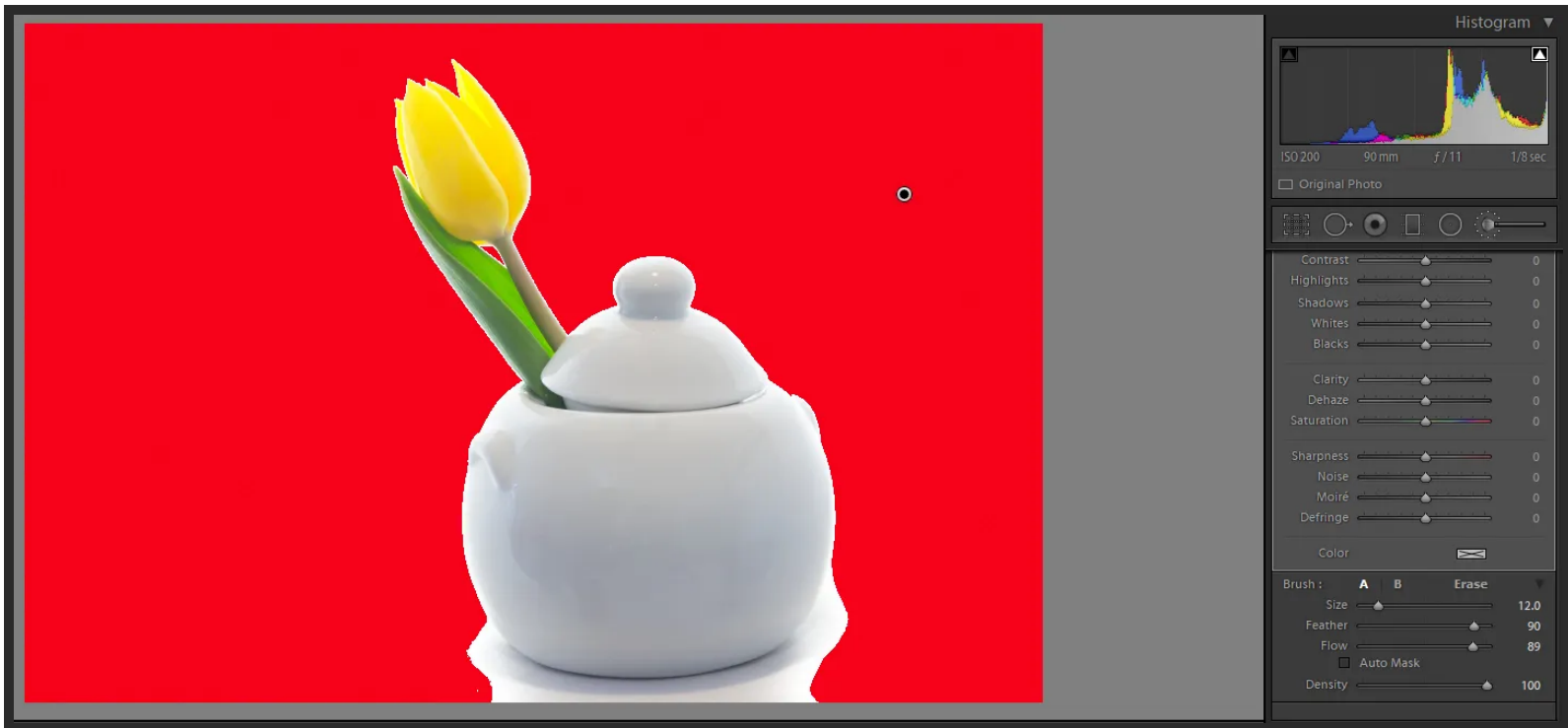
## Editing high-key images

While it's always a goal to get images that are perfect Straight-Out-Of-Camera (SOOC), editing can be used to fine tune an image. Even when you shoot in the high-key style, additional editing can be used to clean up problem areas, lighten up and even out the background, and enhance the look and feel you are striving for. Take a look at the image below.



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





Sometimes you might have an image that you did not consider making a high-key photo when you shot it. However, while editing, you may decide the mood you are seeking would be best suited to a high-key look. Such was the case with the “Angels Dance” image below.

The music and mood of the dance when I captured the shot of these ballet dancers was free, light, and airy. It created a mental image of angels dancing for me. So later, I used the tools in [Lightroom](#) to get the look I was after. Following the method used may give you insight into how you can create high-key images in post-processing.



This shot was going to need some work to give it the high-key mood desired.



# Post-production technique

The **Raw** color image out of the camera was underexposed, and the stage lighting had introduced some unusual color. This did not start out looking like a high-key candidate, but here are the steps taken in Lightroom to produce the final result:

- There were two dancers in the shot with good form, but two others who needed to be cropped out.
- I used a basic editing workflow – Exposure brought up to +1.00, Highlights brought down to -100, Shadows opened up to +100, the Whites brought up to +44, the Blacks brought down to -56.
- To deal with the color problem, and also be more compatible with the high-key look, I converted the image to Black & White. Next, I opened the Black & White Mix dropdown and used the Targeted Adjustment Tool. Here, I sampled different spots in the image and brought up the luminance of those colors. Further manual tweaking of the sliders helped bring up the brightness of each color.
- Then I readjusted the Exposure to +1.46, the Contrast to +38, brought the White down slightly to +38, the Clarity to -7 and Dehaze down to -9.
- To make the background full white, and also lose some distracting elements, I used the Adjustment Brush tool. The Exposure was turned all the way up to +4, checked the Automask checkbox, and carefully used the brush to “white out” the background.
- To further give the “heavenly effect” I used a brush with -50 Dehaze to brush in some light “clouds.”

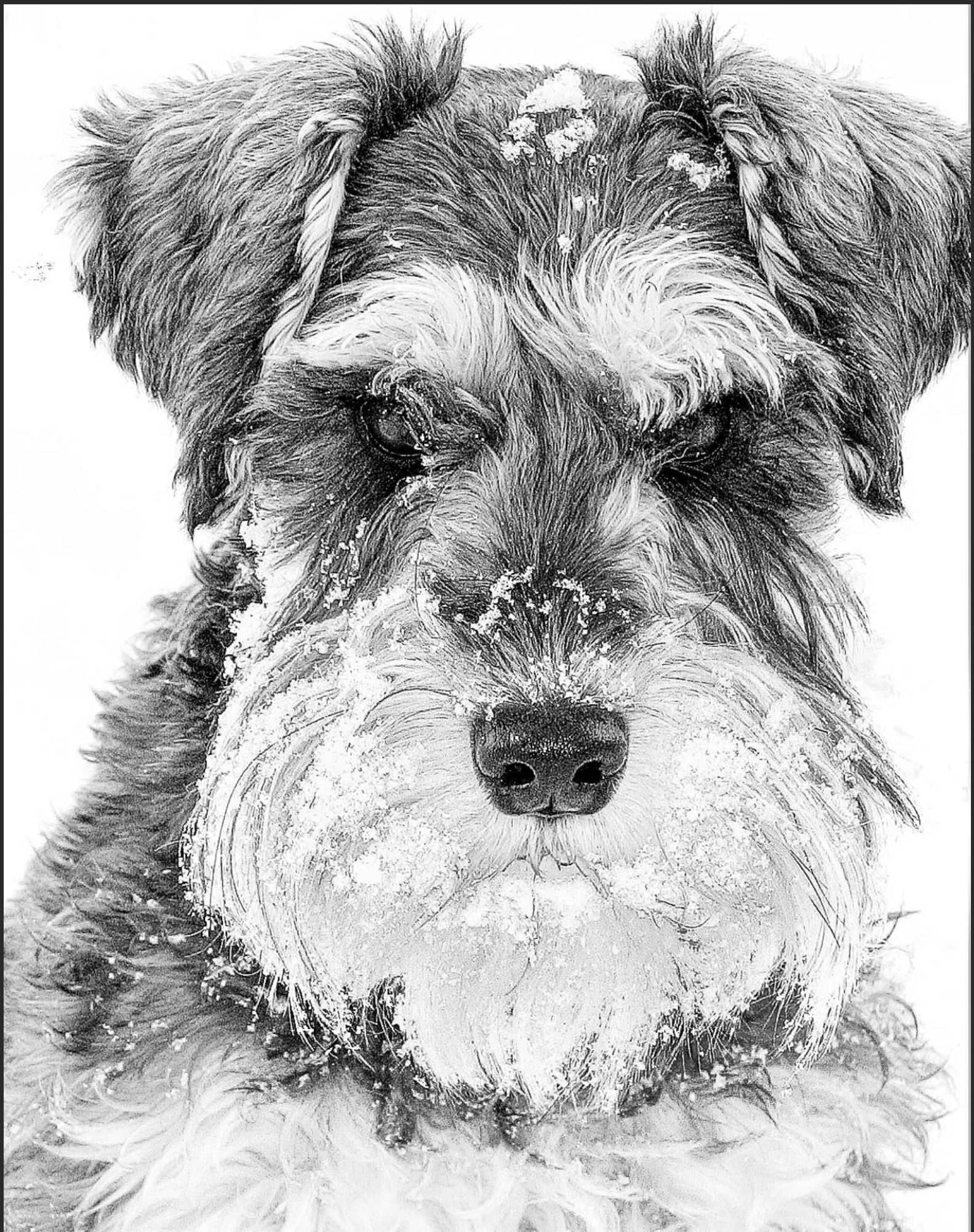


This high key version much better captures the mood of the dance.

# Conclusion

The numbers and precise steps used for this image are a guide rather than an exact “recipe.” They are intended to show you the general idea for creating the high-key photography look with Lightroom and the tweaks and tools to get there. The main point is, even if you have an image that does not immediately look like a candidate for the high-key look, some knowledge of what constitutes that look, and how to use your editing tools to get you there, can create some magic.





It's okay to have some darker tones in your high key photos.

Good photographs communicate to the viewer, tell a story, convey an emotion, or take the viewer to a time and place. Using the technique of high key is one more way to use your images to speak to your viewer. Learn the techniques both to shoot and edit a high-key shot, and you can not only grow your lighting, camera, and editing skills but add a new means of communicating with your images to your bag of photo tricks.

Please try this technique out and share with us in the comments below.



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### Rick Ohnsman

Photography isn't just a hobby, it's an adventure! Photography is about sharing my personal vision. From the '70s, with a film SLR and a garage darkroom, college work with 4x5 view cameras, Kodachrome slides and into the digital age, I've pursued photography for over 45 years. An enthusiastic member of the Boise Camera Club, I share this common passion and enjoy teaching new members. See my work here - **on 500px** and on **instagram**.

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