Indoor Portraits with a Christmas Tree in the Background

BY NASIM MANSUROV | 35 COMMENTS
LAST UPDATED ON SEPTEMBER 23, 2018

If you have been in a situation where you had a Christmas tree behind your subject and you could not take a good portrait, correctly exposing both the subject and the Christmas tree, then don't be surprised – you are not the only person having such challenges. Many photographers have a tough time with correctly exposing images indoors, especially when dealing with a very dim room with bright objects in the background. That's the biggest problem with photographing the Christmas tree – most people like to turn off or dim their main lights and only keep the Christmas tree lights on. With such a low amount of light in the room, all kinds of problems arise for photographers: images come out blurry, portraits are too dark or images have a flat, point and shoot look to them when photographed with a flash. The biggest annoyance and frustration, is when flash lights up the room and makes the Christmas tree lights disappear, as if they are not even on! What is the best way to deal with these problems? How should you take pictures with the Christmas tree? In this article, I will do my best to explain what you need to do to take great family photos during holidays.

Table of Contents

1) Challenges with bright backgrounds indoors

When a room is dim, the only thing you can do without using flash is heavily increase your camera's sensitivity (ISO). Increasing camera ISO, however, results in lots of noise in images and does not help with the problem of having a dark subject with a brightly-lit Christmas tree in the background. If you expose for the subject by setting your camera's metering mode to "Spot/Partial Metering" and pointing the focus point at your subject, the Christmas tree will be overexposed. If you meter for the Christmas tree, your subject will be too dark. Just like in these pictures:


What happened here? Besides me in the picture (note: my home models were asleep when I did this, so I had to find creative ways to photograph myself), the left image is metered for the light, while the right image is metered off me. As you can see, neither the first, nor the second image look acceptable in any way. That's with only Christmas lights in the room. Let's see what happens if I turn one light on the other side of the room on:

NIKON D700 + 50mm f/1.4 @ 50mm, ISO 6400, 1/100, f/2.8

A little better, but it is still very noisy and I still look darker than the background. In such situations, there is not much you can do to address the problem, besides putting a bright source of light in front of your subject. But walking around the room with a lamp is not very practical, specially when the house is full of people. That's where flash comes to save you!

How would flash help in such a situation? Flash lights up your subject, allowing you to expose the Christmas lights properly as well. How? Let me show you how to do exactly that.

2) Before Using Flash

Before using flash, make sure to move your subject away from the Christmas tree or other bright sources of light. Why? Because flash easily spills on other objects and will certainly do so on the Christmas tree. When flash spills, it will make those objects look just like your subject and the image will become "flat". Ideally, you want the Christmas tree to be at least 5-6 feet away from your subject. The next thing you will have to decide on, is whether you want to blur the Christmas tree behind your subject or not. If you choose to blur the Christmas tree, then you would have to use large apertures on your lens (smallest F-numbers) and would have to be close to your subject. If you choose to include the Christmas tree in your frame, then walk away from your subject and use a smaller aperture (larger F-number) to increase the depth of field and make your Christmas tree appear sharp. I personally prefer to blur the Christmas tree lights, so for this article, I only did the tests at relatively large apertures (between f/2.8 and f/4.0).

3) Using Flash

Let's move on to using flash. If you have not purchased an external flash/Speedlight yet, then you will have to use the pop-up flash on your camera. While it works OK for this situation, you will have to be extremely careful with shadows, especially behind your subjects (on the walls, etc). That's because pop-up flash is a direct source of light.

If you have a Speedlight, then you have two options – to use it on the camera or use it off-camera as a remote flash. If you are firing flash from your camera's hot-shoe (on-camera), then I recommend to bounce the light off-ceilings and walls (by moving the flash head). Just make sure that you are not angling the light towards the Christmas tree, so that it does not get much of the light coming from your flash. Your goal is to light up the subject and not touch the Christmas tree. A better option, is to use off-camera flash and shoot through an umbrella. With off-camera flash, you have a much better control over light spill and you can position the light so that it hits your subject, but does not reach the Christmas tree. See my "Indoors Flash Photography" article, where I go through an off-camera light setup. Again, you have to be cautious about the distance between your subject and the Christmas tree – the further away they are from each other, the better.

4) Camera and Flash Settings

Here are the settings I recommend on your camera and flashes:

1. Set your flash to "TTL" both on your camera and your Speedlight(s) to let the camera automatically determine the correct flash power.
2. Set camera mode to "Manual".
3. Turn off "Auto ISO" and set your ISO to the camera's base ISO (100 or 200).
4. If you are using a prime lens, set your aperture to something between f/2.0 and f/2.8. If you are shooting with a zoom lens, set aperture to the smallest number like f/3.5.
5. Set your shutter speed to the current focal length of the lens for now. For example, if you are zoomed in to 60mm, set your shutter speed to 1/60th of a second.

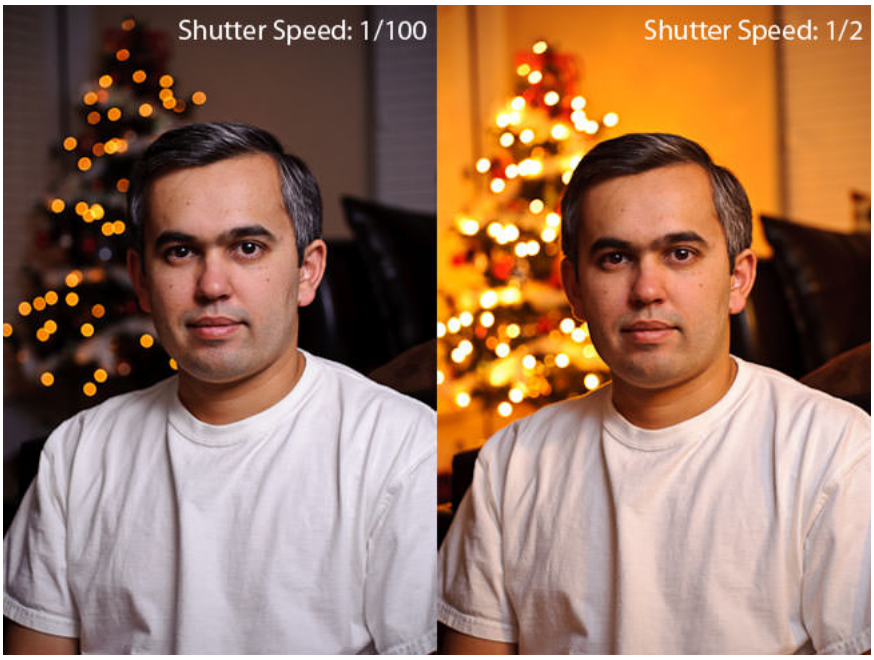
5) Accurate Focusing

While photographing in a dark environment, you might have issues with autofocus behavior – it just doesn't work very well in such conditions. Whether you are using a Speedlight or not, make sure that AF-assist is turned on (if you have it) and you are in a "Single" servo mode (AF-S), not "Continuous" servo (AF-C) – AF-assist only works on AF-S mode. AF-assist typically works great in dark environments to get accurate focus.

If you still have challenges with autofocus, ask someone to temporarily turn the lights on so that you could get good focus, then freeze and when the lights are off again, take a picture. Another thing I highly recommend, is to set your camera on a tripod (read below why it is a good idea to use a tripod).

6) Shutter Speed – the Secret Ingredient

For the current objective, which is to properly expose the both the Christmas tree and your subject and make them both appear natural, you will have to play with your camera's Shutter Speed. When it comes to ambient light, Shutter Speed is what fully controls it. Take a look at these two images:



The image on the left was taken at 1/100th of a second at f/4.5, ISO 200. The image on the right was taken at the same aperture and ISO, except the shutter speed was dropped to 1/2 of a second. See the difference in the way the background came out on both images? The exposure on me is about the same on both images, but the image on the right looks a little more natural and it is almost hard to say that flash was used. That's because ambient light mixed together with flash, giving a different color tone to my skin and shirt. I used one off-camera speedlight positioned on the right (my left), angled at around 45 degrees and reflected off a half-open umbrella with a black cover (I purposefully only opened the umbrella half way, so that the light only lands on me and does not spill all over the room).

Whenever you want to mix ambient light with flash, you always have to decrease your shutter speed. Dropping shutter speed to very low values is tricky, because any camera shake or movement by your subject will make the image blurry. A tripod is always helpful to fight against camera shake, but it cannot help when there is fast movement. Taking pictures of fast-moving kids is certainly challenging in this case. The good news, is that flash does freeze movement to a certain extent and you can increase your shutter speed by increasing camera ISO. For example, if you determine that you are getting a good exposure at 1/10th of a second at ISO 100, you could increase your shutter speed to 1/80th of a second when you increase camera ISO to 800. If you don't understand how I came up with these figures, it is actually a very simple concept to understand – whenever you increase your camera sensitivity by a full stop, you can also increase shutter speed by a full stop. What happens if you increase camera sensitivity and keep both aperture and shutter speed the same? That's right, the image will be overexposed. There are three full stops between ISO 100 and 800 (100-200, 200-400 and 400-800); and there are also three stops between 1/10th of a second and 1/80th (1/10-1/20, 1/20-1/40 and 1/40-1/80). Therefore, an image shot at 1/10th of a second at ISO 100 will look similarly to an image shot at 1/80th of a second at ISO 800, except the latter will have more noise in the image.

So if slow shutter speed becomes a big issue, increase your camera ISO, which will allow you to shoot at higher shutter speeds. Simple, yet works great!

7) Slow-sync/Rear-sync modes

I have already thoroughly explained the differences between various sync modes in a video in my "how to get the best out of your pop-up flash" article, but I know that people will still be asking about this. Basically, flash sync modes will do absolutely nothing to

improve your pictures when you shoot in manual mode, like I have shown above. As for slow-sync mode, it is called "slow" sync for a reason...believe it or not, but all the slow-sync mode does, is decrease your camera's shutter speed! Therefore, it is only good for taking pictures in Auto or Aperture Priority modes. What about rear-sync or front-sync modes? For portrait photography without movements, they do absolutely nothing. What difference does it make if flash fires at the beginning or the end of the exposure? In fact, I would recommend to turn off rear-sync mode, because your flash will fire twice (once in the beginning as modeling light and once at the end as main light), which will be very annoying at slow shutter speeds to the people you are taking pictures of. One flash in a dim room is already too much for the eyes, imagine two flashes firing one after another. So don't worry about sync modes when shooting in Manual Mode and turn off rear-sync mode if you have it turned on.

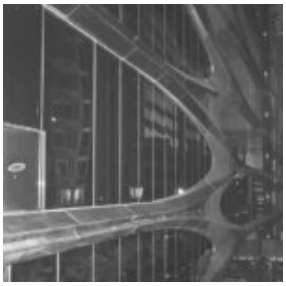
Remember, the key is to use a slow shutter speed!

RELATED ARTICLES

Indoors Flash Photography with Nikon Speedlights


Impact Background Support System Review

Nikon Commander Mode


Infrared Flash Photos on the New York High Line


Infrared vs Radio vs Hybrid Flash


Indoors Flash Photography - Off-Camera Flash

DISCLOSURES, TERMS AND CONDITIONS AND SUPPORT OPTIONS

FILED UNDER: FLASH PHOTOGRAPHY AND LIGHTING
TAGGED WITH: FLASH PHOTOGRAPHY, HOWTO, OFF-CAMERA FLASH, PHOTOGRAPHY TIPS, TIPS FOR BEGINNERS

About Nasim Mansurov

Nasim Mansurov is the author and founder of Photography Life, based out of Denver, Colorado. He is recognized as one of the leading educators in the photography industry, conducting workshops, producing educational videos and frequently writing content for Photography Life. You can follow him on Instagram and Facebook. Read more about Nasim here.