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Benjamin Edwards

Nikon® Creative Lighting System Digital Field Guide

THIRD
EDITION



Nikon®

**Creative
Lighting System**
Digital Field Guide

Third Edition

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Benjamin Edwards is a wedding, portrait, and humanitarian photographer based out of Bend, Oregon, where he and his wife, Lauren, operate Benjamin Edwards Photography. Benjamin previously worked on *Kevin Kubota's Lighting Notebook: 101 Lighting Styles and Setups for Digital Photographers* (also published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.).

He has been featured in the September 2009 issue of *Photo District News* magazine and on *Framed*, a web-based series for photographers. Benjamin also won a Hollywood Film Festival award in 2009 for his short film, *Cry Out for Congo*, and has been recognized as a Photoflex Pro Showcase Member.

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For my Parker. I know you'll change the world.

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Introduction

From its origin in the Greek language, the word *photography* literally means *painting (or writing) with light*. It's fairly safe to say that if you were to remove light altogether from the photography equation, you'd have a difficult time capturing the perfect picture. You could also say that the addition of light, or the ability to create it quickly and efficiently, could go a long way in helping you create your very own masterpiece.

When Nikon introduced the Creative Lighting System (CLS) in 2004, it was mostly overlooked. The industry was focused on the rapidly changing advancement of digital SLR (dSLR) cameras — more specifically, how many megapixels could be jammed into a new generation of image sensors. This was a shame because the Nikon CLS was the most amazing development in creative photography in decades. The ability to completely control the output of multiple lights, *and* do it wirelessly with full Through-the-Lens (TTL) metering was a true breakthrough.

The popularity of the Nikon CLS has grown exponentially in recent years as more people are becoming interested in off-camera, photographic lighting. With the SB-400, SB-700, SB-900, and SB-910, no other company comes close to offering such a multitude of tools for specific lighting needs.

The main features of the CLS are its ability to get the flashes off of the camera and control them wirelessly. Nikon refers to this as Advanced Wireless Lighting (AWL). Simply put, when the flash is on top of your camera (or even attached to a flash bracket) your freedom to place the light source exactly where you want it is limited. AWL eliminates these restrictions.

With the CLS, you can direct and modify all of the light from your camera. This gives you the ability to create images full of depth and dimension, with far greater ease than with traditional studio strobes, and at a much lower cost to both your wallet and your back.

The Evolution of the Nikon Creative Lighting System

Nikon introduced wireless Speedlight control in 1994 with the SB-26 Speedlight. This flash incorporated a built-in optical sensor that enabled you to trigger the flash with the firing of another flash. While this was handy, you still had to meter the scene and manually set the output level on the SB-26.

With the release of the SB-28 in 1997, Nikon omitted the built-in optical sensor. You could still do wireless flash, but you needed to buy the SU-4 wireless sensor. Wireless flash still had to be manually set because the pre-flashes used by the Through-the-Lens (TTL) metering system caused the SU-4 to fire the speedlight prematurely.

In 1999, Nikon released the SB-28DX. This flash was made to work with Nikon's emerging line of dSLRs. The only difference from the SB-28 was the metering system — the film-based Through-the-Lens (TTL) metering was replaced by Digital Through-the-Lens (dTTL) metering. This metering system compensated for the lower reflectivity of a digital sensor as opposed to film's highly reflective surface. (Don't worry; there won't be a test on this at the end of the book.)

In 2002, Nikon replaced the SB-28DX with the SB-80DX. The changes were minimal — more power, a wider zoom, and a modeling light. It also brought back the wireless optical sensor. Before, although you could use this speedlight wirelessly, you still had to set everything up on the flash.

When 2004 rolled in, Nikon revolutionized the world of photographic lighting with the SB-800, the first flash to be used with the new Creative Lighting System. The first camera to be compatible with the CLS was the D2H. Using the D2H with multiple SB-800s enabled you to control the speedlights individually by setting them to different groups — all of which were metered via pre-flashes and could be adjusted separately.

With the introduction of the D70 (and, later, the D70s and D200), users could now control any number of off-camera speedlights with the camera's built-in flash. Of course, using this had some drawbacks. With the D70s, you could control only one group of speedlights. The D200 could control only two. Even so, it was remarkable. Prior to this, you could never use a speedlight off-camera while retaining the function of the intelligent Through-the-Lens (i-TTL) metering. Today, all Nikon dSLR cameras are CLS-compatible, but not all of them allow you to control the lighting with the built-in flash. However, any of them can be used with a speedlight acting as a Commander to control any number of off-camera speedlights.

Eventually, Nikon augmented the CLS line with a little brother for the SB-800: the SB-600. While lacking some of the features of the SB-800, such as the ability to control speedlights and no PC terminal, it's still an amazing little flash.

Nikon also released a couple of kits for macro photography lighting: The R1 and the R1C1. The R1 Macro Lighting Kit includes two SBR-200s, which are small wireless speedlights. They can be mounted directly to the lens via an adapter. You can also purchase the SBR-200 separately, which enables you to use as many lights as you want. The R1C1 Kit is essentially the same, except that it includes an SU-800 Commander unit. The SU-800 is a wireless transmitter that allows you to control groups of flashes (just like the SB-800, but without a visible flash).

Nikon has rounded out the CLS with the bare-bones SB-400 (2006), the efficient SB-700 (2010), and the flagship models, the SB-900 (2008) and the SB-910 (2011). The newer models offer the photographer the ultimate Creative Lighting System. With great attention to detail and ergonomics, and enhanced user-interfaces, never before have so many features been so easy to access.

Released in late 2011, the SB-910 is the culmination of years of research and design. With a faster recycle time (2.5 to 3 seconds, depending on battery use), an improved Thermal cut-out feature, and a multipoint AF-assist Illuminator that now covers the field of view of a 17-135mm lens with 51 focus points (39 focus points for a 24-135mm lens), the SB-910 is the new CLS workhorse.

What's in This Book?

While I certainly recommend that you read your camera and flash manual at least once, most of us find the best use for an owner's manual is as a sleep aid. Technically written and devoid of user experiences, manuals leave out the parts like, "Oh yeah, this works sometimes, but when it doesn't, try this." That's where this Field Guide becomes your best friend.

This book does include the nuts and bolts information usually included in a standard manual. However, it also covers tips and advice. It also includes sample images and setup diagrams that explain how a shot was created using the Nikon CLS.

Finally, some photographers may be so intimidated by off-camera lighting, that they shoot only in available light. That's fine if it's your passion, but what happens when there isn't any light available? Creative, off-camera lighting takes a bit of time and practice to master, but it *can* be done — I'm proof of that.