

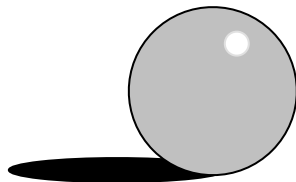
The Quality of Light

Good photography is all about the lighting. After all, it's writing (graphis) with light (photos). Seeing and capturing good light gives our images power and drama and interest. To use light to interpret our subject we need to understand the different qualities of light.

We use the terms **hard** and **soft** to describe the quality of light in a photograph. These terms refer to the way the **edge** of the shadow on a subject is rendered by the light. Hard light makes a shadow that has a very distinct and crisply rendered edge. Usually the shadow is also relatively dark, but this can vary depending on fill light from other sources. Small light sources (point light sources) create hard light. Soft light comes from large light sources (diffused light sources) and renders shadows with an indistinct edge or, if the light source is broad enough, with almost no shadow at all.

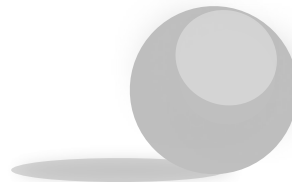
Remember that we are talking about how the *edge* of the shadow is rendered only. The darkness of the shadow does not determine hard or soft. And this does not refer to subject contrast. A high contrast subject can be softly lit and still have crisp subject contrast.

Another aspect of the quality of light is how it creates highlights and reflections on the surface of a subject. Hard light creates small, bright highlights (called specular highlights) whereas soft light creates broader, less distinct highlights (called diffuse highlights).



HARD LIGHT

With specular highlight



SOFT LIGHT

With diffuse highlight

Intensity of light determines the shadow density and the proper exposure. The sunny-16 exposure method uses the shadow area of a scene to compare the relative intensity of the light when determining the proper exposure. Sunny day pictures usually are both intense with dark shadows and hard with crisp shadow edges. Cloudy day pictures are usually both low in intensity and soft on the shadow edges.

And the **direction** of the light changes how the subject looks. Low angle light emphasizes texture and shape and gives long, dramatic shadows.

The time of day influences the **color** of light. Early mornings and late evenings offer warmer light.