

You can use the spot meter in manual mode. Change apertures and shutter speeds until the exposure scale reaches the 'correct' setting. This saves you having to use the AE-Lock function

Exposing backlit subjects

Paul Stefan shows how a spot meter, reflector and fill-in flash are all tools to help you perfectly expose a backlit subject

SHOOTING A BACKLIT subject (i.e. with the sun behind them) is not something I do too often, as it certainly comes with its challenges. If you're not prepared for it, your results can often be quite unpredictable and, more often than not, your subject will be underexposed and look rather flat. This tutorial for beginners will help you to understand the relatively straightforward steps you can take to end up with great results.

Let's begin with why letting the camera make the decisions for you is not the best option. It's often so easy to stick your camera on Full Auto mode and let it decide the exposure. For portraits in which the light is shining on the subject's face, or off slightly to the side, using Auto mode sometimes works just fine, as the exposure levels may not be too extreme. However, if you position your subject so that the light source is

behind them (so you're shooting towards them and the sun or light source), your camera is likely to get the exposure quite wrong. What usually results is an underexposed subject that doesn't usually make a great picture. The reason for this is that the camera's multi-zone exposure system will evaluate the overall scene. Given that you are pointing the camera towards the light source, it will always look to expose the shot for a bright scene, causing the less bright areas – in this case the person – to be darker than you want.

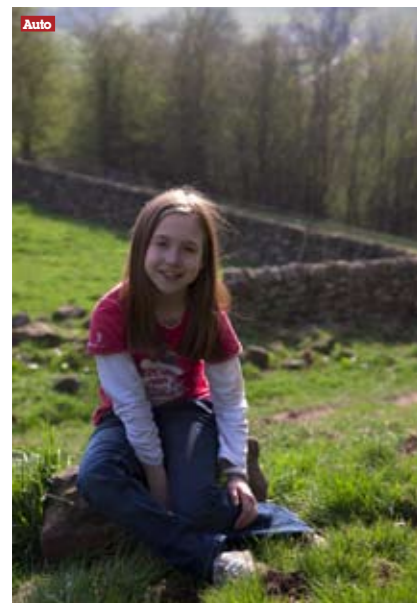
Taking more control over your camera will greatly improve the image and enable you to get the exposure you really want. One of the easiest ways for beginners to do this is to set your DSLR to aperture-priority and use the spot meter along with AE Lock to fix the light reading. With this method, you take a spot reading from the person's face, regardless of the light conditions

around the subject, which should result in a perfectly exposed person every time (assuming your subject has caucasian skin – if not, take a spot meter reading off clothing, grass or any area of mid-tone in the same lighting conditions).

While this is an easy and quick method, it doesn't come without issues. For example, if the surrounding scene is also important for the shot, you may find that it turns out to be overexposed if it's lighter than your subject. One way around this would be to take the meter reading from an in-between subject and then use your camera's flash to fill the foreground in with light, giving a more balanced exposure across the whole scene. Equally, a reflector will also help this, as it will bounce natural light back towards your subject and have a similar fill-in effect. If you're feeling really adventurous, why not try a mixture, using both flash and a reflector.

1) TAKE A SHOT WITH DSLR SET TO AUTO

I was keen for my portrait to have a picturesque backdrop, so I chose a south-facing hillside near my home, with a view looking out to Robin Hood's Stride and Cratcliffe in the Peak District. My first shot was to see how the camera's Auto mode handled the exposure of my subject with the sun directly behind and above her. With this set up, I was shooting towards the sun, which would certainly challenge the camera's multi-zone metering system.



The result from my DSLR wasn't actually too bad as the face of my subject, my eldest daughter Emily, wasn't completely underexposed but could definitely be improved. This would have been much worse if the sun was lower and in direct view of the shot. Other DSLRs may not have coped as well as my Canon EOS 5D MkII either.

2) USE SPOT METERING AND A REFLECTOR

The Auto shot wasn't a disaster, but it could have certainly been improved with the use of spot metering. By switching my DSLR to aperture-priority and setting the metering mode to spot, I was then able to meter from Emily's face and lock the reading using AE-Lock. I did this by looking through the viewfinder and placing the central circle over her face and pressing AE-Lock to ensure a perfect exposure. I then focused on her face, recomposed and took the shot.



Spot metering has improved the scene greatly, but to make it even better, I placed a portable reflector just out of shot, perched on a stick, to throw some of that lovely warm sunlight back onto Emily's face, giving the shot added depth. This really made a difference, revealing so much more detail and depth, both in her face and in her clothes.

3) USING FILL-IN FLASH

I liked the natural look of the spot metered and reflector shot, but for this example I wanted to show a further change to the set up, to create a more dramatic portrait. Therefore, I hooked up my flashgun to my camera with a stretchy sync lead, to allow me to hold the flash unit away from the camera and over to one side. This is a useful technique that causes your flash to give a more flattering look to the subject, rather than blasting them directly in the face! With this set up, I also left the reflector in place, used the same exposure settings from the previous shot and directed the flashgun toward Emily's body, rather than pointing it directly at her face.



The flash has made quite an impact on how she is lit. Her face is a lot brighter, but because I aimed the flashgun towards her body and feet, the shot has exposed her lower half so much better than the previous shot. Her hair is also really well exposed and she now has catchlights in her eyes, caused by the flash.



Swap M to Av



Swap M to Av