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J. Dennis Thomas

Nikon®
Creative Lighting System
Digital Field Guide
SECOND EDITION

Nikon®

Creative Lighting System

Digital Field Guide, Second Edition

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J. Dennis Thomas

Wiley Publishing, Inc.

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About the Author

J. Dennis Thomas is a freelance photographer based out of Austin, Texas. He's been using a camera for fun and profit for almost 25 years. Schooled in photography first in high school then at Austin College, he has won numerous awards for both his film and digital photography. Denny has a passion for teaching others about photography and has taught black and white film photography to area middle school students as well as lighting and digital photography seminars in Austin. His photographic subjects are diverse, from shooting weddings and studio portraits to photographing concerts and extreme sports; he enjoys all types of photography. He has written seven highly successful Digital Field Guides for Wiley Publishing and has more in the works. His work has been published by *Rolling Stone* as well numerous magazines, newspapers, and Web sites.

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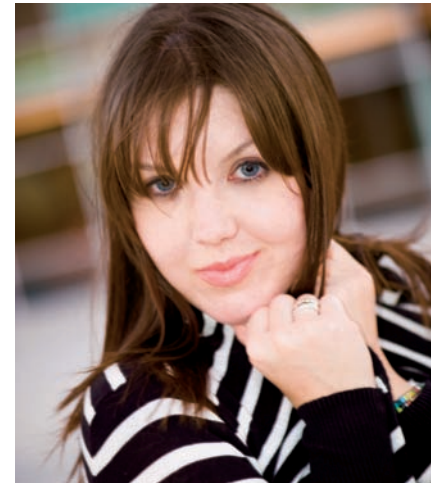

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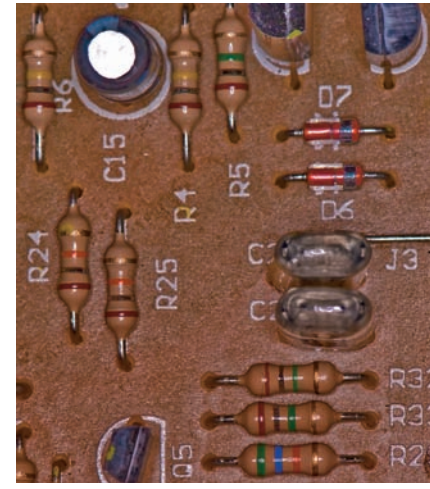

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Introduction

When Nikon introduced the Creative Lighting System in 2004, it was mostly overlooked. The focus was on the rapidly changing advancement of digital SLR cameras. This disregard was a shame because the Nikon Creative Lighting System was the most amazing development to happen to photographic lighting in decades. The ability to infinitely control the output of multiple lights *and* to be able to do it wirelessly, with full Through-the-lens (TTL) metering was almost unheard of.

The popularity of Nikon's Creative Lighting System has grown exponentially in recent years with more and more people becoming interested in photographic lighting. The fact that these flashes can take care of most of the work for you at an affordable cost is a major factor in the popularity of this system. With the SB-800, the SB-600, the SU-800, and more recently the SB-900 and SB-400, no other company comes close to offering such a multitude of tools for specific lighting needs.

The main feature of CLS is the ability to get the flashes off of the camera and to be able to control them wirelessly. Nikon refers to this as Advanced Wireless Lighting (AWL). Quite simply, when you're stuck with the flash mounted on the camera or even to a flash bracket, your ability to control the lighting is severely impeded — leaving you stuck with full frontal lighting.

With the CLS, you can direct the light. Thus, you can create the same lighting patterns that professionals achieve with expensive studio strobes, at a much lower cost. This is the key to professional-looking images: controlling the lighting to get the effect that you want.

The Evolution of the Nikon CLS

Nikon started toying with wireless Speedlight control in 1994 with the introduction of 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 set the output level manually on the SB-26 itself.

With the release of the SB-28 in 1997, Nikon dropped 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 set manually because the pre-flashes used by the 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 digital SLRs. The only change from the SB-28 was the metering system. The Nikon film-based TTL metering was replaced by DTTL. This metering system compensated for the lower reflectivity of a digital sensor as opposed to film's highly reflective surface.

In 2002 Nikon replaced the SB-28DX with the SB-80DX. The changes were minimal, more power, wider zoom, and a modeling light. They also returned the wireless optical sensor. As before, although you could use this Speedlight wirelessly, you still had to set everything up on the flash itself.

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 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 even control any number of off camera Speedlights using the camera's built-in flash. Of course using the built-in flash had some drawbacks. Using the D70s, you can only control one group of Speedlights, and with the D200, you can only control two groups. Even so, this is remarkable. Never before could you use a Speedlight off camera while retaining the function of the iTTL metering. Today all of Nikon's current dSLR cameras are CLS compatible. Although not all of the cameras allow you to control using a built-in flash, any one of the cameras can be used with one of the Speedlights that act as a commander to control any number of off camera Speedlights.

Eventually, Nikon augmented the CLS line with the SB-600, the little brother to the SB-800. While lacking some of the features of the SB-800, such as the ability to control Speedlights, it's still an amazing little flash. Nikon also released a couple of kits for doing macro photography lighting, the R1 and R1C1. The R1 macro lighting kit has two small wireless Speedlights, the SBR-200, which you can mount directly to the lens via an adaptor. The SBR-200 can also be purchased separately enabling you to use as many lights as you want. The R1C1 kit is essentially the same as the R1 kit, with the addition of the SU-800 commander unit. The SU-800 is a wireless transmitter that enables you to control groups of flashes just like the SB-800 without a visible flash.

Recently Nikon has rounded out the system by adding the bare-bones SB-400 and the newest flagship model, the SB-900.

What's in This Book for You?

While the manuals that come with the Speedlights are informative and contain all the technical data about your Nikon Speedlight, they don't exactly go into detail about the nuances of lighting — the small things and pitfalls you may encounter or the types of settings you might want to use on your camera and lenses.

That's where this book comes in. This book offers you tips and advice acquired in real world situations by a photographer who has been using the Nikon Creative Lighting system almost daily since it was first introduced.

Initially, flash photography is often thought of with dread as mysterious and confusing. However, with this book I hope to dispel that myth and help to get you on the road to using the flash and CLS as another creative tool in your photographic arsenal.