

Chromakey Lighting 101

Bill Vahrenkamp

Blue or Green? Although blue is the original chromakey color, it drops out better and is more flattering to skin tones it is green that is the more popular color. More people wear blue clothes and that is the main reason for green. Fewer people wear green, especially chromakey green.

Try to have as much space as possible. Have room for all the lights and have enough room to place the subject far enough away from the background. The two most common problems with chromakey are:

- Uneven background lighting
- Reflective spill onto the subject

What you need: At least 2 lights. Preferably with umbrellas or light boxes. Softer lighting is better. If you have a background light, or 2 background lights they will help even out the lighting. A seamless chromakey green or blue backdrop. This can be paper, cloth or painted on a wall. A camera that has a manual setting for exposure, color balance and a way to set off external flashes (a PC sync connection). Avoid the on-board camera flash as this can cause extra shadows on the backdrop.

Step 1. Set up your backdrop. If possible get the wrinkles out. Try to have enough room to have the subject 6 feet from the backdrop. If you are using a sweep make sure there is enough curve to prevent shadows.

Step 2. Set up your main lights at a 45° angle about 4-6 feet from where your subject will be. Use umbrellas or a soft box to diffuse your light. If possible, make your lights at least 6 feet high so any shadows fall low behind the subject. Make sure the output on the flashes are the same to prevent shadows. Optional. If you are in a fixed location and can hang a light from the ceiling you can use a flash to illuminate the backdrop. Use barndoors or a background reflector to keep the light of the subject. If you have two extra lights and the space you can put them on 45° angles to the backdrop between the main lights and the backdrop. Keep the lights even and NO shadows. Make sure you backdrop light(s) are 1:1 to 1:3 lighting ratio to the main light.

Step 3. Set your camera's white balance to 5500 Kelvin or Flash or Daylight depending on the preference. This will keep your color balance the same between exposures. Set your camera's exposure mode to M-manual. Use either a flash meter or test shots and set the exposure. (Hint: Hold your meter where the subject will be standing for a photograph. If you are using test shots have a subject stand where the photos will be taken. Bracket exposures, ie f-8,11,16,22, and print them in color to find the correct exposure) Remember to keep your shutter speed at or below the maximum for flash exposure. It is the sync speed or sometimes marked as X on the shutter speed dial. If you are not sure of the sync speed, err on the side of caution and use 1/125 sec to 1/180 sec.

Set up your subject 6 feet (4' minimum) from the background. Take photos. Check for shadows and reflective spill (background color reflecting on subject). Make exposure corrections if necessary.