

## 15 Tips for Great Candlelight Photography



[Image by Sea Eye](#)

Have you ever tried to photograph a candle lit scene with your digital camera?

The results can be stunning with the warm glow of flickering flames reflecting off your subjects face (can you feel the romance?) but the shooting in such a low light environment make it can make it a challenging situation.

Here are a few tips on how to get that perfect candle light portrait!

### **1. Turn off Your Flash**

Lets start with the obvious ones and work our way back. We've all taken shots using a flash in low light situations and have been disappointed by the way it totally destroys any ambient light in a shot. If you want to get the warm glow of candles it's essential that you switch your flash completely off. There is of course an exception - see point 15 below.

### **2. Use a Tripod**

Stating the obvious again - but shooting by candlelight means you're shooting with very little light which in turn means you'll almost certainly be shooting with slower shutter speeds that increase the impact of camera shake on your shots. Make sure your camera is as secure and as still as possible during shots by using a tripod and by considering the use of a remote shutter release to take out any vibrations from hitting the shutter.

### **3. Extra Candles**

The biggest challenge with candlelight photography is the lack of light you have to work with. Using more candles will obviously produce more light which gives you a little more flexibility when it comes to shutter speed, ISO and aperture settings.

#### 4. Spread Your Candles

Using a single candle or positioning multiple candles all closely together in one position will cause there to be harsher shadows cast upon your subject's face. This might be the look you're going for, however in most cases you'll want a more even spread of light on their face. This can be achieved simply by spreading the candles out a little. I would still recommend more candles on one side than the other as this will create a nice side lighting impact - however don't get the sides too uneven unless you're after a pretty dramatic impact.



[Image by carf](#)

#### 5. Natural 'Reflectors'

The few times that I shot by candlelight I made an accidental discovery that has been helpful since. I noticed that those times I shot my subject sitting at a table with a white table cloth that the shots were better exposed than those without a white table cloth. Obviously the table cloth reflected light back up into the face of my subject. Similarly white walls and ceilings can have this type of effect also (it's slight - but everything helps when you're shooting in such low light situations).

#### 6. Fast Lenses

If you're shooting with a DSLR and have multiple lenses choose the 'fastest' one you've got as this will allow you to use a larger aperture and let more light into your camera. My personal preference for this type of shot would be one of my 50mm lenses (f/1.8 or f/1.4). I would then generally shoot with the fastest aperture setting possible (or close to it) which enables a faster shutter speed and lower ISO. Keep in mind however that the larger your aperture the smaller your depth of field will be and the more spot on you focussing will need to be.

#### 7. Zooms and Aperture

Keep in mind that when you're shooting with many zoom lenses that the maximum aperture changes throughout the focal length range. ie shooting at the widest setting on many zooms will give you a larger aperture than when you zoom in. As a result it might be better to move in closer to your subject with a wider angle focal range than using the zoom.

## 8. Context and Backgrounds

Compositionally I like to keep these types of shots as uncluttered and simple as possible. I will generally shoot in front of a white background (keep an eye on harsh shadows cast by your subject and consider one or two behind them) and with minimal props. It might be appropriate to include a glass of wine and some basic table settings if you're going for a shot at a table - but the less distractions that you have in the shot the better.



[Image by fast eddie 42](#)

## 9. Shutter Speed

An obvious way to let more light into your camera is to choose a slower shutter speed. Keep in mind that as you decrease shutter speed you increase the chances of capturing any movement (both of your subject, the flames of candles and movement of your camera). If the environment is completely still (so flames are not flickering) and with a subject keeping as still as possible you might set your shutter speed as slow as 1/15th of a second - but any slower and you might be asking too much of your subject.

## 10. ISO Settings

Another way to compensate for low light environments is to increase the ISO settings on your camera. Of course the trade off of doing this is shots with more grain (noise) in them. Attempt to keep your ISO under 400 if you can and you should get reasonably clean shots. Any higher and you'll start noticing the noise - especially if you're blowing shots up to larger sizes.

## 11. Expose

If candles are in the shot, your camera will usually underexpose the shot as it'll see them as such a bright spot. You might want to try overexposing by a stop from what the camera recommends. Don't beef up exposure too much however or you'll end up with your candles being burnt out spots in your image.

## 12. White Balance

It is well worth experimenting with white balance when shooting by candle light. Candles emit a very 'warm' light - something that you'll want to include in your shots as it creates a wonderful atmosphere. However your camera may want to get rid of this warmth if you have white balance set to 'auto'. Try different settings to get the right level of warmth (I find 'indoor' or 'tungsten' settings

can work). Alternatively shoot in RAW and you'll have a lot more flexibility with white balance in your post processing.



[Image by Sara Heinrichs](#)

### **13. Composition of Candles**

There are two main ways to deal with candles in a compositional senses - you can include them in the shot or leave them out unseen out of the frame. Both alternatives can create lovely shots so experiment with both.

If you're including candles in the frame remember that they'll impact the settings your camera wants to us (see section on 'exposure' above) but that they'll also create points of interest in your shot that can potentially draw the eye of those viewing your image - competing with your main subject. As a result you'll want to position your subject in a prominent position and consider placing candles in a way that doesn't distract too much.

If candles are in the frame you'll also want to make sure they're nice ones. Smaller details matter in portraits and ugly candles might prove to be a real distraction.

### **14. Other Light Sources**

Sometimes candles just won't product enough light on their own. If this is the case and the above techniques still don't leave you with enough light consider adding a little extra from another source. You might have a lamp or a dimmed light that you can use for example. For best results try to give your extra light a warm glow by using some red or orange material to drape over it (be careful of heat).

### **15. Using a Flash with a Colored Gel**

In point number 1 I talked about turning off your flash to help you get that warm glow from the candles rather than a bright flash blowing out the image. The only exception that I have seen people use for this using some sort of a warm (red or orange) gel over your flash. This dims the impact of the flash and gives it a warm light. You might also want to decrease the output of the flash manually if you have control over this. Experiment with different color gels to get the color just right.