

Small Subjects, Big Lessons Equipping a Small Tabletop Space

By David Hayden

*Have you heard
about the sad little shooter?
Beaten by,
the source of light,
every time.*

We've spent a bit of time exploring the benefits of tabletop photography. The emphasis has been, and will remain, on the idea that the tabletop environment is really a learning laboratory. It is the place where you control the variables. It is where you own the successes, but perhaps more importantly, where you own the failures as well.

The successes are wonderful. The failures are where problem solving begins.

Confidence in photography rarely comes from owning equipment. Confidence grows from recognizing problems and gradually learning how to solve them. Oddly enough, that process also tends to keep the budget under control because you stop buying things hopefully and start buying things intentionally.

Or at least that is the goal.

The storage required for my studio gear currently occupies somewhere between half and three quarters of my actual shooting space, which seems like a questionable life decision when stated out loud. At some point I realized I was devoting almost as much room to storing photography equipment as I was to actually making photographs with it. That should probably tell you something.

So here is the lesson, it took me far too long to learn.

Do not buy equipment until you understand the problem you are trying to solve.

This applies to cameras, lenses, lighting, modifiers, backgrounds, tripods, and nearly every other accessory photographers convince themselves they urgently need after watching enough late-night YouTube videos.

It is very easy to think:

"I just need more light."

Or:

"I need a bigger light."

Or:

"I need a portable light."

Maybe you do.

Or maybe what you really need is a slower shutter speed and a tripod sturdy enough not to wobble every time you breathe near it. The tabletop environment has a way of exposing those distinctions because the setup stays still long enough for cause and effect to separate themselves a little more clearly.

So, let's think about what is actually required to begin building a useful tabletop setup. Not an elaborate commercial studio. Just a practical little learning laboratory where you can begin studying light intentionally.

At the most basic level you need:

- A subject
- A light source
- A way to block light (a.k.a a flag)
- A way to reflect light (a.k.a a reflector or bounce card, a wall, a white shirt, a piece of paper, etc.)
- A way to modify light (soft box, scrim, diffuser, snoot, barn doors, etc.)
- A shooting surface
- A background you can control
- A way to capture the image

That's really it. Everything else is mostly variations on those themes.

The Subject

Knowing how your subject interacts with light is critical. Or maybe more accurately, knowing how the subject reveals light back to the camera. Fabric behaves differently than metal. Fruit behaves differently than glass. Old wood behaves differently than polished ceramic. The more time you spend observing surfaces, the more you begin noticing that light itself is only half the conversation. The subject finishes the sentence.

One thing I would encourage early on is choosing subjects that are forgiving while you learn. Objects with texture usually frustrate less. Books, tools, fabric, fruit, pottery, coffee mugs, old cameras, hats, worn leather and things like that all work well because they reveal shape and direction without immediately introducing complicated reflections.

Highly reflective objects are another matter entirely.

We will get to those in future lessons.

And while we are discussing subjects, let me briefly climb onto my tiny safety soapbox. Pay attention to your surroundings. Notice unstable stands. Electrical cords near water. Trip hazards. Heavy objects overhead. Pets wandering beneath lighting equipment. Children moving unpredictably through the room.

More than once, I have nearly learned this lesson the hard way.

My wife owns several beautiful decorative pieces that make wonderful tabletop subjects. One afternoon I became so focused on positioning a light directly above one of them that I completely ignored how unstable the stand had become. When the light tipped forward, barely missing the object on the table, my heart stopped for a full second.

Think "crystal egg scene" from Risky Business.

Another time, while photographing along a steep rocky slope above Lake Pueblo, loose shale gave way beneath me and I slid toward the edge while watching my lens cap disappear into the water below. Fortunately, it was only the lens cap. Photography occasionally rewards awareness just as much as creativity.

The Light Source

This is one of those places where practicality, marketing, and equipment envy all collide in spectacular fashion.

We watch the online photography expert place a \$1,000 studio strobe fitted with a \$500 modifier onto a heavy-duty stand that costs more than my first camera body. Then with one click of the shutter their subject suddenly looks ready for a fashion campaign. For a brief moment, \$2,000 worth of lighting equipment starts sounding completely reasonable.

And to be fair, professional lighting gear absolutely has its place. Good equipment can save time, increase consistency, and solve problems efficiently. But none of that changes the underlying principle that light behaves like light.

The tabletop environment teaches this quickly because small spaces allow us to experiment inexpensively. A large window can become a beautiful soft light source. A lamp can work perfectly well. LED flashlights are excellent learning tools because they make direction easy to study. Sunlight reflected off a wall can become gorgeous illumination under the right conditions.

Some inexpensive light sources worth experimenting with include:

- Desk lamps
- LED flashlights
- Clamp lights from hardware stores
- Window light
- Small LED panels
- Natural light bounced off walls or ceilings

One very useful purchase, however, is a collapsible 5-in-1 reflector. They are inexpensive, lightweight, and solve multiple problems at once. They can reflect, diffuse, subtract, and soften light while taking up very little storage space. Mine has probably saved me from at least twenty unnecessary purchases over the years.

More importantly, tools like this teach flexibility.

A Way to Block Light

Beginning photographers often focus entirely on adding light while overlooking the importance of subtracting it. Sometimes the most important thing you can do is prevent light from reaching part of the scene.

This is where flags and negative fill enter the conversation. Place a black surface beside a reflective object and suddenly reflections deepen and become more controlled. Shadows gain shape. Contrast returns. The photograph begins feeling more intentional because you are controlling where light does not go in addition to where it does.

Useful materials for blocking or subtracting light include:

- Black poster board
- Black gaffers tape
- Black foam board
- Black blankets or fabric
- Black curtains
- Pieces of cardboard painted black
- The black side of a 5-in-1 reflector

A surprising amount of tabletop photography involves deciding where light should not exist.

A Way to Reflect Light

This is where photographers often discover that some of the most useful studio equipment looks suspiciously like office supplies.

Once you begin working with directional light, shadows deepen quickly. Sometimes that looks dramatic and wonderful. Sometimes it looks like your subject is being interrogated. Reflected light helps control that balance, and thankfully reflected light does not care whether the reflector came from a photography supplier or an office supply store.

- Useful items for reflecting light include:
- White typing paper
- White foam board
- White poster board
- White walls or ceilings
- Foam insulation board
- Aluminum foil over cardboard for harder reflections
- The white or silver side of a 5-in-1 reflector

Move a reflector slightly closer and shadows begin opening. Pull it farther away and contrast returns. Angle it differently and different surfaces begin revealing detail. Small changes matter, which is one reason tabletop photography teaches so effectively.

You also begin understanding why photographers slowly accumulate strange white and black objects around their workspaces.

A Way to Modify Light

This is where photographers usually begin spending money emotionally.

Sometimes wisely.

Sometimes enthusiastically.

Sometimes both.

Light modifiers exist primarily to shape and soften light. Diffusion stretches transitions between highlights and shadows. Scrims soften and spread illumination. Flags control spill. Grids narrow direction. Fresnel lenses and projectors narrow beams. This may all sound wonderfully technical until you start experimenting with simple materials and realize how basic most of it actually is.

A white cloth shower curtain liner works beautifully for diffusion. Parchment paper works well for smaller setups. White fabric can work. Even inexpensive translucent storage bins occasionally become accidental lighting tools, you might begin to recognize their potential if you stare at them long enough in a hardware store.

Useful diffusion and modification tools include:

- Parchment paper
- White translucent shower curtain liners
- White fabric
- Diffusion cloth

- Inexpensive diffusion film made for glass
- 5-in-1 reflectors
- Scrims made from PVC pipe frames
- Old window screen frames with diffusion material attached
- Picture frames or photo mats holding diffusion material
- Clamps for mounting and positioning

One of the simplest scrims you can build is parchment paper taped inside an old picture frame, or white translucent cloth attached to a lightweight PVC frame with clamps. Old window screen frames work beautifully for this as well and are often available for almost nothing. Hang the scrim near a bright window and suddenly harsh sunlight becomes much softer and more controllable.

Years ago I stretched a shower curtain liner between a pair of stands using industrial clamps. I remember thinking the setup looked less like photography and more like an unfinished bathroom remodeling project. Then I looked through the camera.

The light softened beautifully and because of the angle created a nice gradient on the background.

Light could not care less about branding, which can be slightly irritating after spending a great deal of money on equipment advertised with dramatic music and slow-motion product videos.

A Shooting Surface

Shooting surfaces are another place where photographers can accidentally spend a surprising amount of money before realizing they probably already own something usable.

Most surfaces contribute three things to a photograph. Color. Texture. Reflection. Once you begin paying attention to those relationships, surfaces start making much more sense photographically.

Useful shooting surfaces include:

- Flooring samples
- Scrap wood
- Tile samples
- Poster board
- Foam board
- Fabric, tablecloths, old curtains
- Old tables
- Plexiglas or acrylic sheets
- Countertops
- Weathered boards

Some of my favorite tabletop surfaces over the years were not photography products at all. They were scraps, leftovers, samples, and things other people were probably throwing away or in the bargain bin at the building supply store.

One thing worth paying attention to is how surfaces affect mood. A rough wooden surface feels very different than glossy acrylic. Neither is automatically better, but they communicate very different things visually.

That awareness becomes part of composition.

A Background You Can Control

Backgrounds are where many tabletop photographs quietly fall apart. The subject may be lit beautifully, but something in the background keeps pulling attention away from it. Bright edges. Clutter. Distracting colors. Reflections. Random objects announcing their existence drawing the eye to the distraction.

Fortunately, backgrounds are usually easier to control than photographers first assume.

Useful background materials include:

- Black poster board
- White poster board
- Fabric
- Blankets
- Large craft paper rolls
- Foam board
- Neutral walls
- Flooring underlayment
- Printed background sheets

One of the advantages of tabletop work is that the camera only sees what you allow into the frame. Sometimes moving the background farther behind the subject helps separate it visually. Sometimes simply changing the camera position a few inches removes distractions you did not notice at first. Small adjustments begin having surprisingly large consequences once you start paying attention to edges, reflections, and separation.

That idea becomes very important once we begin discussing light direction in the next lesson.

A Way to Capture the Image

It's no accident that I have placed the camera itself near the end of this discussion.

Cameras matter. Lenses matter. Good equipment absolutely matters. But setting up for a tabletop photograph has a way of revealing that light, observation, and control usually matter first.

Modern phones are capable of remarkably good tabletop photographs under controlled conditions. Older film cameras and DSLRs still work beautifully. Mirrorless systems work beautifully. Compact cameras often work perfectly well.

What matters most early on is not the perfect gear. It's working with a stable system that enables close observation.

Useful capture tools include:

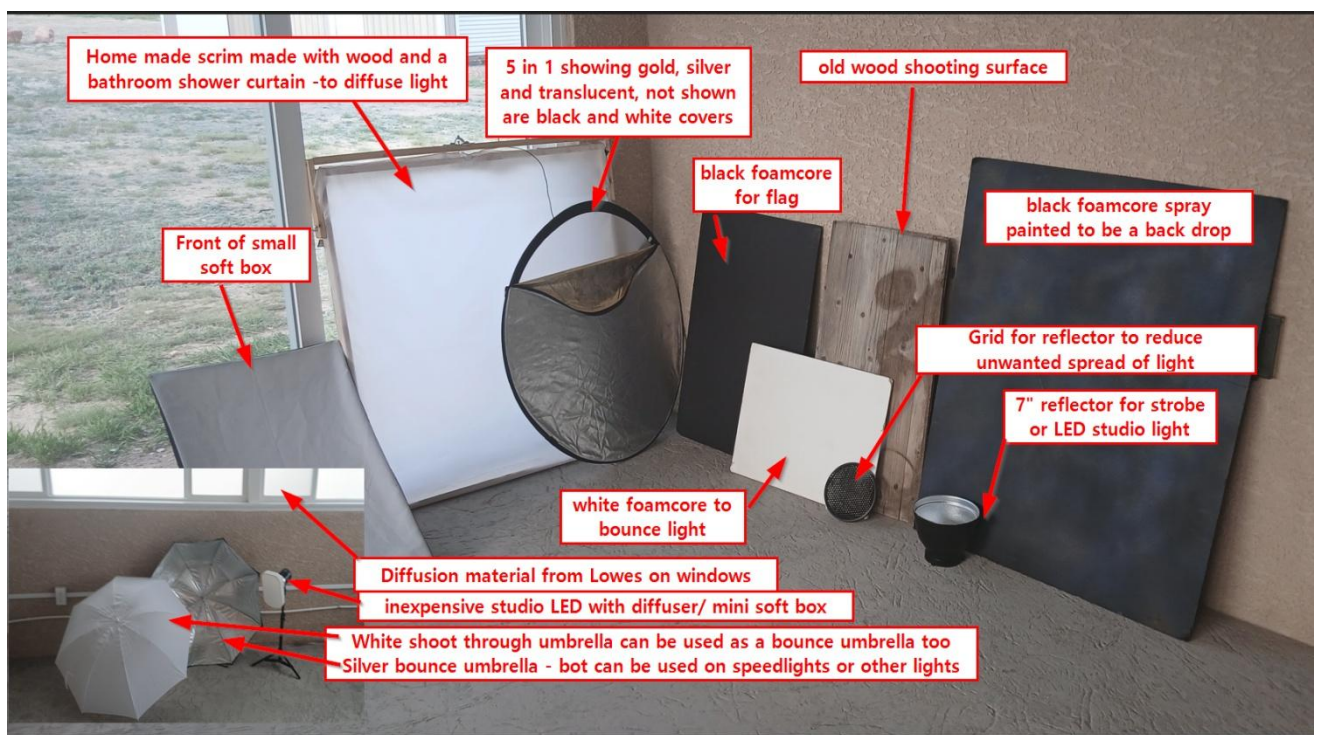
- Smartphones
- DSLRs
- Film cameras
- Mirrorless cameras
- Compact cameras
- Tripods

- Remote shutter releases
- Self timers
- Small tabletop tripods

One of the best investments for tabletop photography is often a sturdy tripod because it slows the process down enough that you begin studying composition and light more carefully. Slower shutter speeds become usable reducing the need for high output lights. Small adjustments become easier to evaluate. The process itself becomes more studied.

Eventually something interesting starts happening. The camera begins feeling less like the source of the photograph and more like what it actually is; the recording device for decisions already made with light, reflection, surfaces, and composition.

That realization tends to stay with photographers for a very long time.



In the next article we will begin looking more closely at light direction itself and why moving a light a few inches often changes shape, texture, and mood more dramatically than photographers initially expect.

David Hayden is a Southern Colorado photographer and writer whose work focuses on light, observation, and photographic craft.