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Dragging the Shutter?

by Jim Hooper

Maybe you've heard of it, maybe you haven't, but chances are you've encountered this problem: You're shooting indoors, the light is low, so you know that you will need your flash. You mount your flash on the hotshoe, turn it on and fire away. You're within the recommended distance for your flash and film speed/aperture combination, but your backgrounds are pitch black!

When you mount your flash, and shoot in one of the auto exposure modes (except Shutter Priority), the shutter automatically sets itself to the top *sync-speed* of the camera, typically 1/160 or 1/125. That shutter speed is TOO FAST to render any detail in the background, and the light from your flash is only going to illuminate the subject. If you were shooting without a flash, the whole picture would be black, but with the flash, the subject should be properly illuminated. The background is too far away to see any light.

“Dragging the shutter” may be exactly what you are looking for. Set your camera in either “Manual” or “Shutter Priority”



exposure mode. Set your shutter somewhere between the top sync-speed and the ambient light reading. The closer to the ambient light reading, the lighter the background. So, if your ambient reading was 1/15 at f4, you could set your flash up and shoot at 1/60 at f4 and have a background that is 2 stops darker than “proper” exposure. Try something like 1/30 at f4 to lighten it just 1 stop.