# 7 TIPS TO SHOOTING A **NIGHT SCENE** WELL

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Ah, the dreaded night scene. When you don't have lights, what do you do? Surprisingly, there are a few things you can do to get good footage, and this guide will show you how.

I have 15 years of filmmaking experience in all genres - feature films and short films, corporate videos, commercials and documentaries. Trust me when I say: Cranking up the ISO is not really the right solution. When things are really dark, you'll just introduce noise and it will look ugly. And when things are dark and you have bright lights from lamps or whatever, bumping up the ISO will just make it look a whole lot worse.

Bumping up the ISO is overrated, and it's *not* one of my 7 tips. So let's get started!

# Tip 1: Keep your ISO low

*Whaaat??* I own and have created [guides for the Sony a7S and a7S II](#). Believe me, I have all the power of high ISO in my hands if I want it. But guess what? I rarely ever use high ISOs. Every time you raise the ISO, you lose two critical things:

- Dynamic range, and
- Color information and accuracy

This is why it's in your best interest to keep the ISO as low as possible, and find other ways to shoot at night. This is the single most important tip I can give you. To understand the effects of ISO, check out [this video](#) I made:
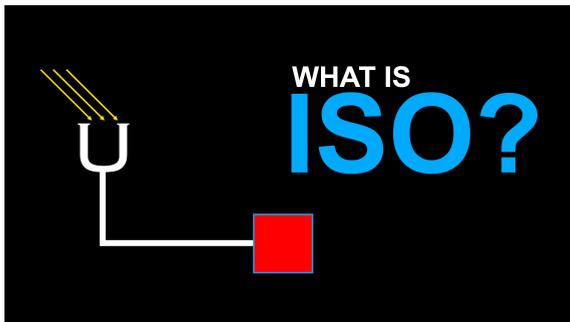
# Tip 2: Keep your ISO constant

If you've watched the above video, you'll understand shifting ISOs for different shots in the same scene will guarantee one thing:

*The shots will not match!*

So when you approach a scene, think for a minute and ask yourself: What's the ISO I can use here (remember to keep it as low as possible)?

Then stick to it for all your shots in that scene – long shots, mid shots, close ups, everything! Sure, you can move your ISO by a stop or so without losing too much, but don't go beyond that, because it'll be hard to match these shots in post.

# Tip 3: Use a wide aperture

There's only so much you can do with ISO. The easiest tip for shooting in low light is to use a wider aperture. Open up the lens to as far as it can go,

because guess what – that's what great cinematographers do!



It helps to have a lens with a wide aperture of f/1.4 for night scenes, especially if you're shooting timelapses of stars.

At infinity focus, the stars will still be sharp at f/1.4 (assuming the lens is good at f/1.4, that is).

# Tip 4: Use a longer lens

A longer lens compresses space so you have less of the background. Also, you can shoot in mid-shots or close-ups to make the area even smaller:



This gives you more control over a smaller area, and you can position the actors near a lamp or shop window to get a good look.

If you have lamps in the background, you can also use a silver reflector ([Amazon](), [B&H]()) to bounce some light on to their faces.

# Tip 5: Shoot in well-lit streets

Don't look at the lamps, look at the streets!



If the streets have sufficient illumination you don't have to worry too much about low light. It will allow you to keep your ISO low and constant.

Also, light will reflect off the road or ground and fill in the actors' faces.

It also pays to have them backlit:

# Tip 6: Use "Blue Hour"

You've heard of golden hour. Blue hour is the time just before sunrise and just after sunset. This is when the sky is not black, and is a dark blue color:

The idea is, you still have ambient light to shoot with, and you can later reduce exposure a bit in post to make it darker – but you won't have to make it brighter!

You also have the advantage of the dying light bouncing off buildings or the roads or land to fill in faces.

However, this tip comes with a catch – blue hour only lasts for about a half-hour, so you might want to get your long shots and masters at this time and then use tip 4 for the mid shots and close ups. Be smart!

# Tip 7: When all else fails

Night is killer. When in doubt, shoot day for night:

Day for night is the art of shooting in daytime and making it look like night. It's not easy, but there are some things you can do to cheat:

- Have a hard light (moonlight is hard light) if you want to simulate moonlight.
- Have a soft light if you want a dark night (no moonlight).
- Shoot in color and don't use any filters (color grading in post production is more powerful than any filter you can use).
- Keep the actors backlit, and fill in faces with a white bounce card.
- Don't show the sky, because a bright sky is a dead giveaway (you can darken the skies a bit in post if it's a rich blue)
- Avoid specular reflections and highlights. Moonlight is strong and hard, but nowhere close to the burning power of the sun.
- Don't blow out highlights.
- No white or bright clothes in the open sun.
- Spend time in color correction.

That's it! If you still need help, please feel free to send me an email and I'll be happy to help if I can.

Now go film something at night!