Setting the SB-900 as a Master Flash Unit

(Say the above using the voice of Optimus Prime from the *Transformers* movie.)

Set the SB-900 to the Master mode by using the Power ON-OFF switch/wireless setting switch. One click, the unit is on as a TTL flash. Press and turn the power switch one more click, and it's a remote. Press and click up once more, it's a master. This is nice. Easier than the 800.

1. Turn the switch while holding down the button in the center. Did I already say that?

2. Align the index on the Power ON-OFF switch/ wireless setting switch to MASTER. Done!

Setting the Flash Mode, Flash Output Level Compensation Values, and Channel Number on the SB-900 Master Flash Unit

1. Press the Function button 1 on the Master flash unit to highlight "M." Function button 1 is the far-left button.

Function button 1
Function button 2

2. Press the MODE button, then turn the selector dial to choose the desired flash mode, and press the OK button. Or, you can just keep punching the MODE button, same way you do with the 800.

   TTL Through The Lens
   A   Auto Aperture flash
   M   Manual flash
   --- No light output (Although in M --- a pre-flash will occur! This is where it might be confusing. It looks like it is flashing. Relax. It is a pre-flash, not an exposure-making flash.)

3. Press the Function button 2, then turn the selector dial to choose the desired flash output level compensation value, and press the OK button.

4. Press the Function button 1 to highlight Group "A." (Turn the selector dial to choose a group other than "A.")

5. Repeat steps 2 and 3 to set the flash mode and flash output level compensation values of the remote flash units in Group "A."

6. In the same way as with Group "A," set the flash mode and flash output level compensation values of the remote flash unit in Groups "B" and "C."
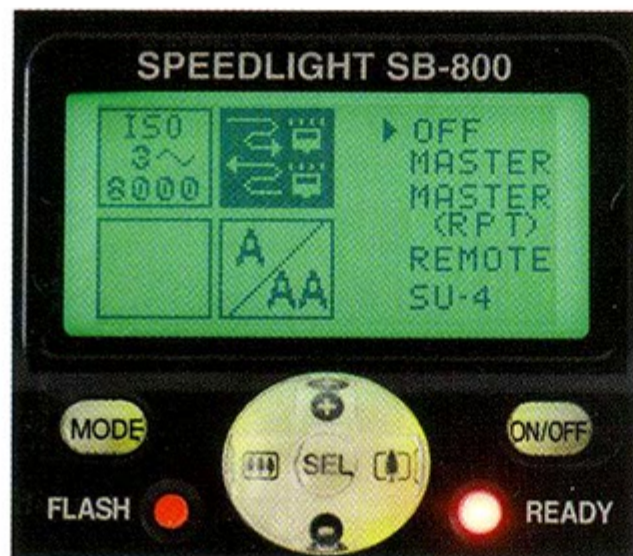
Note: After setting the output compensation value, press OK twice to reveal "Ch" above Function button 2. This is important, believe it or not. I have forgotten this little two-step and been very frustrated trying to change my channels. Remember to punch the OK button in the center of the selector dial twice to get the "Ch." Then you can change channels.

7. Press the Function button 2, then turn the selector dial to set a channel number and press the OK button.

See the padlock symbol running between Function buttons 1 and 2? If you simultaneously depress those two function buttons, you will lock the settings you just made. Not a bad thing to consider, 'cause if you're like me, you'll thunder-thumb your way around the back of the unit and inadvertently change the values or the channels. Depress them again together to release the locking function.
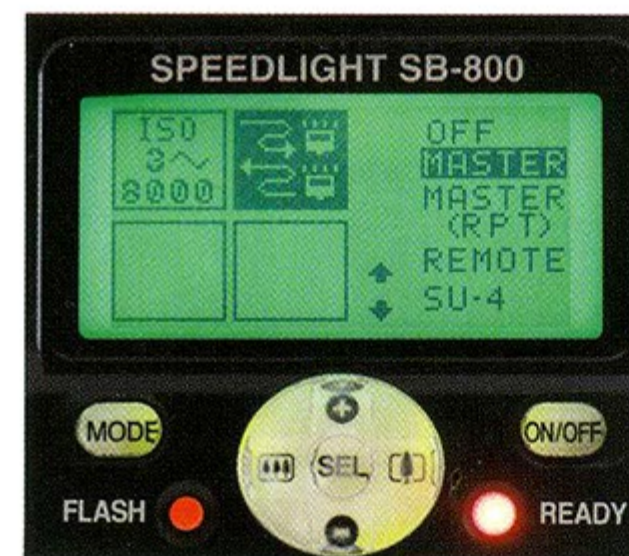
Setting the SB-800 as a Master Flash Unit, or, People with Really Big Thumbs, Go Buy an SB-900

1. With the unit on, press and hold SEL for two seconds. The display will change.

2. In the first four-box grid that comes up, the wireless symbol box—with the Speedlight symbols and the squiggly lines—is the one at the upper right. Toggle over and it will highlight.

3. Press SEL for one second. The one ↑ will change to two ↕ and the OFF selection on the right will become shaded. Now you can scroll through the options, by toggling up and down (+/-).

4. Scroll down and select MASTER by highlighting it and pressing SEL for two seconds. (You can also tap the ON-OFF button as a shortcut.) The display will change to the Master view. The Master view comes up with M and A active as flashes. You can tell they are active by the fact that they have a compensation value reading next to them: "0.0." Whenever M or any of the Groups A, B, or C are active as remote flashes, they will have a compensation value next to them. They are inactive if they have three dashes (---) next to them.
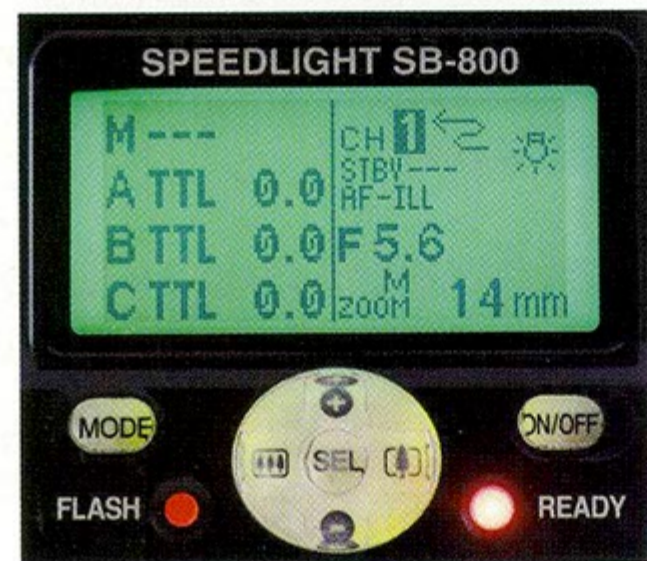

5. Press SEL to highlight "M." By pressing the +/- buttons, you can change the flash output compensation value for the "M" group. Pressing MODE while a group (M, A, B, or C) is highlighted will change how the Speedlights in that group will react.

TTL   Through The Lens

A   Auto Aperture flash

M   Manual flash

---   No light output (Although in M --- a pre-flash will occur—again, this can be confusing.)

Press SEL to jump from Group M to A to B to C. Set the amount of flash output compensation for each group using the +/- buttons.

SPEEDLIGHT SB-800

M---
A TTL+0.7
B TTL-0.3 F5.6
C TTL-1.0

CH 1
STBV---
AF-ILL
ZOOM 14mm

MODE   SEL   ON/OFF
FLASH ●   ● READY

6. Use SEL to highlight "CH" and use the +/- buttons to select the channel you will be working in. (There are four channels, allowing multiple photographers using the Nikon Creative Lighting System to control their own Speedlights.)

SPEEDLIGHT SB-800

M---
A TTL 0.0
B TTL 0.0 F5.6
C TTL 0.0

CH 1
STBV---
AF-ILL
ZOOM 14mm

MODE   SEL   ON/OFF
FLASH ●   ● READY

Note: The channel you choose for the Master Speedlight must be the same channel the remote units are set to. Make sure you check this. With multiple Speedlights firing and pre-flashing, it is often hard to tell when one is not working. Double-check that you have all the flashes on the same channel.

7. Attach the Master Speedlight to your camera.

If you ever get into the woods with the SB-800 and can't figure out where the heck you are in the menus, simultaneously depress the MODE and the ON/OFF buttons, to the left and right of the white SEL button. The unit will default back to a regular TTL flash setting, and you can start all over. Also, on the back of the white fill card, there is a cheat sheet. No one ever reads it because no one ever uses that white bounce card.

Note: During shooting, if you wish to change the power output of the remote flash units, do so from the Master SB-900, SB-800 or, if you are using the built-in flash, you can do it here, too, from the camera menu. The change will take effect immediately. That's what they mean by wireless, right? You don't have to walk over to the unit to change the power.

You can still read the instruction manual if you want, and I guess I have to say that so somebody doesn't get irate about a piece of minutiae I haven't mentioned here, but to get a flash going as a Master, the above is all you need to know. The SU-800 is a Commander unit, in effect a Master flash without being a flash. Very good little unit, less expensive and smaller than using a flash unit as a Master. The LCD is simple to sort out. If you can program a 900 or an 800 to be a Master, you can figure out the SU-800. Trust me on this.

Using the Built-In Flash on the D80, D90, D200, D300, D700 as a Commander Flash

The built-in, or "pop-up," flash on these models can be used as a Commander flash to trigger remote Speedlights.

1. Go to the camera menu. That means you hit the Menu button.

2. Go to the Custom Settings menu. That is the pencil symbol/icon on the far left, just under the camera symbol.

3. Highlight and select Bracketing/Flash. Consult your camera's instruction manual for the Custom Setting number for your particular camera model.

4. Select Flash control for built-in flash.

5. The default is TTL, so toggle down to "C" for "Commander Mode." Toggle right.

6. Grid comes up. Options will vary according to your camera, so here you should go back to your manual for your particular camera model.

7. But—this is key. If you do not want the built-in flash active, and you wish to drop it out of the final exposure (basically we are talking about just using it as a trigger), when the TTL box is highlighted next to Built-in flash, use the multi-selector wheel to toggle up or down until you see two dashes (--). Now the built-in flash is just set to trigger your remote units. Another key thing to remember, folks: Pop up that little flash.

Now you can continue to activate either of your other groups. Toggle right, and you will start to highlight the REMOTE GROUPS. Toggle through them as you wish, and dial "+/-" into each group.

And a note from the Telling You the Obvious category: Make sure you choose the appropriate channel.

Note: Remember to hit OK before exiting the menu. If you don't, all the crap you just did will not take, and your photo won't look anything like what you anticipated, and you will have to go back into the menu and do all this toggling hoo-hah all over again.

More Buttons:
Remote Wireless Flash

The Nikon SB-900, SB-800, SB-600, and SB-R200 Speedlights can be set as remote units and can be triggered by using an on-camera SB-900 or 800 set in "Master Mode"; or directly from the built-in flash on the D80, D90, D200, D300, or D700; or by using the SU-800 Wireless Commander.

Setting the SB-900 as a Wireless Remote Unit

You can set the SB-900 for remote operation using the Power ON-OFF switch/wireless setting switch. It's in the lower right, by the way. I make a game of it, and try to set this one-handed using my thumb. (It's the little things that amuse you on location.) The 800 is definitely a two-handed operation, or one hand and the tip of your nose or chin.

1. Turn the switch while holding down the button in the center.

2. Align the index on the Power ON-OFF switch/ wireless setting switch to REMOTE.

This is three clicks of that button. I mean, you're making the unit a remote, right? So this makes sense. Cool. Much simpler than the 800.

Setting a Group and Channel Number on the SB-900 Remote Flash Unit

1. Press the Function button 1, then turn the selector dial to choose a desired group name, and press the OK button.

2. Press the Function button 2, then turn the selector dial to choose a desired channel number, and press the OK button.

Note: Be sure to choose the same channel number as set on the Master flash unit or in the Commander mode on your camera. Okay, okay. Remember you can lock these up if you want.

"Read what the LCD is telling you. It is your friend."

Setting the SB-800 as a Wireless Remote Unit

1. With the unit on, press and hold the SEL button for two seconds. It sometimes can take more time—I think it depends on how fresh the batteries are, but that is a guess on my part. It seems like forever when the sun is setting and you are trying to do a portrait at the last minute of the day.

2. Locate the shaded box and use the toggle to highlight the squiggly lines (the wireless symbol box).

3. Press SEL for one second. The one ↑ will change to two ↕.

4. Scroll down and select REMOTE by highlighting it and pressing SEL for two seconds. The display will change to the Remote view. It says REMOTE in large letters. Read what the LCD is telling you. It is your friend.

5. Press SEL to highlight "CH," and use the +/- buttons to select the channel. (The Remote and Master units must be set to the same channel or they will not communicate. Duh.)

6. Press SEL again to highlight the group. Use the +/- buttons to choose Group A, B, or C. (The amount of output compensation set for Groups A, B, and C on the Master flash will determine the amount of output from the Remote Speedlights. That's why they call it the Master. Wild guess on my part.)

You will notice that I do not show how to set up the SB-600 as a Wireless Remote Unit here. That's because I never use them anymore. Spring for the dough to buy an 800 on eBay, or get a new 900. ☐