

Nikkor 85mm f/1.4D Lens Review

Once a champ, still a champ?



Lens	9 elements in 8 groups.
Formula	
Other	manual/autofocus switch, internal focus, 77mm filter size. Comes with HN-31 hood, 9-blade rounded
Features	aperture. Focuses to 2.8' (.85m).
Size & Weight	About 3" (78mm) long, 18 ounces (513g).
Price	US\$1229 street

The Basics

What we have here is the classic portrait lens for FX, a modest telephoto for DX. Nikon shooters have been using one or another variant of this lens for decades. You'll see it at weddings, at parties, on the street, anywhere that portraits are being taken. While the f/1.4 maximum aperture made it sought after for low light work, it really was the depth of field isolation and smooth backgrounds (bokeh) that made this lens a classic. There is one previous version, a manual focus version first made in 1981. As one noted Nikon historian wrote about that version: "It is a dream lens!"

The basic specifications for the lens are straightforward enough: fast maximum f/1.4 aperture with click stops at every aperture (smallest aperture is f/16); 77mm filter size; close focus as close as 2.8 feet (.85 meters). For an FX body, the horizontal angle of view is 24°, for a DX body, 16°. While this is an autofocus lens, it is not an AF-S lens, meaning that it won't autofocus on the low-end DSLR bodies.

The lens has focus markings, plus depth of field markings for f/11 and f/16 (at too lax a standard, IMHO). There's also an infrared focus mark (and this lens does indeed work well on infrared-converted DSLRs). Foot markings are in yellow, meters in white, but being behind glass I sometimes have trouble seeing the foot markings in certain types of light.

The build of the lens is rock solid. This is a heavy (19.8 ounces, 550g) metal body with very little use of composites. Build quality is Nikon's old pro level.

The lens is made in Japan.

Handling

As with most primes, there isn't a lot to talk about in terms of handling.

The focus ring is a decent size, easy to find at the front of the lens, and has a smooth, if slightly loose feel to it. Since the lens is not AF-S, you either let the camera do the focusing or you use the ring-based **M/A** switch to set the lens to manual focusing. From near to infinity focus is almost a full half rotation of the focus ring. The lens does not extend or rotate during focus (i.e. it is an internal focus lens).

The aperture ring is the typical recent Nikon one: a stiff ring that has click stops only at the full stop markings and is thus a bit tough to set at precise half stops. Of course, on all DSLRs you're going to be using the camera's Command dial to set apertures, so this really is only relevant news to folks using older film-based bodies (and I mean *older*).

The lens cap now supplied is the front-pinch type, but the earliest iterations of the lens came with the traditional edge pinch. The supplied HN-31 hood is a full hood and big (1.75" deep). It's also the old-style screw-in hood, which means you have to take the lens cap off to put it on (you

Quick Evaluation

Highly Recommended



If it were AF-S and VR, it would be perfect.

★★★★★	features
★★★★★	focus speed
★★★★★	optics
★★★★★	build
★★★★★	value

On an absolute scale, the optics can't really be faulted.

Limitations

This 85mm lens has limitations you need to be aware of:

Converters: TC-14A or TC-201, but you'll lose autofocus.

Old AF: will not autofocus on cameras without a lens drive (D40, D40x, D60, and D5000).

Coverage Area: No limitations. Covers the DX, FX, and 35mm film image area.

Version of Review:
5/6/09: initial post.

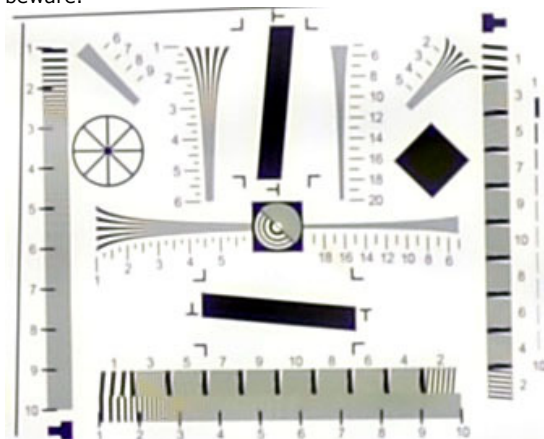
can manage to get the lens cap back on after the hood is attached, but it isn't fully secure). The lens hood cannot be reversed on the lens.

Performance

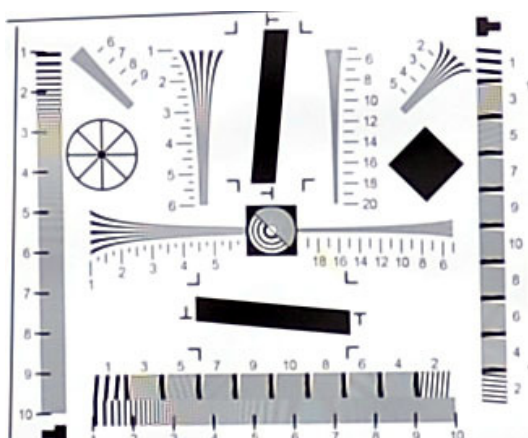
As I've already noted, this lens is a classic.

Autofocus: I wouldn't call the autofocus slow or fast. For a screw-drive lens its pretty snappy as long as it doesn't have to go from one extreme to another (e.g. close focus to infinity). Even when it does, it does so with a certainty. If you measure the focus speed in numbers, the 85mm f/1.4D doesn't match, say, the 70-200mm AF-S in speed, but nor is it the more leisurely focus speed of some recent Nikkors, such as the 50mm f/1.4G. The way I'd describe it is like this: for a D-type autofocus lens, the 85mm f/1.4D is one of the fastest. It won't match the best AF-S lenses, but nor will it drive you crazy waiting for it to reach focus. Moreover, there's very little tendency to hunt, even in low light, at least on the pro bodies (remember, it won't autofocus on many consumer bodies, including the D40, D40x, D60, and D5000).

Sharpness: Absolutely nothing to complain about, unless, I suppose, you're a corner purist and were expecting flat field correction. Right from f/1.4 the lens is very good in the center with just a touch of softness; two stops down it is superb. Yes, the corners are softer than the center at the wider apertures, but frankly not enough to worry about considering how this lens will be used most of the time (portraits). The lens is not a flat field lens, either, so test charts aren't going to usually do this lens justice in the corners if you're looking at measurements done by tests you see elsewhere on the net. On DX bodies the corners of the 85mm f/1.4D are still measuring what would be considered "good" in most testing. On FX bodies, yes, the corners test a bit soft wide open--though there is a large "central area" that is quite good--and the corners don't really change until about f/5.6, at which point the lens is darned good from edge to edge on FX. If you want to shoot flat objects, get the PC-E lens; for the rest of the photographic opportunities, this lens is plenty sharp enough. Indeed, sharp enough to reveal flaws in your shooting technique, so beware.

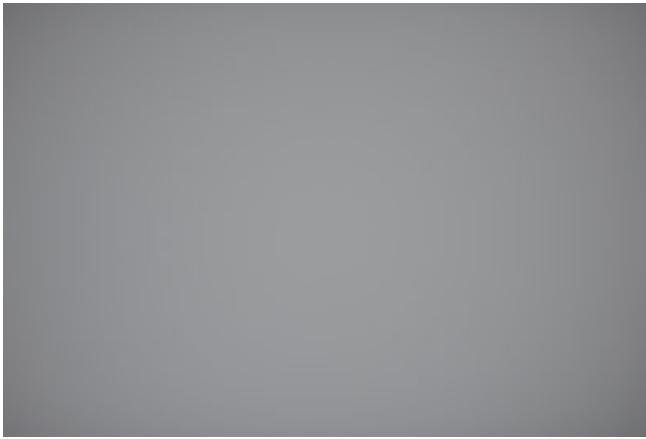


f/1.4 center

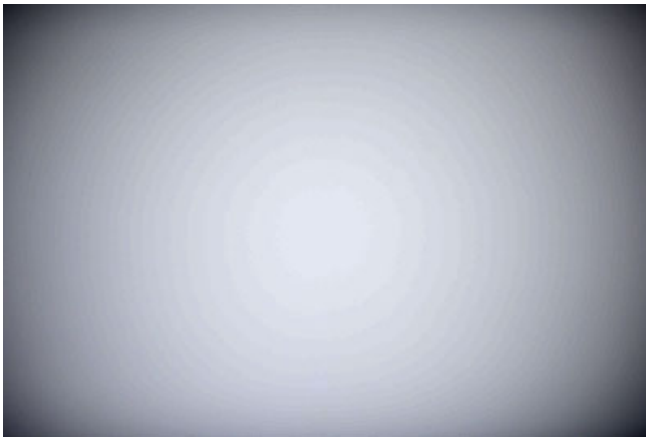


f/5.6 center

Light falloff: On a DX body, there's not really enough light falloff to get concerned about (perhaps a half stop in the corners), but on an FX body, yes, at f/1.4 the lens has a very observable vignetting (a bit more than a stop, though well hidden, see below). And the lens gets down to the half-stop level I consider not worth worrying about by f/2.8. For an f/1.4 lens, I'd actually say the light falloff is less than expected--this lens has very good performance here, and the central area least impacted by the light falloff is plenty wide--perfect for portraits.



from camera

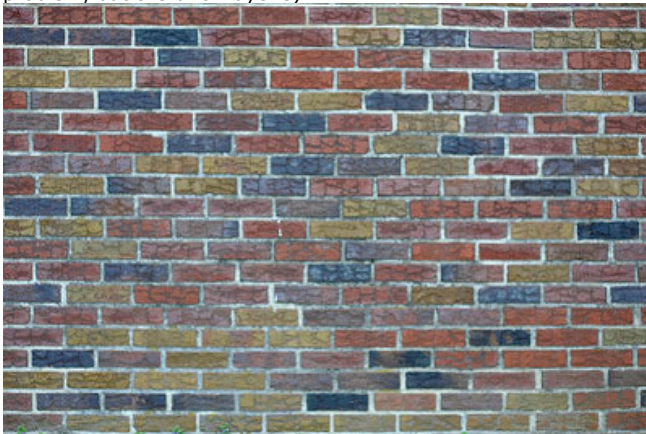


adjusted to show pattern

Chromatic aberration: Very consistent and low levels of chromatic aberration across the apertures, an unusual result.

Flare: The big, slightly curved front element without much inset means you should use the hood, always. The hood does a very good job of keeping light from the front element.

Distortion: close to zilch. Nada. None. I can't even get an accurate measurement for linear distortion off my test charts, as it's well less than a half percent (barrel). Indeed, my usual photo target is revealed to have a bit of dip of its own in the upper right corner (that's not the lens' problem, but the brick layer's):



Bokeh: While the Nikkor has a rounded 9-blade aperture opening, I noticed that it does not retain a good shape as it gets down to $f/11$ and $f/16$ (above that, it is fine). But you don't care about that. If you're interested in this lens, you're interested in the wide open and near wide open bokeh. And that's one of the classic aspects of this lens: bokeh is clean, soft, and very pleasant. Of all the Nikkors made, this lens is in the top half-dozen in this respect, perhaps even in the top three. Out of focus backgrounds just render in ways that don't look artificial, which is good, because at $f/1.4$ and 85mm you're going to have a very shallow depth of field!

Compared to the f/1.8D

The real issue here is value. The $f/1.8D$ is about one-third the cost of the $f/1.4D$. You obviously lose two-thirds of a stop in light gathering, the question is do you lose anything else? My answer might surprise you. Not nearly as much as the price suggests. Indeed, if anything the $f/1.8D$ is a

little sharper wide open than the 1.4D at f/1.8 on my FX bodies. This is especially noticeable in the corners (the f/1.4D may beat the f/1.8D in some apertures in the center, but barely). The f/1.8D vignettes less wide open, too. Chromatic aberration and distortion are very similar to the f/1.4D, too, which is to say very good. Nope, the only other thing you really lose besides that two-thirds of a stop aperture loss is, wait for it, bokeh. Yep, there it is: it just doesn't quite have that "don't see it" bokeh of the f/1.4D. What to attribute that to, I don't know, but it isn't quite the same. That's not to say that I find the bokeh objectionable on the f/1.8D--it's good. But if I look closely, I can tell the two apart. So, it comes down to two-thirds of a stop and bokeh that can't be beat for an extra US\$800 or so. If you're buying an 85mm for a general purpose lens that will sometimes be used for portraits I'll surprise you and say no, it isn't worth the extra money. Even if you're on FX and shooting only portraits with it, I think you need to really examine your shooting to see if f/1.4 and better bokeh are really worth the extra money.

That said, I'll also say this: I've never been disappointed when I've picked up the 85mm f/1.4D and shot with it. Never. Even shooting high-speed pro basketball from the end line (it's very tight in focal length for that, by the way). If you nail the shot with this lens, you really nail it, and oh boy, that background sure looks dreamy. No, unless Nikon produces an update to this lens that keeps all the good parts and still manages to improve something, this lens will stay in my lens collection pretty much forever.

Drawbacks

- 1 *Old design.* No AF-S, no VR--this lens needs an update.

Positives

- 1 *Optically what you want.* On FX bodies it is the perfect portrait lens. On DX bodies, it's a little long for that, but still a useful lens.

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