

HOW TO MAKE YOUR PICTURES 'SING' - ADDING DEPTH TO THE BLACKS

If your pictures, particularly monochrome prints, appear a little flat and greyish, this very simple technique will give them a boost. Using a Levels adjustment layer, check the histogram. This is a graph of the tones of your image, and in most images it is usually in the form of a pyramid, appearing a bit like a silhouette of a mountain. The shadow tones are on the left, the highlights on the right, and the greater part of the image - the 'peak and slopes' of the mountain - indicate the mid tones. It is usually assumed and recommended that the tones in the histogram graph should just touch each edge, which is fine in theory, as you should then have a full range of tones. That means, however, that the black tone on the extreme left edge will indicate the only, possibly tiny, part of the image that has a full black, and conversely, the extreme right edge will be the only maximum highlight. If the tones at either edge end in an upright line, that means that either the highlights or the shadows will be 'clipped' i.e. without detail. With highlights, it is advisable that this is corrected, as detail-less highlights, especially if there is a large area of them, will often ruin a picture. Another way of checking if there is clipping, in the Levels layer, is to press the Alt key at the same time as moving the small triangles under either side of the histogram edges. The screen will go either white or black and as the sliders are moved into the histogram, either areas of pure white or black will be seen. This is where the tones are starting to clip.

In the case of highlights, it is best to stop the slider when evidence of clipping is just starting to appear, but clipped blacks are not nearly as disastrous and this can be exploited to improve the depth and contrast of an image. If the histogram on the left edge is brought just to the point of clipping and not beyond, only a tiny part of the image will be maximum black and all of the tones to the right of that will be shades of grey (not necessarily 50 though!). The result can often be a rather disappointing flattish image that lacks zing and punch and you might wonder what has gone wrong -and it is simply that you need stronger blacks.

As it is the blacks that enrich an image, I will usually strengthen them and I do that by moving the left hand triangle *into* the histogram so that the areas of maximum black are increased and the image gains contrast and depth. Yes, your deepest blacks will now be clipped! But as long as these are not large areas, the small loss of detail is unlikely to be a problem and if in any particular part of the image more detail is required, it is easy to bring enough of this back by 'dodging' with the Overlay blend technique (see my other article).

It is, of course, a matter of aesthetic judgement as to how far the blacks are clipped, but after you have used the technique a couple of times, you will soon be aware of how far you need to go. The technique can make such a difference to an image, especially monochrome, and it is now an essential part of my work flow.

And to give a final tweak, open a Curves layer and near the top of the window, where it says 'Presets' scroll down from 'Default' to Linear Contrast, and you will see a small 'jump' in the tones to give a final boost!

Colin Westgate, September 2017

CONVERTING TO MONOCHROME

There are several ways of doing this e.g. Greyscale, Hue & Saturation, Channel Mixer, Lab Colour, Black & White Adjustment Layer or in Camera Raw. The two I favour are 'Black and White' adjustment layer or 'Grayscale' in Camera Raw.

1) Black & White Adjustment Layer

After opening your image, it is sensible to make a Duplicate Layer - c/o Layer on the top tool bar, then Duplicate Layer. This preserves your original image and you don't lose it if you mess things up. It does double your file size though and to be honest, I don't always do it - the worst that can happen is that you have to start again! - but that isn't considered good practice!. To find a 'Black and White Adjustment Layer, Click on (c/o) **Layers**, found on the tool bar at the top of your screen. This brings up several options - c/o '**New Adjustment Layer**'. This brings up loads more options - c/o the one that says '**Black and White**'. This brings up a window with several boxes - ignore them all and c/o 'OK'. (NB, it is much quicker to use the 'Adjustments' tool bar on the right of your screen – if it isn't there, go to 'Window' on the top menu bar, c/o that and you will see a host of options. You don't want to clutter up your screen though, so just c/o the, ones you need – I use History, Adjustments, Info and Layers). The circular symbol half black and half white is the Black & White adjustment layer – c/o that and the window will come up.

Your picture will immediately change to mono and it brings up a window with colour sliders. Try each of these and you will find that the tonality and/or contrast of your picture will change, although not necessarily with every colour, as this depends on the mix of colours in your image. Sometimes the change will be very subtle, other times much more obvious. When you have the tonality that works best, c/o 'OK' and close the layer. You then have a basic mono image which is your starting point and you can manipulate this by using contrast and tonal adjustments.

2) Grayscale in Camera Raw

This is now my preferred method as it can be done before opening the image in Photoshop proper and is very flexible. Open your image in Camera Raw - I open mine through Bridge - right click the image in Bridge which then brings up the option for you to open in CR. On the tool panel on the right, at the top, the 4th box from the left is the Grayscale box*. C/o that and a window will open with the same sliders as in the B&W Adjustment layer method described above. C/o the small square which says 'Convert to Grayscale' and your image will change to monochrome. Then work the sliders as above.

*In later versions of Photoshop CC, tick the separate B&W box below the menu and then click the hue/saturation symbol.

There are many other options in Camera Raw for manipulating your image and I would recommend doing these in CR before opening in Photoshop. However, some earlier versions of Photoshop do not support the Camera Raw software.

When you have completed work in Camera Raw, open your image in Photoshop for final adjustments.

To maximise the quality of the blacks in an image, I use a levels adjustment layer and move the left hand slider into the histogram. This will 'clip' some blacks i.e. block them, but as long as there isn't a large area, it should be fine. This technique adds a richness to the blacks and help to make your images 'sing'. You may want to bring any larger area back slightly by lightening as in the 'dodge & burn technique, just to add a *suggestion* of detail. How far you go is a matter of taste and discretion!

Colin Westgate, January 2015 (amended December 2018)

TONAL CONTROL (DODGING and BURNING) – ‘OVERLAY’ METHOD

This method is to be preferred to that using the actual ‘Dodge & Burn’ tools in Photoshop, which are destructive and less flexible. Before you start, you may wish to make a duplicate layer and work on that rather than the Background layer - although I don't as it doubles the file size - but this will probably be considered 'bad practice' by some!! It is also advisable to work in 16 bit as occasionally artifacts can occur in 8 bit due to the limited range of colours or tones.

With your image open in Photoshop go to **LAYER**, then **NEW LAYER**. A window will come up in the centre of your screen. The default name is ‘Layer 1’ but you can change this if you want to e.g. ‘Dodge and Burn’ Click the arrow in the **MODE** box. This will drop down a list of numerous layer modes. Choose **OVERLAY**. You can also use **SOFT LIGHT** or **HARD LIGHT** for weaker or stronger effects.

Leave the Colour box as ‘None’. Leave the opacity box at 100%

Leave the box ‘Use previous layer to create clipping mask’ un-ticked

Tick the box headed ‘**Fill with overlay neutral colour [50% Gray]**’

When you have completed the above, click on OK and the window will disappear

From the usual Photoshop tool list select the brush tool. (Short cut ‘B’) Choose a **SOFT** brush I use max softness 100% and hardness 0%. Use the square brackets (to the right of the letter ‘P’ on your keyboard) to get the size of brush you want. ‘Overlay’ should appear in the box top left - Photoshop normally defaults this to ‘Normal’, so make sure Overlay is displayed..

Look at the two overlapping squares nearly at the bottom of the tool list (usually on the left of your screen). Make sure these are set at black and white. Choose **white** to dodge (lighten) and **black** to burn (darken), whichever one is on top is the one that is operative - you can alternate between the two by tapping the letter ‘X’ on your keyboard. If there is another tone or shade in those boxes, tap ‘D’ on your keyboard and this will then set the default black & white

Look at the **OPACITY** slider on the top menu bar. It will be defaulted at 100%. This is far too strong. I normally use between 5% and 20%, very occasionally stronger, as it is better to build up an effect rather than try and do it all at once. You can adjust the slider appropriate to different parts of the image, as you burn and dodge. The adjacent ‘Flow’ box should be left at 100%. Each time you click and hold down, tone will be added or reduced as you click and/or drag. I tend to use big brushes for skies and sweep across the image, but then smaller brushes to darken/lighten in more detailed areas. It may help to enlarge your image on the screen when lightening/darkening small areas (Control + (plus) to enlarge and Control – (minus) to make smaller on screen.

Experiment to get the effect you want. You cannot do any damage to your image, as it is reversible if you go too far either by going back in the ‘History’ (or Control-Z to go back one steps or Control-Alt-Z to go back more than one step, on your keyboard), or simply dodging or burning back. Unlike the Photoshop ‘Burn and Dodge’ tool, this method does not destroy pixels and thus won't degrade your image.

If, in extreme cases (such as very dense black or a very light highlight), the overlay method may not go far enough. You can then try ‘Hard Light’ as your blend mode instead of ‘Overlay’. Alternatively, you can open up a second ‘Overlay’ layer and repeat the process.- but beware, this will considerably increase your file size! As these layers do increase your file size considerably (they are not ‘Adjustment Layers’) you may wish to flatten, or ‘merge visible’ the layer when you are happy with the results.

You may find that when you next open Photoshop, that ‘Overlay’ is still displayed, as the programme will remember it. If that is the case, then you don't have to open a new layer. but as you will then be working on the background layer, you may wish to duplicate that first.

A final tip to maximise the rich black tones in your image is to ‘clip’ the blacks in levels (or curves) Open up a Levels adjustment layer and move the left hand slider slightly *into* the histogram pyramid. This will clip some blacks in small areas but this isn't usually a problem if not too large or important. Your blacks will be enriched throughout, as in an ordinary histogram, only the extreme left part of it will give true black in your the picture and it can appear flat. You will need to trial and error to see how far you can, or want, to go. Any problems give me a call on 01206 384315 and I will talk you through it.

Colin Westgate June 2010 (updated Jan 2019)