

Favorite Photoshop Tips

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Color Correction

Many times we find that we have an unintended color cast to an image. It may have been a white balance issue, lighting, or even some nearby source reflecting light onto our subject. Autocolor tends to work well in the latest versions of Photoshop and Elements when there is a defined black and or white for it to work with. When you find you have a more stubborn color cast, try one of these methods to cure the problem.

The first method is one of my favorite quick fixes. It is very easy to use and if it doesn't cure the problem, it is also simple to remove by just deleting the Levels Adjustment Layer used. The second method relies more on your ability to ascertain when the color cast has been removed to an acceptable degree. Think of it as correcting "to taste". This is useful when you have a cast that you want, but which is more intense than intended.

Method 1 – Open the image with a problem color cast in Photoshop

Create a copy of the image by using Image > Duplicate

Make the copy image active and go to Filter > Blur > Average. (This will turn the copy image into a monotonal nothing. If the image was perfectly neutral, the averaged image would be medium gray. More likely, you will see that it has a defined color cast. That is fine for our purposes.)

Select the original image to make it active and arrange the two images so that you can see them at the same time.

Add a Levels Adjustment layer to the original image.

Click on the middle eye dropper (the middle gray) in the Levels Adjustment samplers and click once on the averaged (blurred) image. You should see an immediate shift to a more pleasing color.

You can now close the copy image without saving as it has served its purpose.

Method 2 – Open the image with a problem color cast in Photoshop

Create a copy of the background layer.

On the background copy go to Filter > Blur > Average (This will turn the copy image into a monotonal nothing. If the image was perfectly neutral, the averaged image would be medium gray. More likely, you will see that it has a defined color cast. That is fine for our purposes.)

Invert the background copy layer by pressing <CTRL> I [<CMD> I on a Mac]

Change the Blend Mode of the Background Copy layer from Normal to Color.

Adjust the opacity of the Background copy layer until the image color looks the way you feel it should.

You may want to add a Levels or a Curves Adjustment layer to tweak the overall image contrast to your liking.

Punching Up Color

As nice as the Vibrance sliders in ACR or Lightroom are or the Vibrance Adjustment Layer in Photoshop proper, I often find that some images can use a little added help when it comes to making the color look the way I'd like it to. Here are two different ways to approach adding that extra pop.

The first is done entirely in the sRGB color space (this includes Adobe RGB and ProPhoto RGB). The second relies on shifting into the Lab Color space and then bringing the image back into sRGB. I tend to use the first method unless the image really needs some strong help. Both methods are very easy to set up in actions to make applying them that much simpler.

Elements users please check out this link to a set add-ons known as Grant's Tools <http://www.cavesofice.org/~grant/Challenge/Tools/Files.html>. These will give you a channel mixer in Elements 8 or later, but there are versions that work with Elements 3 and on. Be sure to pay attention to the different sets of instructions for installing in your version of Elements and your operating system.

RGB color boost – Add a Channel Mixer Adjustment Layer. Note that each channel starts with 100% color on it's slider and 0% on the sliders of the other two channels. Our objective is to intensify the color in each channel while leaving the combined total for a channel at 100%.

Begin with the Red channel

Increase the Red percentage to 116%

Change the percentage in the Green and Blue channels to – 8% each (minus 8 %).

Repeat the process for the Green and Blue channels
i.e., Green channel Green to 116%, Red and Blue to -8%
Blue channel Blue to 116%, Red and Green to -8%

This makes the basic color shift we want. We now add a little punch with a curves adjustment.

Add a Curves Adjustment Layer.

This time we will use the RGB master channel. If you have CS3 or earlier you will see the input and output boxes. If you have CS4 or CS5 click anywhere on the curve to activate the input and output boxes. Now click in the input box and set input 0, click in the output box and set output 0. This preserves basic black. Next click back in the input box (In CS4 you will have to click on the curve again to establish a new point.) Set the input value to 65, click in the output box and set the value to 60. Next set a third new point with input 190 and output at 195. Finally reconfirm whites with a fourth point with input 255 and output 255. What you will have done is to make a very subtle bend to the curve that has the effect of boosting the contrast in the image very slightly. Click OK to accept the changes.

Lab color boost – When you really need to help the color in an image, the Lab color space is the place to go. One drawback is that only whole layers can make the trip to and from the Lab space. That means you will need to merge any adjustment layers into a regular layer before moving to or from the Lab space. Be sure to take a snapshot of your image state before flattening or merging anything so that you can easily restore the image to its pre-adjustment state if you aren't happy with the results.

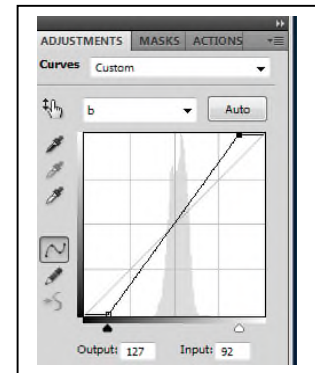
Take a snapshot of the history state of the image file

Merge all adjustment layers into regular layers and rasterize any smart objects into a regular layer. (Since I have the snapshot to fall back on, I will generally flatten the file and then make a single background copy layer before moving to the Lab space.)

Go to Image > Mode > Lab color. If you have multiple layers be sure to click "Don't Flatten".

Ignore the Lightness channel and go to the "a" channel. Dragging only at the top and bottom (i.e., do not put a bend in the curve line),

drag the bottom to the right until the input reads -90. Next drag the top until the input reads 91. Note that the line still goes through the center point on the grid. This is critical. Go to the “b” channel. Drag the bottom until the input reads -93 or there about. Next drag the top until the input reads 94. Again, the curve should pass through the center point on the grid. The objective is to keep the adjustments fundamentally color neutral while amplifying their intensity.



If the image color isn't strong enough, adjust the settings on the a and b channels to make the line even steeper. Just remember to keep the line passing through the center point. If the color is now too intense, just dial back the opacity of the layer until it looks good. If you want to add some extra contrast, add a second Curves Adjustment Layer and use a slight bowing curve on the Lightness channel as we did with the composite channel in the RGB color boost adjustment above.

Take another history snapshot before merging the Adjustment Layers into the background copy layer. The go to Image > Mode > RGB to convert back to the RGB color space.

High Pass Filter

You may have seen or heard someone recommending the High Pass filter in Elements or Photoshop as a way to do sharpening on your images. For those of you who haven't tried it here are three different tips for using High Pass to enhance your images.

Sharpening - After making all of the basic adjustment you want to your image either flatten it (after saving the layered file) or create a new composite layer by pressing <CTRL><ALT><SHIFT>E for a PC (<CMD><OPT><SHIFT>E on a MAC).

With this layer selected go to Filter-Other-High Pass. Set the level to something on the low side, between 2.0 and 5.0 pixels is generally plenty, and then click OK. The image turns grayish but that is fine. In sharpening we are only interested in the edge effect introduced by the filter, not in the gray color that results.

Change the Blend Mode on the layer to Overlay and the image snaps back to color. This technique adds contrast because of the Overlay Blend Mode. If there seems to be too much contrast, try changing

the Blend Mode to Soft Light. Both of these Blend Modes are blind to 50% gray, which is the main color the High Pass Filter generates.

Check your High Pass layer before making the Blend Mode change. If you see significant color fringing, press <CTRL><SHIFT>U on a PC (<CMD><SHIFT>U on a MAC) to desaturate the layer and eliminate any color influence.

Softening - Did you know you can also use the High Pass filter to soften an image? Here's how. After making all of the basic adjustment you want to your image either flatten it (after saving the layered file) or create a new composite layer by pressing <CTRL><ALT><SHIFT>E for a PC (<CMD><OPT><SHIFT>E on a MAC).

With this layer selected first change the Blend Mode to Overlay.

Now go to Filter-Other-High Pass and select a higher setting, say between 10 and 20 pixels, and click OK. Since the Blend Mode was already set to Overlay you will see the sharpening effect, though at the higher settings it may seem exaggerated.

Here's the trick, with the High Pass layer still selected press <CTRL>I on a PC (<CMD>I on a MAC) to invert the effect. Presto, instant softening.

Since you may not want everything softened, add a layer mask and fill it with black to hide the effect. (For those with Elements prior to Elements 9 remember that you will need to add a blank adjustment layer and then press <CTRL><ALT>G on a PC (<CMD><OPT>G on a MAC) to pin it to the High Pass layer as a clipping mask so that you will have the use of a mask on the layer.) Now paint with white where you want to add the softening effect back in. If the effect seems too strong, lower the layer's opacity to suit your taste.

You can also modify the extent of the softening by using lower pixel settings for less softening and higher settings for greater softening. I find that using something between 10 and 20 gives me a good starting point that is easily modified using the layer opacity rather than repeatedly backing up and rerunning the filter at different settings. This technique also adds a faint "glow" to the image, making it very effective when you want to soften a model's cheeks or forehead when working on portraits. Rather than spending money for a "bokeh" plug-in try this way of creating a false bokeh to introduce controlled softening to your images.

Enhancing Midtone Detail - I have to start by apologizing to the Elements users.

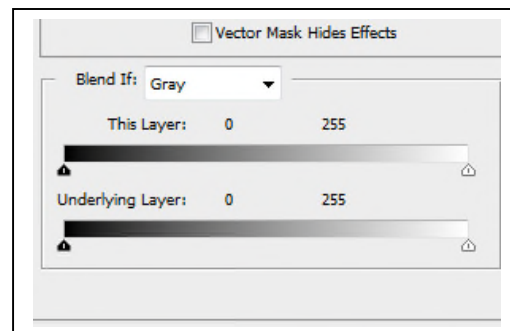
This technique isn't possible in Elements, at least that I know of, because it relies on using the layer blend styles (as opposed to blend modes) that are only available in full Photoshop. To appreciate the potential in this technique try it on something that has a lot of texture in the midtones, say something like the foreground sweep of rocks at Pemaquid Light, brick or stone work, a long stretch of sandy beach where there are ridges in the sand ala the dunes in Death Valley.

As before, complete all of your primary adjustments to the image. Next either flatten it and then duplicate the background layer or generate a new composite layer by pressing <CTRL><ALT><SHIFT>E for a PC (<CMD><OPT><SHIFT>E on a MAC).

To make this adjustable, I would recommend converting the layer for smart filter use.

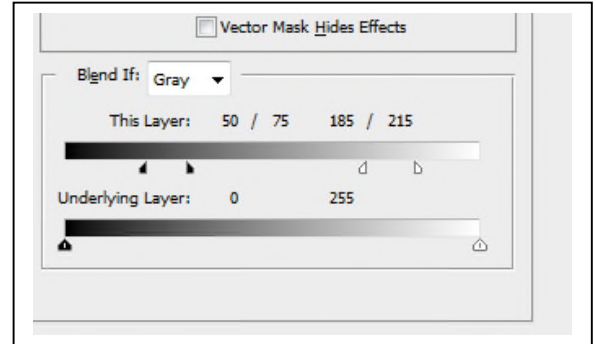
Now apply the High Pass Filter (Filter > Other > High Pass) and use a setting of around 50 pixels and hit OK. Note that you can play around with the exact number, but you do want to see a significant amount of definition in the area that has the texture you want to bring out. In part, that is why I recommended converting the layer to a smart filter because you can just double click on it and adjust the settings after everything is done. Using this much radius on a High Pass filter has likely introduced colors to the layer, rather than the grays that we want. To fix this press <CTRL><SHIFT>U for a PC (<CMD><SHIFT>U on a MAC) to desaturate the layer.

Change the Blend Mode on the layer to Overlay and then dial back the opacity to about 20%. Now double click in the blank area to the right side of the layer to bring up the Layer Styles dialog box. We are interested in the blending options at the bottom of the dialog. (You can bring this up by going to Layer > Layer Styles > Blending Options as well.) This is where we limit the impact of the effect to the tonal range that we want to bring out. You are working on the upper slider that says "This Layer". Start by drawing the slider over to around 50. Now hold down the <ALT> key (<OPT> on a MAC) and click and drag on the right side of the triangle. The triangle will split in two. Drag



the right side over to about 75. Repeat the process for the highlights (left triangle) by dragging it to about 215, then holding down the <ALT> key (<OPT> key on a MAC) drag the inner part of the triangle to about 185.

Your results should look like the second example. What this does is eliminate the High Pass effect in the shadows, below 50, and in the highlights, above 215. It then phases in between 50 and 75 and between 185 and 215. The full effect is confined to between 75 and 185, or what serves as the midtones in most images. If your textures are lighter or darker, adjust the blending and exclusion zones accordingly. Now you can adjust the layer opacity a second time to increase or decrease the effect to get what you are looking for.



You can use several of these layers to make fine adjustments to very specific tonal ranges by controlling the blending to restrict the effects of each layer to a very specific tonal range. When coupled with the use of a layer mask, you can literally custom build the midtone, shadow and highlight contrast for an image. I do have to admit that if you own the NIK Color Efex Pro complete edition you can do the same basic thing in far less time using the Tonal Contrast filter. If you do go that route remember to change the Blend Mode for the layer created to Luminosity or the saturation aspect of the Tonal Contrast filter will push your colors into the “non-realistic”, I look HDR’d realm.

The High Pass technique I’ve described was pioneered by Mac Holbrook of Nash Editions. It is a favorite of well known printers such as John Paul Caponigro. Try it and take your image control to the next level.