Learning to Love Levels
Master one of Elements’ most powerful photo-editing features with our simple how-to guide

GETTING BETTER
BLACK & WHITE
Our two-part package shows you how to take your photos from color to grayscale and how to make them pop off the page.

PLAYING WITH TEXTURES
Use funky and fun backgrounds to liven up your images.

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Every month, in our exclusive subscriber-only area, we post new videos and tutorials from some of the top Photoshop Elements gurus. Here’s some of the most recent postings:

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VIDEO

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Dave Cross chisels a fun text effect into a stone background.

Using Symbols
Learn how to create custom shapes from dingbats with
Dave’s technique.

Stage Curtain Effect
Corey Barker steps you through creating a stunning “showtime” effect.
Editor’s Note

When I speak with people who want to learn more about Photoshop Elements, I usually tell them that the key to getting the most out of the program is to gain an understanding of two concepts: Levels and layers. Of all the tools and features inside Elements, these two are the foundation of much of the program’s power. If you can master the “little bits” found here, there’s no end to the things you can do, from drastically improving your photos to building creative collages, scrapbook pages and more.

It wasn’t intended this way, but as I was going over the stories this month, I realized that these two subjects were the unstated theme of this issue. Nearly every article uses layers, Levels and painting on layer masks to get things done. This includes Diana Day’s smart piece on textures, Matt Kloskowski’s tutorial on adding highlights to hair and Ben Long’s feature on improving your black and white photos through localized editing techniques.

The centerpiece of this issue is Lesa Snider King’s excellent in-depth look at the Levels command, which includes helpful information on decoding the mysterious histogram and offers plenty of tips for correcting your photos with a few simple steps.

I do understand “easy,” especially when it comes to the process of editing photos. It is easy just to click the Auto button in a dialog box, or use Elements’ Quick Edit mode, to get results that look good. But if you take a little time to become more familiar with Levels and layers, you’ll find that you will get better—and more predictable—results without a lot of work, and you’ll be that much closer to being a pixel pro.

On another note, since taking over the newsletter, I’ve frequently spoken about the creativity found throughout the Photoshop Elements Techniques community. In December, I came across a stunning photo restoration done by a subscriber, Bobbie Coughlin. On Page 26, you’ll find the before and after photos of this labor of love, along with a little history and information regarding Bobbie’s process. I’m grateful that Bobbie was willing to spend some of her precious time talking with us, and I hope you’ll find her results as inspirational as I did. I want to get more reader work into the newsletter, and this is a first step towards that goal. So, enjoy this issue, and drop me a note with any comments and suggestions you might have about anything and everything Elements. I read all my email messages, even if I can’t reply to every one that I receive. And, for those of you keeping track, the May/June issue should mail to subscribers around May 10.

Until next time,

rick@photoshopelementsuser.com
Enhancing Highlights in the Hair

By Matt Kloskowski | Here’s a simple technique that improves a portrait dramatically in just a minute or two. It has to do with enhancing the highlights that we see in hair. If you took a portrait that looks a little flat, check to see if there is any light on the hair. With just a few steps in Elements we can add some depth to that hair and make your subject stand out.

1 Start off by opening a photo where the hair looks somewhat flat, by which I mean that it doesn’t appear to have a lot of highlight and shadow areas in it and is pretty much just one color. (Even if an image has some highlights present, you can use this technique to enhance them.)

2 Click on the Create New Adjustment Layer icon at the top of the Layers palette and choose Levels to add a new adjustment layer. Your Layers palette will show a new layer in it and you should now have the Levels adjustment dialog open on the screen.
3 Move the middle gray slider over toward the left. I usually find that moving it between 1.15 and 1.30 (on the numeric readout below the slider) is a good starting place.

Then try moving the white slider toward the left. It's hard to give an exact number here but look at the existing bright areas in the hair and when they look brighter then you're there. Be careful that you don't make them too bright.

4 Finally, let's add a little more contrast to the hair and enhance some of the darker areas by moving the black slider toward the right. When the readout below reads somewhere between 8 and 12 that should be a good amount. When you're done click OK to close the dialog.

Follow along by downloading the image used in this tutorial from the Subscriber Extras area at photoshopelementsuser.com.

5 At this point the hair (or other parts of the photo) may look a little funky. That's why we've used an adjustment layer for this. Now we can be selective about which parts of the Levels adjustment that we keep. For starters, press **Ctrl-I** (**Mac: Cmd-I**), which inverts the layer mask that appears next to the Levels adjustment layer. This means the white mask will be filled with black.
Select the **Brush tool (B)** from the Toolbox. From the Brush picker in the Options Bar at the top of the screen, choose either 65- or 100-pixel soft-edged brushes to paint with. Press **D** to set your foreground color to white (if black is the foreground, then press the **X** key). Then start painting over the existing highlights in the hair to enhance them. If the highlight areas are smaller than your brush, try pressing the `[` key to decrease the size of your brush (use `]` to increase it). Don’t worry if the hair looks too bright in some areas. We’ll take care of that in a minute.

We have two ways that we can soften this effect. First is to click on the Levels adjustment layer to select it. Then, we can decrease the Opacity setting at the top of the palette to help reduce the highlights. Somewhere around 50% works good for this image, but it will be different for every photo.

Another way to soften this effect—one that works really well if the hair is dark—is to click on the Levels adjustment layer to select it. Then go to the **Filter** menu and choose **Blur > Gaussian Blur**. You don’t need a lot of blur: All you really want to do is soften the edges of the brush strokes you painted on the mask. Try a setting between 10 and 20 pixels, which will just soften the transitions between the dark and light areas. Click OK when you’re done. You won’t see a huge difference, but it should still be noticeable. You can also reduce the opacity of the layer (as we did in Step 7) to use both softening techniques.

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When you think of all variables that come into play when you're capturing images, it's a wonder any of them turn out halfway decent. Just think about it: Unless you're hauling around your own light kit, you're dependent on ambient light sources—which are less than perfect on a good day—and then it's up to you to set the camera properly so you don't overexpose or underexpose the image too much. Even if the stars are aligned and you get all that right, the camera itself may introduce a color cast. Argh!

Thankfully, Photoshop Elements has several tools that can help fix almost any lighting or color problem you might have. For starters, you can pop into Guided Edit Mode and choose to enhance the color, lighten or darken your image, and zap a color cast by clicking the text buttons. In Quick Edit Mode you can just click the Smart Fix button and let Elements have a go at fixing both color and lighting, then use the handy sliders to tweak the image further.
Histograms: Mountains of Data

The key to understanding how to work with Levels is the histogram. A histogram is a visual representation—a collection of bar graphs, really—of the information contained in your image. Once you learn how to read it, you’ll understand why your image looks the way it does. More importantly, you’ll learn how to use the tools in Elements, namely a Levels adjustment, to tweak the histogram in order to produce a better image. It sounds complicated, but once you watch it in action you’ll see it’s pretty straightforward…and powerful.

You’ll encounter a histogram of your image when you select Levels from the Enhance > Adjust Lighting menu or when you create a Levels adjustment layer from the Layers palette.

A histogram—like the one shown on the right—looks like a mountain range, which is a perfectly fine way to think about it. Its width represents your image’s tonal range—the range of colors between the darkest and lightest pixels—on a numeric scale of 0 to 255. Pure black (0) is measured at the far left, and pure white (255) is on the far right. All told, 256 values are measured, which represents the minute gradations between a total absence of light (black) and full-on illumination (white). The histogram’s height at any particular spot represents how many pixels are at that particular level of brightness. Using the mountain analogy, a noticeable cluster of tall and wide mountains mean that particular brightness range makes up a good chunk of your image. Short or super skinny mountains mean that brightness range doesn’t appear much. And a big, flat prairie means there are few or no pixels in that range.

A glance at the histogram, in other words, can tell you whether you have a good balance of light and dark pixels, whether the shadows or highlights are getting “clipped,” whether the image is overexposed or underexposed, and whether it’s been adjusted before. Many digital cameras can display a histogram on their LCDs, although you may have to root through your owner’s manual to learn how to turn it on. Once you get comfortable with reading histograms, you can use it to see whether the shot you snapped has good exposure values for the scene.

About clipping

Clipping is the term used when a light pixel is turned pure white, or when a dark pixel is turned pure black. When this happens, the pixel is stripped of all detail. As you might imagine, clipping in the highlights can be more worrisome than in the shadows, because the highlights usually contain more important details than those found in the dark shadows.
An extremely jagged mountain range means your color data is unbalanced. Your image may contain a decent amount of some colors but very little of others.

A narrow mountain range means you’ve got a narrow tonal range, and little difference between the darkest and lightest pixels. Your whole image probably looks flat and lacks detail and contrast.

If there’s a sharp spike at the far left of the histogram, your shadows are probably clipped (meaning they’re solid black). If the spike is at the right end of the histogram, your highlights may be clipped (meaning they’re solid white).

If your mountain range is bunched up against the left side, toward black (or 0) with a vast, flat prairie on the right, it’s underexposed (too dark); see the figure above left.

If your mountain range is snug against the right side, toward white (or 255) with a vast prairie on the left, it’s overexposed (too light); see the figure above right.

An image that has a good balance of light and dark colors has a wide mountain range—one that spans the entire width of the histogram—that’s fairly tall and pretty uniform in height. Basically, you want your histograms to look like the older, eroded Appalachians (see above middle), instead of the newer, super-jagged peaks of the Himalayas (see above right).

Now, all this histogram (and the subsequent correction business) is subjective; if your histogram looks terrible but the image looks great to you, that’s fine, because in the end, your opinion is all that matters. There are times when you want that overexposed (sometimes known as a high-key) look, for example.

Happily, you can fix a lot of problems using Levels. You can smooth the height of the histogram’s mountains, thereby balancing color, and you can widen the mountain range to expand your tonal range and increase contrast. However, there’s a wee bit of setup you need to do first to make Levels work a little better.

Here are a few tips for understanding histograms, some of which are shown in the shots above (the histogram for each image is shown as an overlay):

A word on workflow

Each adjustment you make can reduce the quality of your image, and some techniques are more destructive than others, so the order in which you work—known among gurus as workflow—is important. After importing and saving backups of your images, keep this cheat sheet in mind:

1. Crop, resize, and (if necessary) straighten your image. There’s no use fixing pixels you’re not going to keep!

2. Fix color and lighting.

3. Fix problem areas (reducing wrinkles, zapping blemishes, enhancing eyes).

4. Apply special effects (fancy edges, head-swapping, filters).

5. Sharpen.
Setting Target Colors

In order for a Levels adjustment to fix the colors and lighting in your image, you need to give it some guidance on what you want those colors to be. You can do that by setting targets for the three categories of color found in an image. They include:

- **Shadows**, which are created when light is blocked. Rarely totally black, shadows can vary in color depending upon exactly how much light is blocked.

- **Highlights**, which represent the lightest or brightest parts of your image, where the light is at full strength. When an image is overexposed, the highlights are often referred to as “blown out.”

- **Midtones**, tonal values that fall between the darkest shadows and lightest highlights. By enhancing midtones, you can increase the contrast and details in your image.

Setting target colors is a bit of a pain, but if you save the settings you’ll only have to do it once:

1. Open any image and choose **Enhance > Adjust Lighting > Levels**. Elements will open a Levels dialog box, like the one shown here. You can also press Ctrl-L (Mac: Command-L).

2. To set a target shadow color, double-click the black eyedropper toward the right of the dialog. In the resulting color picker, enter 10 in each of the R, G, and B fields. The reason you want to pick 10 is because on the 0-255 range of brightness levels, 10 is a very dark gray. Once you start using Levels, this gives you nice, dark shadows, without them being so black that you can’t see detail. Click OK when you’re finished.

3. To set your target midtone color, double-click the gray eyedropper. In the color picker, enter 133 in the R, G, and B fields. This gives you a charcoal gray that’s just a touch lighter than 50% gray. Click OK.

4. To set a target highlight color, double-click the white eyedropper. When the color picker opens, enter 245 in the R, G, and B fields. This helps you get highlights that are really light gray instead of pure, blinding white. Click OK.

5. Click OK to close the Levels dialog box. When Elements kindly asks if you want to save the new target colors as defaults, click ‘Yes’. Close the image you opened in Step 1 and click Don’t Save when asked if you want to save your changes (we just needed a sample to set default target colors).

Now you’re ready to start using Levels. Find a troubled image, pop it open, and let’s get cracking!
Creating a Levels Adjustment Layer

Take a peek at the top right of your screen and make sure you’re in the Editor, and then click Full (circled at right). Then, locate the Layers palette on the right side of the screen. If you don’t see it, choose Window > Layers.

Click the half black/half white circle icon at the top of the Layers palette (below left) and choose Levels. This creates a Levels adjustment layer (below right), which simply means that the adjustment you’re about to make will occur on another layer entirely, instead of on your original image (which remains on the Background layer). Using adjustment layers gives you a lot of editing flexibility because you can:

- Lessen the strength of the adjustment by lowering the layer’s opacity;
- Re-edit your adjustment by double-clicking the Levels layer in your Layers palette;
- Hide the adjustment from parts of the image by using the built-in layer mask;
- Change its blend mode;
- Turn the effect on and off by clicking on the layer’s visibility “eye,” giving you a nice before/after viewpoint; and
- Delete the effect without affecting your underlying image simply by dragging the layer to the trash can icon if you don’t like it.

Several of these items are beyond the scope of this article, but hopefully you get the picture about how useful adjustment layers can be. Now it’s time to actually adjust your image. Feel free to choose between the following methods to get it done: using the Levels sliders; adjusting individual color channels; or using the Levels eyedroppers.

Method One: Using the Levels Sliders

By using a set of three sliders, a Levels adjustment lets you reshape and expand the information in your histogram. The black slider at the far left of the histogram represents the shadows in your image. It starts out at 0, which is the numeric value for pure black. The white slider on the right represents highlights, and it “starts” out at 255—pure white. To give your image the greatest tonal range and contrast, you need to situate these sliders so they point to wherever your histogram’s values begin to slope upward (at the foot of your mountains, so to speak).

In other words, if there’s a gap between the shadow slider and the beginning of the histogram, drag that slider to the right. If there’s a gap between the right-hand end of the histogram and the highlight slider, drag it to the left.

When you move the sliders, Elements adjusts the tonal values in your image accordingly. For example, by dragging the highlights slider inward to 235, Elements changes all of the pixels in your image that were originally at 235 or higher to 255 (pure white).
Near the top of the Levels dialog box is the Channel pop-up menu, which lets you view and adjust the composite channel—a combined histogram of the red, green, and blue channels—or each channel individually. If each channel’s histogram differs greatly, it’s worth looking at adjusting each one separately instead of adjusting the RGB (or composite) channel. If the histograms are almost identical, you can get away with adjusting the composite channel only, as you did in the previous section. In the photo on the top left, you can see that the gaps on the right side of each red, green, and blue histograms vary quite a bit so in this case, you can adjust each channel separately. Be careful not to drag the sliders too far in, or you’ll make parts of your image pure black or white (actually, the colors you set earlier as your black and white targets).
Method Three: Using the Levels Eyedroppers

Another way to adjust Levels is to use the eyedroppers on the right side of the dialog box (beneath the Auto button). Instead of dragging the sliders that live below the histogram, you can use the eyedroppers to sample pixels that should be black (the darkest shadows that contain details), those that should be white (the lightest highlights that contain details), or neutral gray (midtones). If you use this method, Elements takes care of adjusting the sliders for you. The only problem is that it can be darn tough to figure out which pixels to click on (or sample). There are a couple of tricks you can use however, which you’ll learn shortly.

With an image open, follow these steps:

1. Click on the Eyedropper tool (I). In the Options Bar at the top of the screen, change the Sample Size pop-up menu to “3 by 3 Average.” Because you’re about to use the eyedroppers to reset your black and white points, you need to change the way the tool measures color (the eyedroppers in the Levels dialog box use these settings). The Eyedropper’s Sample Size is automatically set to Point Sample, which means that clicking with it samples exactly one pixel. By changing it to “3 by 3 Average,” you are telling Elements to average several pixels around the spot where you click, which is much better for color correction.

2. Create a Levels adjustment layer. Click the half-black/half-white circle at the top of the Layers palette and choose Levels from the pop-up menu. Elements adds the layer to your palette and opens the Levels dialog box.

   The Levels dialog box sports three eyedroppers—the black one resets your image’s black point (shadows), the gray one resets the gray point (midtones), and the white one resets the white point (highlights).

3. We’ll deal with the shadows first. Click the black point eyedropper. What we want to do here is click on an area that should be black. In most cases, it’s pretty obvious what part of your image should be black, although sometimes it’s hard to tell and there are a few things to consider before you click. First, you want to pick a point that’s near the focal point of your image. For example, if you’re correcting a portrait, find a dark shadow that’s near your subject’s face. Second, try to pick an area that has a little detail in it instead of an area that’s pure black, since if it’s pure black then most likely there’s no detail there at all. (See “Use the magic Alt/Option key,” on Page 15 for a tip on how to find the lightest and darkest points of your photo.)

   When you click with the eyedropper, you’ll likely see the colors in your image shift a bit. If you don’t like the results, click somewhere else to set a new black point. (Click Reset if you want to start all over again.)

4. Now, do the same thing with the highlights. Click the white eyedropper to select it and then click an area in your image that should be white. The same rules apply when it comes to choosing a new white point: Try to pick an area that’s close to the focal point and not pure white (because it won’t have any detail). You also don’t want to pick a white point that’s a reflection from a light source, because it’s not a true white.
Repeat the process with your midtones. Select the gray eyedropper and then click an area that should be neutral gray (pixels that are about 50% gray in color). This is sometimes the toughest one to do, but if you can nail the gray point, the colors in your image will look spot on. You can use the Ctrl-+ (Mac: Command-+) and Ctrl-- (Mac: Command--) keys to zoom in and out on portions of your image while the Levels dialog box is open.

If you look at the image on the right, you can see where I clicked to try to improve the overall strength of this photo: the black point in the lower right, by the rocks; the white point, slightly above the bridge's span; and the gray point in the shadow of the building above the bridge. It's all subjective, as I said, but my quick edits definitely improved the color and the contrast with a few clicks, and I can just as easily delete the adjustment layer and start again if I want to try something different.

It doesn't take serious voodoo to use a Levels adjustment, and it sure can improve the color and lighting in your image. In the next issue, we'll explore how to use an even more advanced way of using Levels: correcting the numbers, or rather, RGB values. Until then, may the creative force be with you!

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As the founder of the free tutorial site, GraphicReporter.com, and chief evangelist for iStockphoto.com, Lesa is on a mission to teach the world to create better graphics. She's the author of Photoshop CS4: The Missing Manual (O'Reilly), and the video titles “Practical Photoshop Elements” and “From Photo to Graphic Art” (KellyTraining.com). Lesa also writes for Photoshop User, Macworld, and Layers magazines. You can catch her Graphics Tip of the Week live each Wednesday night on YourMacLifeShow.com.

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**EXTRAS: GET THIS IMAGE!**

To follow along with this tutorial, go to the Subscriber Extras area at photoshopelementsuser.com and download this photo.
By Ben Long | Because digital cameras default to shooting in color, it’s easy for the digital photographer to become a bit of a color chauvinist. While learning to effectively use and manipulate color is an essential skill, it’s important to remember that some of the most effective photos in history have been shot in black and white.

Given that we see the world in color, and that our digital cameras can capture exceptional color images, it may seem strange to consider a color-free image. However, color is a very small part of our visual system. Most of what our eye processes is black and white vision, with only a very small portion devoted to sensing color. As light levels dim, color vision becomes less pronounced, and in the dark you can see very little color at all. So, black and white images—images that record only luminance, or brightness—are not completely foreign to what our eye sees in the real world.

Black and white is also a form of abstraction, and as you make an image more abstract, you ask the viewer to perform more work. This often results in the viewer becoming more engaged and involved with the image, since more of it will be created inside their head.

The goal of any image edit or adjustment—whether it’s a color or tonal adjustment, a crop, or the decision to convert to black and white—is to make your image easier to read. In a good photo, the viewer’s eye is led through the image, to provide a clear understanding of subject, background, and the relationships of the shapes and tones in the image. And black and white is just another tool at your disposal to help guide the viewer’s eye.

In many photos, color can be a distraction; it becomes another element that the viewer has to process and understand, and that distraction can make an image harder to read. For example, consider the images of the leopard, shown above. In color, this image is a little busy and hard-to-read. But if we remove the color, the subject becomes much more clear.

While the leopard is a pretty color, it doesn’t stand out against the background. Some of that is because of the lines created by the branches in the background, but it’s also because of the color. If we change the image to black and white the leopard stands out more, creating a better separation between the subject and background.
You Say Red, I Say Gray

Technically, when we speak of black and white images, what we really mean is grayscale, because the colorless images we create have far more than just black and white tones: they have a full range of gray tones in them.

There’s no quantifiable, absolute “correct” correspondence between a particular color and a specific shade of gray. A light blue sky, for example, can reasonably be represented by any shade of gray from dark to light.

In the series of photos above, you can see a color image, followed by two different black and white versions created from that same original. In the first image, the sky is rendered with very light gray tones, as are the green tones in the grass. In the second image, the sky is rendered much darker, along with the green grass tones. One image is not more correct than the other, but you might prefer the look of one or the other—or you might want a completely different approach. Fortunately, there are ways to take control during the grayscale-conversion process, to get the results that you like best.

Convert to Black and White

The best way to convert to grayscale (in Elements 5 and up) is to choose Convert to Black and White from the Enhance menu. This simple dialog box includes a group of conversion presets and sliders for adjusting the red, green and blue channels and contrast.

At the top you can see before and after thumbnails, allowing you to preview your conversion while you adjust it (the changes are also previewed on your actual image in real-time).

In the Select a Style list, you can choose a predefined conversion recipe. Adobe has included presets for just about any kind of subject matter, as well as infrared. Here, I chose the Portraits preset, which does a good job of reproducing skin tones and enhancing contrast.

The Adjustment Intensity sliders let you fine-tune the conversion. As you may know, any color in an image is made by mixing different amounts of red, green, and blue, just as you can make colors by mixing different colors of paint. The Intensity sliders let you brighten or darken those red, green, and blue values in your photo. For the portrait, I wanted her skin tones to be lighter, so I moved the Red slider to the right (see below left).

Of course, moving the red slider does not brighten tones that are only red. Instead, each slider brightens or darkens that component color in the image. Red is used to make up many other colors, so if you slide it to the right, reds will brighten, but so will the purple hues, because purple contains red.

For many photos, this dialog box is all you need to use. You can use one of the Styles, tweak the sliders a little, click OK and your conversion is complete. However, the channel sliders will only go so far. Sometimes, I’ll often want to brighten or darken just one object or area in a scene, and to do that, I’ll use adjustment layers and masks to finish the job (see “Localized Black and White Editing,” on Page 22).
Photoshop Elements’ Black and White Conversion Methods

There are four basic methods for converting a color photo to black and white using Elements. To illustrate this, I’ve taken this trolley photo and applied each type, as shown—with the resulting histogram, to give you an idea of what each conversion accomplishes—in the boxes below:

- **Desaturate:** This method, achieved by choosing **Enhance > Adjust Color > Remove Color**, just removes all the color from your photo. Of the four methods, this one is really the least useful for black and white conversion tasks.
- **Gradient Map:** You can create an adjustment layer that maps the tones to a gradient. This method produces good results as well, and is perfect if you want to add some color back into your photo (see “Using Gradient Maps,” page 20).
- **Mode change:** By choosing **Image > Mode > Grayscale**, this form of conversion uses a stock recipe for converting colors to gray tones. If you’re using Elements 4.0 or earlier, this and the Gradient Map are your best options.
- **Convert to B&W:** In Elements 5, 6 and 7, Adobe has a rich conversion function that lets you adjust the red, green and blue color channels, available via **Enhance > Convert to Black and White**. This option is also referred to as “channel mixing.” Most of the time, this is your best bet.
Gradient Maps

The Convert to Black and White command is the best place to start for most images, especially if all you want to do is create a good black and white photo. However, if you are using Elements 4 or an earlier version, or you would like to add some color back into specific places in your image, use a Gradient Map adjustment layer. Set the foreground color to black and the background color to white (press the D key), then add a Gradient Map from the Create Adjustment Layer menu in the Layers palette. Your image will immediately be converted to black and white (although your color photo remains untouched on the background layer), and the Gradient Map dialog box will appear.

What’s happening here is that the darkest tone in your image is set to the darkest tone in the gradient, while the brightest tone in your image is set to the lightest color in the gradient. All intermediate tones in the image are mapped to the corresponding position in the gradient.

Click on the gradient in the dialog box and you’ll see the Gradient Editor. From here, you can select other preset gradients.

The two rectangular handles beneath the gradient are called Color Stops, and if you drag the left one to the right, your image will darken. Similarly, if you drag the one on the right, your image will lighten. When either stop is selected, a small diamond-shaped handle appears in the middle, which lets you brighten or darken the midtones—just drag it to the left and right.

If you double-click on one of the stops, you can change its color, and if you click below the gradient, you can add additional Color Stops to create a more complex gradient. It’s beyond the scope of this article, but you can create quite interesting toned images (like sepias). Remember too, that, like all Adjustment Layers, you can go back and alter the Gradient Map settings at any time.

To add color back into your image, click on the adjustment layer’s mask icon and paint with black as your foreground color on the parts of the image you want to show through. (See “Localized Black and White Editing,” on Page 22, for more on working with layer masks.)
Shooting in Black and White

Learning to recognize good black and white subject matter as you walk through a color world takes practice. As you’ve seen, color can be distracting in an image, so it can often keep you from seeing a potential black and white shot. You might walk by scenes that, while they don’t catch your attention as a good potential picture, might make excellent subject matter when visualized in black and white.

To find good black and white scenes, you want to keep your eyes peeled for contrast. Black and white images are all about luminance, or brightness. When you’re out shooting, pay attention to a particularly interesting play of light, or a scene with dramatic contrast. The great thing about digital cameras is that you always can get back to the color image if it turns out later that it works better that way.

One day I was walking in downtown San Francisco and saw the building shown below. It’s not especially interesting as a color image, but what struck me was the brightness of it, and how it looked like the prow of a ship. I was also intrigued by the contrast between the top and the bottom. With a little editing, it was easy to get a good conversion that turned this scene that I normally would have ignored into a more compelling black and white image.

Here’s a good way to practice your black and white visualization: chose a folder of images that you’ve already taken and look for images that you think might make good grayscale prospects. Try to imagine what they would look like in black and white—would you set a particular tone lighter or darker, for example?—and then perform a conversion and see how they look.

Don’t Use the Camera’s Grayscale Mode

Here’s one last tip. Some cameras have a mode or setting that lets you shoot grayscale (sometimes referred to as monochrome). With this feature, your camera still shoots a color image, but it then does a grayscale conversion for you. As you’ve seen, a stock grayscale conversion is not always the ideal choice—for best results, you want more control. So, stay away from these modes and perform your grayscale conversion inside Elements.

It would have been easy to walk by this building and not recognize that there was a potential black and white image there. Keeping an eye out for light and dark interplay helped me see the shot.
Next Steps: Localized Black and White Editing

By Ben Long | As we saw in the previous pages, Photoshop Elements’ standard grayscale conversion routines can be used quite effectively when you want to create a strong black and white image from a color photo, even if the original was compelling in its own right. If you have an image that still needs work, however, you can use the same adjustment-layer masking techniques you would use on a color image. In many cases, you might even find that you can “rescue” a lackluster color image from your library with a few localized edits, by using a series of Levels adjustment layers, each with a mask that limits the layer’s effect to a specific part of the image.

For example, the color photo above is a perfect candidate: The light wasn’t particularly great when I shot this image, so it’s rather flat and lacking in contrast. What compelled me to take this shot was the color of the different lanes of the road, as well as the two peaks above the end of the road. Unfortunately, because the image lacks contrast, neither of these features stand out.

EXTRAS: GET THIS IMAGE!

To follow along with this tutorial, download this image from the Subscriber Extras area on photoshopelementsuser.com.
1. The first thing we'll do is convert it to grayscale. Choose Enhance > Convert to Black and White, and select the Scenic Landscape Style as a starting point. The converted file is fine, but it still looks a bit flat.

2. Next, we'll work on the road. Create a Levels adjustment layer by clicking on the Create Adjustment Layer icon (the black and white circle) at the top of the Layers palette, and select Levels. An adjustment layer will be added to the palette, and the standard Levels dialog box will appear.

3. I want to make the blacks in the image blacker, so I drag the black slider to the right, to approximately 41 and the white slider to the left to about 200. But because the lower part of the image is already darker than the top, I know that I'm not going to be able to find one Levels adjustment that will be right for the entire image. So here, I'm only paying attention to improving the contrast on the road and the ground as I adjust the black point. Click OK when you're done, then double-click on the layer's name and rename it “Road.” (I generally rename my layers when performing this kind of localized editing; it helps keep track of what I'm targeting with each layer.)

4. The road looks better, but the sky is washed out. I'll create a second Levels adjustment layer (using the same method as in Step 2). In the Levels dialog box, I will set it so that the sky has more contrast, by dragging the black slider to the right. Here, all you should be looking at is the sky. Click OK when you have it the way you would like it. Rename this layer “Sky.”

Feature

BETTER BLACK AND WHITE
5 Since the new adjustment layer’s extra contrast is making the ground too contrasty, I’ll “paint” on the Sky layer’s mask to apply its Levels adjustment only to the sky. Every adjustment layer includes a built-in mask, which is represented by the box to the right of the layer’s effect. This lets you limit the effects of the adjustment layer to specific areas of your image, in effect, “localizing” your edits. You can use any of Elements’ standard painting tools to remove (or soften) the effect on any areas of your photo. If you paint with black, the effect will be blocked—or “masked”—while painting with white will let the effect pass through to your image.

To alter the mask of our adjustment layer, click once on the Sky layer’s mask in the Layers palette to select it.

6 Painting around clouds is difficult, so I’m going to use Elements’ Gradient tool—which creates a smooth gradient from the foreground color to the background color—to let me lessen the effect as the sky meets the mountains and the road. Click on the tool in the Toolbox to select it, or press the G key, then click on the gradient icon at the far left of the Options Bar and click on the first gradient type, labelled “Foreground to Background.”

I want to make sure that the foreground and background colors are set to white and black, which can be accomplished by pressing the D key—to set Elements defaults—and then the X key, which swaps the foreground and background colors. Then click on the sky and drag down to the tops of the clouds, just above the mountains, holding down the Shift key to keep the gradient perpendicular to the horizon.

After you release the mouse button, the Levels effect will disappear from the lower part of the image, and what’s left of it will be smoothly blended into the top of the image. (Your Sky layer mask should look like the one in the palette next to Step 10 on Page 25. If it’s the other way around, choose Edit > Undo, swap your foreground and background colors (X) and retry it.)

7 Next, we’ll alter the contrast in the mountains with a third Levels adjustment layer. We’ll need to add this new layer between the Road and Sky layers, so click on the Road layer once (which will select it), and choose Levels from the Create Adjustment Layer menu. As we did with the previous two adjustment layers, our focus with the Levels command is solely on one area—in this case the mountains. I moved the black point slider to the right to about 37, leaving the other sliders alone. Click OK and rename this layer “Mountains” since the new adjustment layer’s extra contrast is making the ground too contrasty, I’ll “paint” on the Sky layer’s mask to apply its Levels adjustment only to the sky. Every adjustment layer includes a built-in mask, which is represented by the box to the right of the layer’s effect. This lets you limit the effects of the adjustment layer to specific areas of your image, in effect, “localizing” your edits. You can use any of Elements’ standard painting tools to remove (or soften) the effect on any areas of your photo. If you paint with black, the effect will be blocked—or “masked”—while painting with white will let the effect pass through to your image.

To alter the mask of our adjustment layer, click once on the Sky layer’s mask in the Layers palette to select it.

Don’t go too far

One of the most difficult things to learn about image editing is not how to perform an edit, but knowing how far to push an edit. For example, I could easily make the sky darker, possibly lending more drama, and a little more contrast to the clouds. However, if I push too far, I’ll end up with ugly banding artifacts in the sky, which can be seen in the close-up on the right.

Whether the banding will appear depends on how big you print the final image. Fortunately, because you can go back to an adjustment layer at any time, and change its settings, I can easily do a test print, and then go alter my Levels settings if I see any banding.
Since we want this layer’s effect to show up only in the mountain area, we need to block the effect everywhere else. So we will fill the layer mask with black and “paint” white back in where the mountains are. Click on the Mountain layer’s mask icon and choose Edit > Fill Layer, then select Black from the Contents pop-up.

Select the Brush tool (B), and with your foreground color set to white, paint only in the mountain areas with a soft-edged brush at 100% Opacity in Normal mode, adjusting the size of the brush—via the [ and ] keys—as needed in tight areas. Again, where you paint with black (use the X key to swap the foreground and background colors), the effect is masked out, while white applies the full effect. Here I also painted with a bit of gray (by double-clicking on the foreground color chip and changing it to a light gray), which applies a partial effect.

The final state of my Layers palette is on the left. The great thing about this approach is that I can tweak the different layers’ Levels settings by double-clicking on the ‘gear’ icon to the left of the mask and readjust. Once I’m satisfied, I can flatten the image (to save space) by choosing Layer > Flatten Image.

These are the same types of edits I might make in a color image, except rather than worry about hue or saturation, I’m concerned only about contrast. As for the decisions I’ve made, they are purely subjective. I liked a darker sky in this image to balance the dark of the foreground, and to provide better contrast with the clouds. In this image, I chose edits that accentuated those tones. As you look at your black and white conversions, look to see if there are places that could benefit from some localized Levels adjustments. They’re easy to do, and can take your grayscale photos to whole new heights.

Ben Long is a photographer and trainer based in San Francisco. He is the author of Complete Digital Photography (Charles River Media) and Getting Started With Camera RAW (Peachpit Press). For info on his Tuscan Photo Workshop in Italy this summer, check www.completedigitalphotography.com.
By Pamela Pfiffner | When asked by a dear friend to digitally restore some family photographs, Bobbie Coughlin eagerly accepted the assignment. Rosetta and Louis “Papa” Bunch have been second parents to her. “They are absolutely wonderful people, and I would do anything for them,” she says.

Little did she know that her promise would require 25 hours of painstaking labor to restore a single image.

“Mama” Bunch had given Coughlin several photos to retouch—including some of her deceased daughter as a child (before and after versions of these pictures are shown at the top of Pages 28 and 29). But the photograph that Coughlin retouched over the course of a month was that of a group of sailors standing in front of the submarine U.S.S. Lafayette. Third from the right in the top row is Papa Bunch.

The photo, taken in 1965, was badly damaged. “It was literally falling apart. I was almost afraid to handle it because it is so fragile,” Coughlin says. “The right side was nearly crumbling in my hands.” Large chunks of the old paper were missing at the corners, and a tear scarred the uniformed shoulders of two sailors. Hard creases, including one bisecting the face of another crewman, riddled the print. Earlier attempts to salvage it with transparent tape badly yellowed the edges and distorted the image. It was, quite frankly, a mess.
Starting Simple

Coughlin gingerly placed the photo of Papa Bunch and crew on the bed of her Epson CX500 scanner and captured the image at 300 dpi. Once it was imported into her PC, she changed it to black and white using Elements’ conversion feature. To be consistent with the era in which the picture was taken, Coughlin preferred black and white to sepia tones, thereby replicating the sharp contrast of a formal photograph.

She began with simple tasks, such as ironing out the creases in the uniforms where the color and texture showed little variation. Her primary tools were: the Clone Stamp, which allowed her to duplicate nearby pixels and apply them to adjacent areas; and the Healing Brush, which let her take a sample of the image and use it to blend damaged areas and patchy pixels. She smoothed the creases with the Clone Stamp by first sampling and applying pixels one side of the crease and then doing the same on the other side. Alternating sides allowed her to mimic any subtle color variations created by the fold.

She turned to the Healing Brush when a crease crossed larger areas of black.

Satisfied with her work thus far, she turned to the trickier areas: the holes and tears in the paper and the missing details in the men’s faces.

Falling into Holes

“The holes were certainly one of the bigger challenges,” Coughlin confirms. Patching the ripped corners was relatively straightforward because those areas lacked detail. Coughlin also knew that the lower corners would not be the main focus of attention, so she felt comfortable filling much of it with black.

The hole at the sailors’ shoulders was another matter. For the man in the officer’s cap, Coughlin used the Lasso tool to select the existing shoulder, duplicate it, flip it and position it in place on the other side. The repair to the other man’s shoulder involved more guesswork. She observed the slant of his existing shoulder and drew in what she thought the other would look like. She filled in the gap between the men’s shoulders with material cloned from the background.
Taking it at Face Value

Then came the biggest challenge of all: the faces. “Faces are subtle, and faces are what make a photo like this important,” Coughlin says. “You've got to somehow maintain shading and expression. That was tough.” Faces that suffered only minor damage were fixed with her standby tools, the Clone Stamp and Healing Brush. But places where the image was missing or where the face was unrecognizable required intense effort on Coughlin’s part.

One half of the officer’s face was largely intact, so Coughlin selected, duplicated, flipped, and placed the piece over the damaged area. Then she used the Liquify filter to gently distort the face, thereby making it less symmetrical and giving it more character, finishing it with the Free Transform tool.

The sailor on the officer’s left was a bit more tricky. Because the left side of his face is in shadow but with a deep crack running through it, Coughlin learned to play with the Clone Stamp tool's opacity settings. “Cloning at 100% opacity created an unnaturally sharp change from shadow to light,” Coughlin says. “After I eliminated the crack, I changed opacity to 50-75% so it looked like a normal, soft edged shadow.”

Zooming In

The sailor in the middle front row was another problem altogether. Creases crisscrossed his face, obliterating his eyes and smearing his mouth and left ear. The technique of duplicating intact pieces wouldn’t work here. As there were no other photos to refer to, Coughlin was, in effect, working blind. She ended up creating his eyes from scratch.

“I zoomed in really close and drew them pixel by pixel,” she says. Using the Clone Stamp to pick up the colors of nearby pixels so that the skin tones around the eyes matched the rest of his face and that the shadows weren’t too strong or artificial looking. “I had to zoom back out every few pixels or so to see if it looked natural.”

She admits that the process was exhausting. “I have to be honest and say that was the one part I didn’t enjoy very much because

Managing layers in the real world

Coughlin admits she used “a gazillion layers” for this project. But because her PC isn’t incredibly powerful, she had to limit the number of active layers so as not to bog down her machine. Rather than keep all layers live, she employed two layer-management techniques:

- She flattened layers when satisfied with the work. Layers that had trickier elements to retouch, or that interacted with another area being restored were kept live.
- She retained the first and last layers of each session. This allowed her to turn off the topmost layers so she could see how far she'd come. “It was kind of an encouragement when I got tired,” she says.
it was so exacting and tedious,” she says. She also acknowledges that if you look closely, the man’s eyes appear closed. “It was the best I could do. I was winging it.”

A similar problem emerged when filling in the background. Coughlin was unfamiliar with how submarines and battleships are rigged. “I paid close attention to what was there and then guessed at what the missing parts looked like,” she says.

Honing Cloning

In the course of restoring the photo, Coughlin discovered new ways of working. She was able to hone her cloning skills and put into practice concepts she’d seen in Photoshop Elements Techniques videos, especially the “Restoration Station” series. The biggest revelation to her was changing the opacity of the Clone Stamp tool for subtler blending.

In addition to the face of the sailor in the upper left corner, examples of this technique can be seen in the faces and caps of the sailors. The shadow cast by the visor of the officer’s hat, for instance, is at a lower opacity so that the man’s face can be seen. At 100% opacity the lighting on the brimless sailor’s caps appeared too harsh. With its opacity lowered to 50%, the folds in the caps are visible and the shadows look more natural.

Filters were used sparingly in this restoration. Near the end of the project, she ran the Dust & Scratches filter to wipe out errant spots. Because the filter tends to soften detail, she used a separate layer for the clean up. A swipe of the eraser on the separate layer let her keep the details in the faces sharp.

Spreading Joy

Coughlin’s toolset may seem rudimentary, but her restoration didn’t require the latest version of Elements: she works in Photoshop Elements 5. Having a newer version didn’t matter to Coughlin. “Photoshop Elements is a very powerful program,” she says. “There is nothing I haven’t been able to do with it.”

Not all of us may choose to tackle a restoration of such complexity. The problems Coughlin encountered may seem daunting, but she says the project was worth the effort. Not only did she bring joy to loved ones, but she also sharpened her retouching skills along the way.

Pamela Pfiffner is a writer, editor, and publishing consultant in Portland, Oregon. She is the author of Inside the Publishing Revolution: The Adobe Story (Peachpit/Adobe Press).

Tips for restoring vintage photos

If you plan to embark on a complex restoration, Coughlin offers this advice:

- Allow enough time to work methodically and patiently.
- Start with simple areas of the picture—for instance, backgrounds of a uniform color and with few details—to build your skills and confidence.
- Appreciate the satisfaction and joy of giving new life to an old photograph.
- Add a layer when feeling uncertain—you can always trash it later.
- Realize that the detail work, as painstaking as it is, all adds up and contributes to the big picture.
- Take a break when feeling overwhelmed or frustrated so that you don’t make irreparable mistakes or worse, abandon the project all together.
- Save a version at the beginning and end of each workday to get a psychological boost when you see what you’ve accomplished.

EXTRAS: RESTORATION LINKS

Go to the Subscriber Extras area at photoshop-elementsuser.com for a list of Elements Techniques tutorials and videos related to photo restoration.
You may have noticed that applying textures to photos is a trend that’s pretty hot on the Web these days. Whether you use them for funky teen portraits, to add interest to landscapes, to apply a grunge or vintage effect, or if you just want to lend a more artistic feel to your photos, this technique can transform an image from boring to exciting. Here’s your chance to try it out and discover the difference it can make in your photos.

Check the Subscriber Extras area at photoshopelementsuser.com to download the sample image and to get links to the texture used here and many others on the Web.
Merriam-Webster defines texture as, “The visual or tactile surface characteristics and appearance of something.”

1. Open a photo you would like to try the effect on. I’ll be using this sunflower image from a series I photographed last summer. It has kind of a blah sky, and I thought a texture might give it a lift.

2. Open a texture image. Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary defines texture as, “The visual or tactile surface characteristics and appearance of something.” That’s pretty broad; a texture image can be a surface that you have photographed, such as peeling paint or a rusty metal wall; one you’ve created with grungy brushes or other techniques; or a texture file you have downloaded from the web. For this photo, I decided to apply a subtle blue texture created by Jasmin Junger from her deviantArt gallery.

Tip: You can find many more of Jasmin Junger’s wonderful textures as free downloads at http://kuschelirmel-stock.deviantart.com/gallery/#textures

3. Add the texture to the photo. Bring both images into the workspace with Images > Tile from the Window menu. Select the Move tool (V), click on the center of the texture image, and drag it over to the photo. This will put the texture on its own layer above the photo. You may close the original texture image now, as you won’t need it.
Creating your own textures

The next time you go out for a walk, take your camera with you to catch some shots of such textures as grass, tree bark, peeling paint, ice, and cracked cement. You can use them as is with your photos, or manipulate them using the tools and filters in Elements.

If you have a flatbed scanner, you can also try scanning items such as crumpled paper, textured or patterned fabric, carpet samples, or anything with a rough surface.

Create a texture from a brightly colored photo by experimenting with the tools and filters in Elements. Just as an example, run the motion blur filter on the photo, moving the distance slider all the way to the right. Then apply some of the other filters, or stamp with grungy brushes. Add some depth to it with Filter > Texture > Texturizer. Or create a fiber-type texture from the foreground and background colors using Render > Fibers from the Filter menu. Work in layers and use blending modes to combine layers. Flatten the image when done and use it as a texture layer for one of your photos.

A digital scrapbooking paper with a definite pattern can sometimes be used as a texture. Remember, you can lower the opacity, and reduce the saturation, if needed.

If you like your texture effect, but would like it more pronounced, duplicate the texture layer with Ctrl-J (Mac: Command-J), then change the blending mode of the duplicate to Multiply. Lower the opacity, if needed, to fine-tune the effect, then merge the two texture layers using Ctrl-E (Mac: Command-E), or Layers > Merge Down.

Once you have added your texture in a layer on top of your photo, you may have to resize it, if it is larger or somewhat smaller than your photo. To do that, press Ctrl-T (Mac: Command-T) for Free Transform to get a bounding box around your texture image. If you still don’t see the bounding box, press Ctrl-0 (Mac: Command-0) to get the texture to fit in the screen view. Drag the handles inward or outward until it fits your photo, then click the green checkmark, or press Enter, to commit the transformation.

You probably shouldn’t use a texture image that is significantly smaller than the photo as it may become degraded when you stretch it out to fit.
To apply the texture to the photo, we’ll need to change the blending mode. Go ahead and try all the modes to see which one looks best to you. However, the three blending modes I’ve found usually work best with the texture overlays are Multiply, Overlay, and Soft Light. In my example photo, I decided Multiply gives the best texture effect.

If the texture you applied to your photo has a more intense effect than you’d like, lower the opacity of the texture layer to lessen the effect.

Should you not want your whole image textured, you can control exactly where your texture is applied using an adjustment layer mask. Select the background layer of your photo, click the Create Adjustment Layer icon in the Layers palette and select Levels. Click OK without making any adjustment. This will create a new layer in between your photo and texture layers with a mask attached. Now select the texture layer and press Ctrl-G (Mac: Command-G), or use Group with Previous from the Layer menu, to group that layer with the middle adjustment layer.

Tips for working with textures

There is no limit to the varied effects to be achieved using textures with photos. However, not all photos and textures work well together; you may need to keep trying different combinations to find the right fit. Don’t be discouraged if a texture doesn’t work on a particular photo.

You may use multiple textures on a photo by repeating Steps 2 through 7 to stack the textures in the layers palette. By masking out certain areas of each texture (using the painting technique discussed in Step 7), you can have each texture affect a different part of the image. Remember to lower the opacity of a layer where you need a more subtle effect.

If you decide a texture itself works with a photo, but the colors are too saturated, you can always lower the saturation of the texture layer with Enhance > Adjust Color > Adjust Hue/Saturation, or use the keyboard shortcut Ctrl-U (Mac: Command-U). Then drag the Saturation slider to the left as needed.
Once you add the adjustment layer mask, you’ll be able to “paint” the texture out of select areas of your photo. Click on the white mask of the adjustment layer (the box on the right side of the layer). Select the Brush tool (B), with a soft-edged brush, and with black as your foreground color, paint on the image where you want to remove the texture. If you go out of the lines and need to put some texture back where you removed it, change your foreground color to white and paint where you want to bring the texture back in (Use the D key to get the default foreground/background colors and X to toggle between the foreground colors when painting on a mask). Lower the opacity of the brush to paint in areas where you wish to lessen the texture effect, rather than remove it.

Once you add the adjustment layer mask, you’ll be able to “paint” the texture out of select areas of your photo. Click on the white mask of the adjustment layer (the box on the right side of the layer). Select the Brush tool (B), with a soft-edged brush, and with black as your foreground color, paint on the image where you want to remove the texture. If you go out of the lines and need to put some texture back where you removed it, change your foreground color to white and paint where you want to bring the texture back in (Use the D key to get the default foreground/background colors and X to toggle between the foreground colors when painting on a mask). Lower the opacity of the brush to paint in areas where you wish to lessen the texture effect, rather than remove it.

Diana Day, a retired H.R. manager and self-taught Elements user, hosts a PSE users’ group where she teaches Elements to members of her community. Diana also puts her skills to practical use by administering her church’s Web page and public relations projects.
Increasing Image Size

If you need to increase the size of an image, you choose **Image > Resize > Image Size**. But which is the best way to get a high-quality image? Next to the Resample Image check box at the bottom of the dialog you’ll see a list of confusing names like Nearest Neighbor, Bilinear, and so forth. These are the different methods that Elements can use to resize your images. They all produce similar results, but when it comes to making things bigger, you’ll find you’ll get better results if you use Bicubic Smoother; if you’re looking to reduce your image size, go with Bicubic Sharper. (A video in the Subscriber area on photoshopelementsuser.com explains these settings in greater detail, if you’re interested.) —MK

Repositioning Marquee Selections

If you start to make a **Rectangular Marquee tool (M)** selection and discover that you don’t have the selection positioned where you want it, don’t start over. Before you finish creating the Marquee, press and hold the **Spacebar**, reposition the selection, and then finish making the selection. This trick also works with the **Crop** and the **Shape** tools. —Matt Kloskowski

Get the Elements Manual

Few companies are including complete printed manuals with their software these days, and Adobe is no exception. But Adobe does have a 467-page PDF manual for Elements 7 that you can download from the Adobe site at www.adobe.com/support/photoshopelements/. The great thing about it is that it is completely searchable—and printable—which is perfect for when you really want to know how this command or that feature works. (Elements 6 users can download their manual at www.adobe.com/support/documentation/en/photoshop_elements/) —Rick LePage

Don’t Keep Saving JPEGs

Unless you absolutely need to change a photo that was shot in JPEG mode on your camera, don’t edit it and then just save it by using **File > Save** or **Ctrl-S (Mac: Command-S)**. You lose image quality every time you resave a JPEG file. A much better workflow is to save all of your edits to a file as a PSD file, and use **File > Save As** to save a JPEG if you need to post to the Web or send an email. If you need to reopen the file for editing, always use the PSD version of the image. Even better, if your camera can do it, shoot all of your digital images in RAW format. —MK
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