

# ADJUSTING COLOUR AND CONTRAST IN PHOTOSHOP

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## INTRODUCTION

Much of the time, the image you create with Lightroom or ACR is good enough. It can be printed, or exported to a final JPEG image as it is. However further development in Photoshop will produce a better image where you need to go that extra mile for competition or exhibition. Photoshop using layers and masks has much more control, and may be quicker to use. This is because adjustment calculations are not applied until you finish editing. Lightroom adjustments may be slower on an older computer that lacks RAM and speed.

Photoshop has many tools for making colour and tone adjustments. However, many of these do the same thing, or are a hangover from early days. You can do all your colour and luminance adjustments using [CURVES](#) and [HUE/SATURATION](#) adjustment layers. The Levels panel provides a nice easy to understand interface, but Curves adjustments will do everything in Levels plus a lot more. The Dodging and Burning tools are destructive and permanent, whereas Curves adjustment layers with masks are editable. These notes will look only at Curves and Hue/Saturation adjustments.

If you are new to Photoshop, keep things simple. Just learn these and forget the dodging and burning brushes, levels, exposure colour balance and the rest. These tools will do everything you need.

Before going through these notes, make sure you are familiar with the articles on [Photoshop Workspace](#), [Photoshop Selections and Layers and Masks Overview](#). Have Photoshop open with an image you want to develop as you use these notes.

## WHERE TO START

Once you are satisfied with Lightroom editing, you can open the image in Photoshop from the Lightroom Menu. MENU > Photo > Edit in > Edit in Photoshop, or alternatively keystroke: Control/Command + E.

If the image is very noisy due to the use of a high ISO or long exposure time, noise reduction may be more effectively performed using a Photoshop plug-in such as Nik Define, than Lightroom's controls. This should be undertaken at this stage.

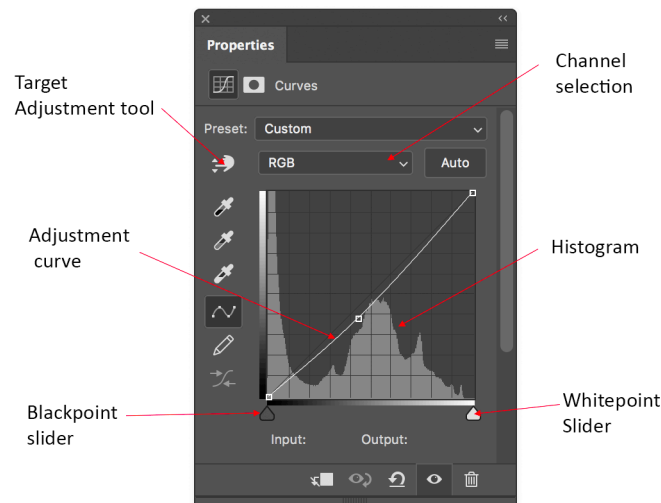
Photoshop's powerful tools for touching up the image should now be used to remove major and minor defects, and to move subjects around. See the article on [Touching-up using Photoshop](#) for details in this. After these steps, it is time to consider colour and luminance adjustments.

## CURVES ADJUSTMENTS

There are two ways of applying a curves adjustment, as with other adjustments. Direct adjustments using MENU: Image > Adjustments should not be applied to image layers, because the change is permanent and not editable later. It is provided in Photoshop to be used on Masks and Channels, to which you cannot apply a Curves Adjustment Layer. A curves adjustment layer, not only is editable later, but can be masked to apply the curve adjustment to part of the image, and the mask changed at any later time.

Select the layer you want the adjustment layer to go immediately above, then create a Curves adjustment layer in one of the following ways:

- Click on the Curves button in the Adjustment Layers panel
- Click the Mouse down on the “Create new fill or adjustment layer” button on the Layers panel, and select Curves.
- MENU: Layer > New adjustment layer > Curves



## ADDING POINTS TO THE CURVE

The default adjustment curve will be a straight line. Clicking on the curve will add a point. Here I have added a point and dragged down to darken the mid tones.

Dragging the darks downward and the lights upward (2 points) will create an S-curve. Contrast is increased in the steepest part of the curve, which will be the mid tones. This adjustment is the most common one, and such a curve can be found in the Preset menu. You can reduce contrast by making the curve flatter.

Adding more points will give a more complex adjustment, which only is necessary for a few images. You may for example be happy with the contrast in the brighter parts of an image, but want to lighten or darken the shadows. Add points to keep the top of the curve straight. Adding a point at the bottom can be used to brighten the shadows by raising it or lowering it.

Having two points close together and increasing or reducing one may cause the curve to slope the opposite way. You will see this causes some bizarre colour effects. To get rid of a point, drag it off the graph. Talking of bizarre effects, check out the Preset curves.

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## TARGETED ADJUSTMENT TOOL

You can on-image edit using curves. First click on the Target Adjustment tool button. Then move the mouse pointer over your image. A circle on the curve line will appear showing which part of the curve the particular tone where your mouse pointer is located. Mouse down on a point in your image that you want to lighten or darken. This will add a new point to the curve. Drag up on the image to lighten and down to darken the tone you have clicked on.

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## BLACK POINT AND WHITE POINT ADJUSTMENT

If the histogram does not extend to the far left, as in this case, the blacks in the image may be too light. This is corrected by dragging in the Blackpoint slider to the tip of the histogram. The very darkest parts of the image will then be black. Drag it further to increase the amount of blackness in the image. You will remove shadow detail, which is known as clipping the blacks. Adjusting the Whitepoint slider will lighten the whites.

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## BLENDING MODES FOR CURVES LAYERS

Sometimes when you use Curves (or Levels) to adjust the tonal balance of an image is that the adjustment changes both luminosity and colour. Increasing contrast by steepening the curve will also increase colour saturation. If you do not want higher saturation, change the blending mode of the curves layer to Luminosity. This is done in the Layers panel, ensuring you have the curves layer selected. Now the curves layer will only affect the lightness and darkness of the image.

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## WHY NOT USE THE LEVELS ADJUSTMENT?

Levels has a simpler interface, but you have more control with Curves. Many Levels adjustments are identical to Curves ones. The only real difference is that levels allows adjustment of the middle tones with a slider. You can make exactly the same adjustment with curves by adding a point in the centre of the default straight curve and dragging it left or right to lighten or darken mid tones. But with Curves you can alter the slope, affecting contrast over the whole tonal range, which you can't do with Levels.

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## COLOUR ADJUSTMENTS USING CURVES

Adjusting colour using curves is a powerful way of applying colour adjustments. This is done by selecting the Red, Green or Blue channels individually in the Channel Selection menu of the Curves Property panel.

If you have already adjusted overall contrast, create a new Curves layer to adjust colours. You can change the blending mode to Colour so that it does not affect luminosity.

First select the Red channel. Dragging the Blackpoint and Whitepoint sliders towards the centre is used to correct colours in the shadows and highlights. Hold down the Alt/Option key as you do this, and the image will show where these shadows and highlights are. Do it just enough to see the darkest shadow or brightest highlight. The points will be at the extremity of the histogram.

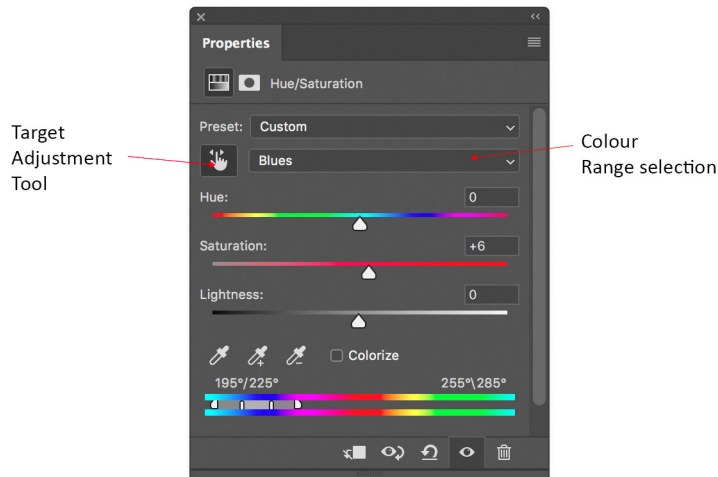
Dragging the centre of the curve up or down will add or subtract red from the mid tones. This can be used to apply a colour correction.

Repeat these adjustments with the Green and Blue Channels. When you return to the RGB channel display you will see the combined adjustments.

I find that using these adjustments cleans the image, making the colours less muddy.

## HUE/SATURATION ADJUSTMENT LAYERS

This adjustment allows you to change colours globally in your image or over a limited range of colours.



When you add a Hue/Saturation adjustment layer, the Colour Range Selection is at Master by default and adjustments affect the whole colour range. The hue over the whole colour range can be changed by dragging the hue slider. Hue is based upon a LAB Colour model, the hues around a colour wheel. Red is at 0° and cyan at 180°. Adjusting saturation raises or lowers saturation of all colours. Lightness affects the lightness.

You can select a particular colour range to adjust from the Colour Range Selection menu. Now the colours adjusted by the sliders will be restricted to the hues shown in the middle bar. You can also use the Target Adjustment tool to select a range of colours to adjust. Click on this tool, then mouse over a colour in your image that you want to change. Mouse down and drag leftwards to reduce saturation, and rightwards to increase it. Vary the range of colour adjusted using the eyedroppers with the + or - signs. You can use a mask to confine your adjustment to a particular area of the image.

The Preset menu contains some special effects that can be applied.

## OTHER SPECIAL EFFECTS

The colour effects in the Hue/Saturation Adjustment layer are fairly radical. You may also like to explore those available in the Colour Lookup Adjustments Layer. These Colour Look-up Tables (LUT) apply special colour adjustments that are widely used for film and video to give a moody colour effect. You'll have seen these effects used for TV and movies.

The Colour Lookup .... Panel is easy to use. Just select an effect and see what it does to your image.

## MASKING

Each adjustment layer comes with a white mask. The adjustment can be confined to part of an image by painting part of the mask black. Remember black conceals the effect of the layer the mask is attached to. See the article on Layers and Masks to find out how you do this.

The process described in this article allows you to lighten, darken or change the hue and saturation of part of an image, so you can highlight the subject and tone down the background. This is dodging and burning non-destructively. You can easily change the mask to revise the area affected by the adjustment, and change the adjustment by revising the layer properties at any subsequent time.

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