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## TECHNIQUE



1. A typical layer stack for this editing strategy.

## CREATING A MASTER FILE

“What types of color adjustments do you typically make to images, how do you make them, and what order do you make them in?”

These are questions I’m asked frequently. This is a concise summary. I detail each step at other times (in my newsletters, in my book *Adobe Photoshop Master Class*, in seminars, and in workshops).

I use the word “correction” cautiously. What is correct in one context or for one person may not be so for another; forming consensus is difficult at best. Still, correction is the most common word used for the practice of changing color. Similar words are often used without discrimination, such as adjustment, modification, and editing; even though there are useful distinctions to be made. I’ll save those distinctions for another time and place.

The body of the text that follows uses an assortment of similar words such as *adjustment*, *correction*, and *modification* without distinction to avoid repetition.

### GLOBAL CORRECTIONS

Here’s a little more detail on the types of global corrections made, their order, and how to make them. Again, I go into more detail at other times.

The types of adjustments I make routinely follow a specific strategy: *Adjust the entire image globally before making local corrections*. In a vast majority of cases, what you think needs modification in specific areas often needs modification throughout the entire image. Do as much as you can with global corrections before moving on to local corrections.

If corrections are made very precisely and deliberately four adjustment layers will suffice: Levels (black point and white point), Curves (midtone contrast), Curves (hue), and Hue/Saturation (saturation). Corrections are made on separate adjustment layers so that any one component of color (luminosity, hue, saturation) can be further adjusted without affecting the others. Blend modes are used to cure many of the side effects of editing in RGB.

*First*, set black and white points with a Levels adjustment layer using the histogram as a guide. Slide the black point to the right, positioning it so that it touches the main mass of the histogram. Next, slide the white point to the left, positioning it so that it touches the main mass of the histogram. Then set brightness using the midpoint slider. While the histogram will guide you to specific positions for black and white points (you can see when you clip shadow and highlight detail), set overall brightness to suit your taste. If subtle detail in shadows and highlights is important, be conservative and position black and white points to the point at which a thin line of data breaks, rather than the main mass of the histogram. Set black and white points on the Master channel if you wish to preserve a color cast, such as a sunset. Set black and white points for each channel (R,G,and B) individually if you wish to remove a color cast. Set overall brightness with the midpoint slider on the Master channel only in both cases. With Levels, set only black point, white point, and overall brightness; don't try and establish midtone contrast as this can lead to loss of detail in highlights and shadows or both. (Alternatively, perform these corrections with Curves using the Histogram palette as a guide.)

*Second*, set midtone contrast with a Curves adjustment layer, affecting the Master channel only. Use a blend mode of Luminosity to eliminate shifts in saturation.

*Third*, set color balance with a Curves adjustment layer, affecting individual channels as desired. Use a blend mode of Color to eliminate shifts in luminosity.

*Fourth*, set saturation with a Hue/Saturation adjustment layer. Adjust the saturation of all colors (Master) before moving to specific colors. Use a blend mode of Saturation to eliminate shifts in luminosity.

This strategy moves from adjustments that can be made by assessing a graph or determining a set of numbers to increasingly subjective decisions. It starts with *luminosity*, setting dynamic range, brightness, and contrast. Luminosity is often the easiest to perceive and is a relatively stable component of our perception that is hardwired into the fight or flight parts of our nervous system. Then it proceeds to *hue*; making precise assessments of hue is more difficult as it is context sensitive – color constancy helps us to

perceive the local color of an object separate from its context and the effects of an illuminant. Finally, it moves to *saturation*, the most complex factor in color adjustment. Saturation is influenced not only by the illuminant's intensity and temperature but also by its spectral composition; thus hues are not affected uniformly.

## LOCAL CORRECTIONS

After making global corrections, make local corrections in a layer set labeled "local corrections." To selectively lighten and darken areas of an image, create a new layer set to a blend mode of Soft Light to darken and lighten the image selectively with a black or white paint brush. Use varying opacities to control the strength of the adjustment. Use the Eraser tool, at varying opacities, to remove or reduce the intensity of the effect. Or, start with a rough selection of the area you intend to adjust; create an adjustment layer for the type of correction you wish to apply locally; make the correction; blur the mask; and then refine the mask with a brush as necessary.

## SOFTPROOFING

Prepare to print by softproofing the image – View: Proof Setup: Custom (choosing the ICC profile you intend to print with). While softproofing, create a layer set named "softproof" and make output-specific corrections. So that you can repeat these precisely, make notes about the printing conditions (driver, profile, color management route, rendering intent, media settings, media types, etc.) either in the title of the folder or with the Notes tool. Typically, files can benefit from additional contrast and saturation. Use these corrections for outputting to the device and printing conditions they were created for and nothing else. If the corrections are made for a file that represents the full spectrum of hues and tonal range, it may be possible to use these corrections for other images printed to the same device in the same way.

If you make these moves very precisely, in many situations, you won't need to make additional corrections. Still, some images may contain challenges that additional types of adjustment will solve best. And, while directness and efficiency are things to be strived for, the human decision-making process is rarely this streamlined or predictable – but it sure is interesting.