

Photoshop Elements SIG – April 11, 2007

by John Durrett

Check Your Picture First

Before you start any color or contrast correction on your photos, take a look at the picture. Is it too dark in places? Is it too bright? Does it have some really bad color? While there are many things you can do with a photo, the first thing I do is try to add an experimental Levels adjustment layer. To add this layer, click on the black/white circle icon at the bottom of the layers palette, and select Levels. Let's use an example. Here is a nice photo of a ship.

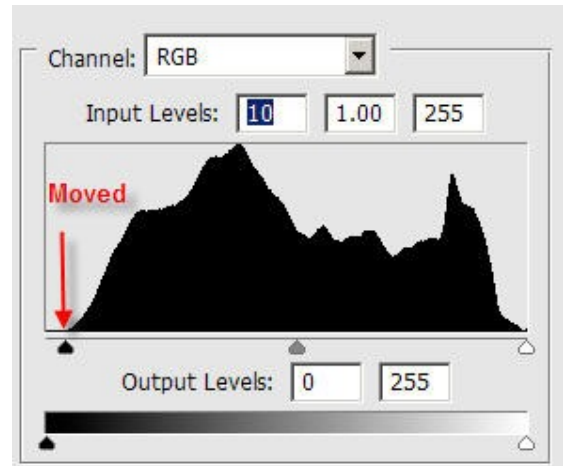


It has a nice sky, but the water is a little dark. If we add a Levels layer, we can see the histogram, and it spreads along most of the axis. The most we can do is move the black

Shadows/Highlights and Color Curves Correction

Using the shadows/highlights correction on your picture will consume whatever layer you apply it to. So, first make a copy of your background layer. Then rename the

point inward to the start of the slope, as in this capture of the histogram.



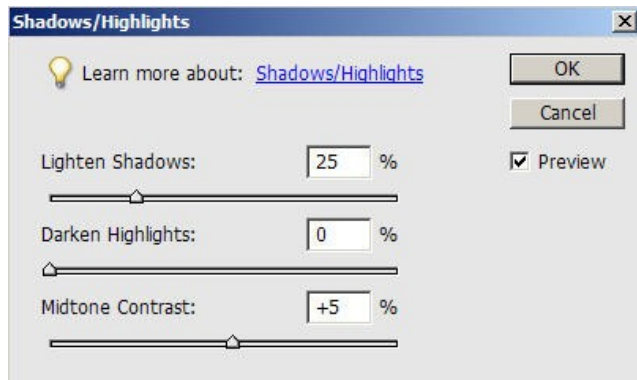
But if we look at the picture, it brings out the cloud a little better, but it makes the dark ocean even darker. So using a regular Levels layer is not the answer to fixing this photo. What we want to do, in a photo like this with strong differences in light and dark is one of two things:

- either add a shadows/highlights correction, or
- add a selection to isolate the ocean, and then add a Levels layer

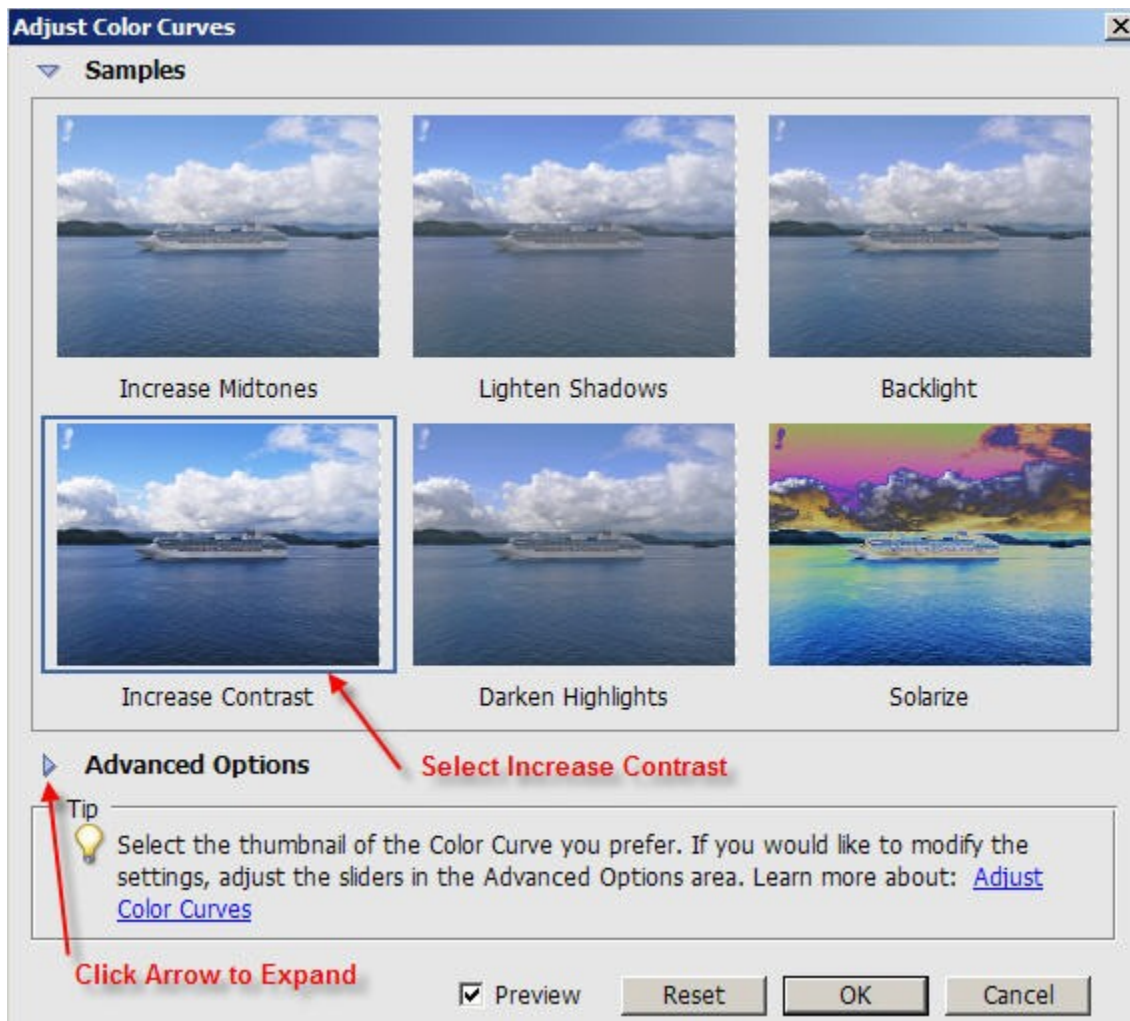
Let's try the shadows/highlights first. But before we do, remember to either turn off the experimental Levels layer, or throw it away in the trash.

background copy layer as Shadows/Highlights. With that layer active, select Enhance > Adjust Lighting > Shadows/Highlights. You will get another screen where you can adjust

the details. The default on lightening the Shadows is 25%, and that works well here. I opted to increase the Midtones to +5%.



The photo looks better, but the whole thing looks a little washed out. Now, those of you who bought Photoshop Elements 5 will like what happens next. To punch up the picture we need to add a Color Curves correction, BUT, we must first make a copy of the Shadows/Highlights layer. Then select Enhance > Adjust Color > Adjust Color Curves. You will get a screen with multiple views of the photo. We are going to improve the contrast, so we select the image for Increase Contrast. The other thing we do is click on the small arrow next to the Advance Options phrase to get more control over our picture.



After we open the Advance Options, we need to make some further changes to the Photoshop Elements Color Curves Increase Contrast settings. I find that the Increase Contrast default settings are often too harsh. So to make them more suitable for this picture (and for most photos that I have processed), I move the upper settings tab for Adjust Highlights to the Left, and the Adjust Shadows settings tab to the Right. As you make these changes you can see the changes they make to the "Curve" on the right. This "Curve" is what we would see in a regular version of Photoshop if we were to add a Curves Adjustment layer.



After All these adjustments, we get a very nice picture of our ship in the ocean with a great sky.



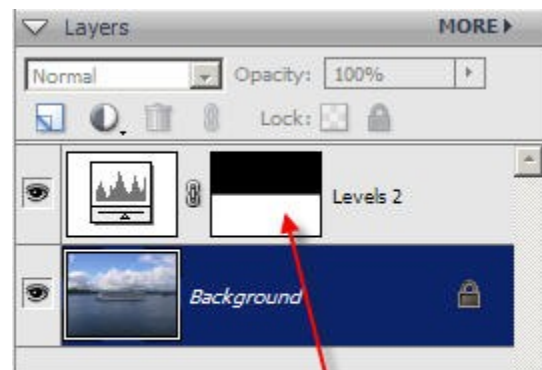
Now let's look at the alternate approach, which uses selections and Levels layers.

Using Selections in Levels Layers

We go back to the original version of the ship, and look at the photo. What we want to do is lighten up the water in the picture. The clouds look pretty good as is. In order to isolate the ocean (and the ship) we first make a simple rectangular selection of the ocean using the Rectangular Marquee Selection tool.



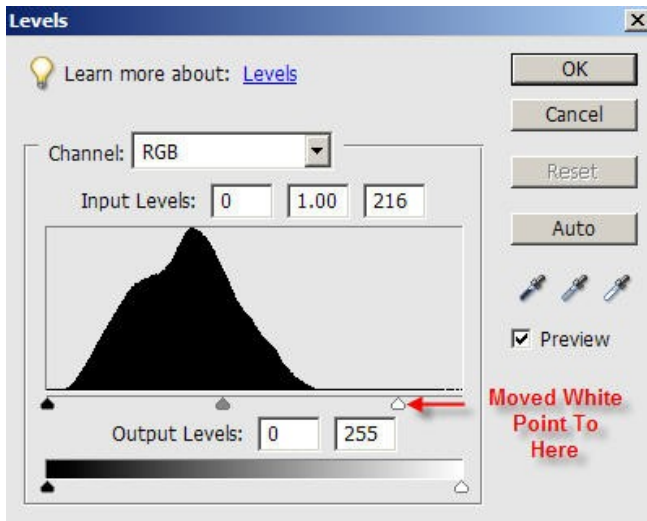
Now, add a Levels Adjustment layer using the icon at the bottom of the Layers palette. Because we started with a selection in place, we get a mask that is part black and part white. The white part is where the mask will allow any changes in the Levels layer to affect the photo. Anywhere it is black, the effect of the Levels layer will be blocked and the picture will not change.



Levels Layer Mask

What I did with the Levels layer was to move the White Point triangle inwards towards the histogram, BUT I did not move it up to the histogram slope. I watched the picture and moved the White Point inward until the color tone of the ocean matched the color tone of the sky.

Moving all the way in to the slope would have made the ocean far too bright for the sky. The resulting histogram of this Levels layer looked like this.



This helped the ocean, but I needed to add in the effect of the Levels layer to the top of the ship since it was cut off by the original rectangular selection.

To include the top of the ship, I need to Paint on the Mask.

Painting on the Mask

People who use Photoshop like to say that they Paint on the Mask. What that really means is that they first selected the mask, and then they painted on the picture of the photo on the screen. But, because they had pre-selected the mask, the only color that goes on, goes onto the mask like icon in the layer in the Layers palette. We usually stick with Black and White painting on the mask. To paint on the mask, first click the mouse on that thumbnail of the mask on the Levels layer in the Layers palette (it is the half white/half black rectangular icon). Then select the Brush Tool from the Tool Bar. {Remember to click on the Mask icon before you paint anything. Else you will get white or black directly on your photo. Not good.}

I started with a size 19 Hard Brush and increased its size to a 40 pixel width by clicking on the] (right square bracket key

until it reached a size that looked good). When I wanted to reduce the size, I clicked on the [(left square bracket key). I could also have typed 40 in the size box. I started with White as my color and painted over the upper portion of the ship. As I painted white on the mask, it allowed the Levels layer effect to brighten up the upper part of the ship. To get the smoke stacks I reduced the size of the brush, and painted on the stacks.

Another thing to keep in mind is that if you include too much of the photo in the white portion of the mask, you can always switch the Foreground color to Black and paint out the offending part of the mask. I will show the finished version at the SIG meeting, and will include it in the [online version](#) of these notes. But for right now, to keep the repro costs, down. That's it for page 5.

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Ok, here is the finished version of the picture.



Variations on Selections

This demo used a Rectangular Selection tool. But this same approach works when using other selection tools, such as the Magic Wand Selection tool. This is particularly good for photos where the dark and light points are scattered around the picture. Just go for one or the other, and build up your selection until you have what you want. Then add your Levels layer and adjust to get your contrast changes. If you have selected the wrong part of the photo (say you wanted to change the dark areas and you selected the light parts of the photo), don't worry. Just choose **Select > Inverse** before you add the Levels layer and you will be operating on the right part of your photo.