

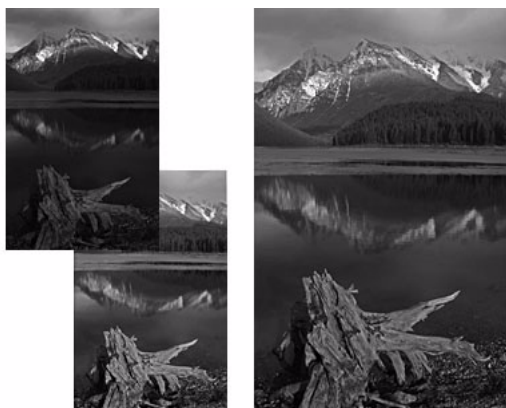
ADOBE PHOTOSHOP CS

Total Contrast Control Using Two Images

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www.georgedewolfe.com. George DeWolfe is Senior Editor for Camera Arts and View Camera magazines and teaches digital photography workshops worldwide. He studied with Ansel Adams and Minor White and holds an MFA in Photography from the Rochester Institute of Technology. His prints are in major national and personal collections.

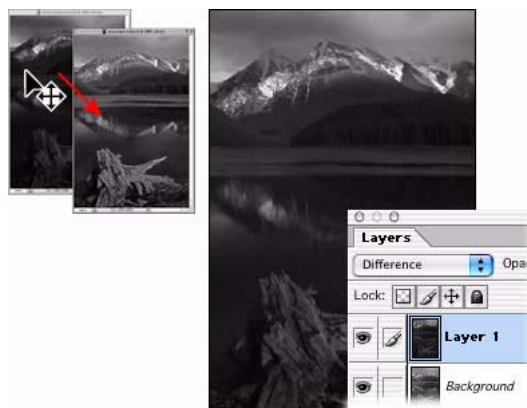
Contrast is the supreme technical problem in photography. In traditional print photography the major limiting component is the range of the paper, or 5 f/stops of detail from highlight to shadow. It was for this reason that the Zone System was invented—to manipulate the exposure and development of the negative to fit the print. In the darkroom there are also different contrast grades of paper or different variable contrast filters to adjust contrast. In Adobe® Photoshop® CS, I use the following technique to correct and adjust the overall contrast of digital images. The technique uses 2 digital files from a digital camera mounted on a tripod, one of which has been taken for the highlights and the other that has been taken for the shadows. The 2 images are combined together in Layers using a Layer Mask and Curves into one seamless image containing the highlights of one, the shadows of the other, and a good blend of midtone values.



1. Combine the 2 images and crop.

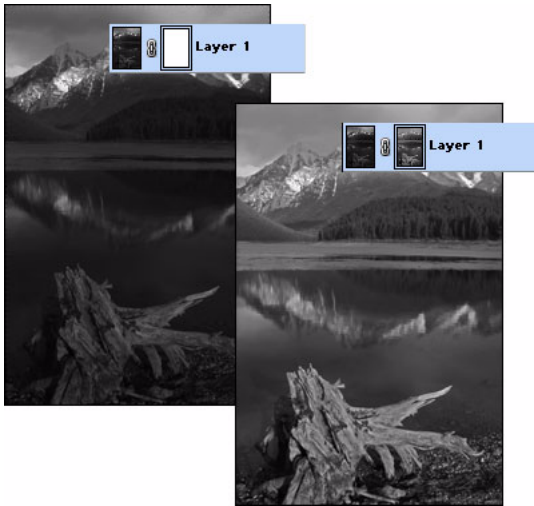
Open both underexposed and overexposed images into Photoshop. Click and drag (using the Move Tool while holding down the Shift Key) the underexposed image on top of the overexposed image. This puts the underexposure on a layer on top of the overexposure (which becomes the Background). In the Layers palette, select Layer 1 and set the Blending Mode to Difference and align the 2 images with the Move Tool, if necessary.

Crop the images here. (Cropping the image here at the first step keeps the images aligned if you have moved Layer 1 even the slightest amount). Save the image (File > Save As) as Combo and close the 2 original images without saving them. Return to Normal Blending Mode.



2. Make a Layer Mask and paste the background layer into it.

On Combo make a Layer Mask (Layer > Add Layer Mask > Reveal All) on Layer 1. Select the Background Layer (Select > All) and Copy (Edit > Copy). Hold down the Option/Alt key and click on the Layer Mask (the document window should turn white). Paste the Background Layer (Edit > Paste) into the Layer Mask (it will be pasted as a Black & White mask).

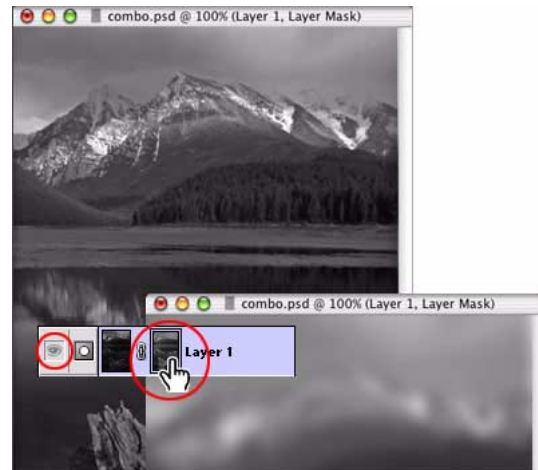


3. Make a new window.

Go to Window > Arrange > New Window for Combo.psd to see the effects of the mask. You will not be able to see the actual picture because you will be working on the mask. This is the reason for making the New Window.

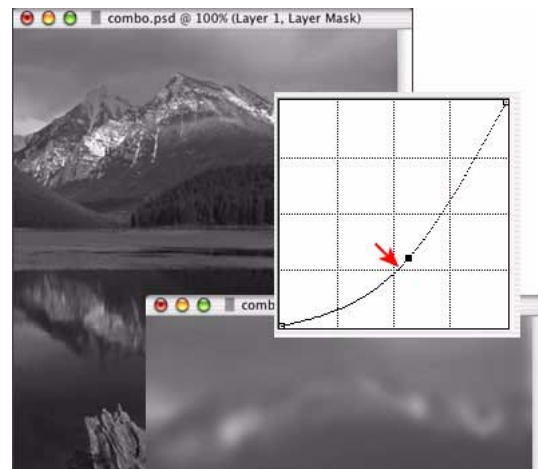
4. Blur the mask.

Click on the Layer Mask and Gaussian Blur (Filter > Blur > Gaussian Blur) the mask to a 5–50 pixel Radius. You want to blur enough to get rid of all texture and detail.



5. Adjust the mask contrast with curves.

Select Image > Adjustments > Curves and adjust contrast and brightness of the mask until the image looks correct in the New Window. You do not want to use a Curves Adjustment Layer here because you are still working on the Layer Mask. Close the New Window after you've finished adjusting with Curves.



6. Flatten the image.

Deselect and Flatten the image (Layer > Flatten Image).



7. Conclusion.

The great thing about Photoshop is that we have much more control in adjusting the overall contrast than we do in traditional photography because we can use both Black & White and Color images. This technique frees your photography and enables you to capture any extreme lighting situation with ease.

