

Get Your Dodging and Burning Under Control

Using Photoshop's Tools and Overlay Layers to Selectively Lighten and Darken Your Digital Images

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Anyone who has worked much in a darkroom will be familiar with the terms *dodging* and *burning*. Dodging selectively lightens an area of a photograph and burning selectively darkens areas. With traditional photographic processes, an opaque paper mask is inserted between the enlarger and the photo paper for part of the exposure.

Dodging and burning photographic prints in a darkroom is always hit-and-miss. The timing is largely guesswork. To make effect less obvious, you need to fashion a handle to the mask in order to gently move it during the exposure. Often, several trials are necessary to achieve the desired effect

The dodging and burning of digital images with Photoshop is a much more precise process. There are Dodge and Burn tools that you can use to make freehand adjustments to your images. However, like dodging and burning in the darkroom, precise control with those tools can be tricky. This article will show you a technique for selectively lightening and darkening images with an overlay layer that's quick and easy and which will give you very precise control over your dodging and burning.

Dodging & Burning with the Photoshop Tools

The Dodge, Burn and Sponge tools all share one icon on the Photoshop toolbox. These are sometimes referred to as the Photoshop toning or contrast tools, because they are used to selectively alter image contrast and restore lost details.

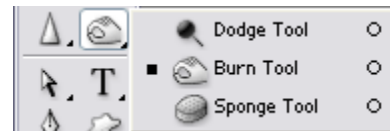


Figure 1. The Dodge and Burn tools in Photoshop 7

The Dodge tool is used to lighten selected features in an image by painting over them in a freehand fashion. The Burn tool is used to darken features.

These Photoshop tools give you much more control than traditional darkroom techniques. Once you select one of these tools, you can proceed to the Options Bar to select which tones in the image to affect and the intensity of the effect.



Figure 2. Options for Controlling Effects of the Dodge and Burn Tools.

Range limits the effect to highlights, midtones, or shadows. If you select highlights with the Burn tool, for example, you can brush over parts of an

image and increase the intensity of only the lightest and whitest areas. Midtones and shadows will remain unaffected as you brush over them.

Exposure controls the intensity of the dodge or burn effect. If you repeatedly brush over the same area, the intensity of the effect compounds.

The Dodge and Burn tools, in essence, paint directly on your image, so you should carefully select the brush you intend to use to apply the effect. Brush selection is usually done from the Option Bar. You change brushes anytime you feel the urge.

Brushes with soft edges usually work best for dodging and burning. Since it is difficult to precisely predict the result of a brush stroke with the Dodge and Burn tools, it is best to use small strokes and to dab with the brush. That way, you can select Undo from the Edit menu or press Command-Z to reverse an effect that is too severe. Then, you can make a quick adjustment to the Exposure option and try again.

Getting More Precise Control Over Dodging and Burning

The Dodge and Burn tools give you a lot of control when you apply them. One of the lessons you soon learn about editing digital images is that effects which look just fine now can look a little too weak or a little too severe later.

These tools remove a lot of guesswork, but you cannot be certain of the effect until you apply a brush stroke. At the moment you finish a brush stroke, your only choice is to accept the adjustment or reject it and try again.

Using an Overlay layer expands your dodging and burning options. You can make changes to the effect later, and you can also quickly and easily attenuate the effect.



Figure 3. An image that can benefit from some “burning in.”

The hydrangea bloom in *Figure 3* is a typical example of an image that can benefit from some selective lightening. The lighting for the image was natural. The flower was in partial shade. As a result, there is a slight shadow on the left side of the image.

An Overlay layer is just one of several available Fill layers in Photoshop. When you dodge and burn with an Overlay Layer, you brush your tonal changes onto a layer that is filled with 50% gray.

To really understand how an Overlay layer works, you need to be familiar with the Screen and Multiply blend options for a Photoshop layer.

Using a Multiply blend is a well-known Photoshop technique for salvaging an overexposed photo. Washed out areas will be darkened. A Screen blend has the opposite effect on an image. With an underexposed image, darker areas are lightened.

An Overlay layer combines both effects. You use a paintbrush to paint on a neutral gray layer. Areas that are darkened with the paintbrush strokes are dodged and areas that are lightened are burned.

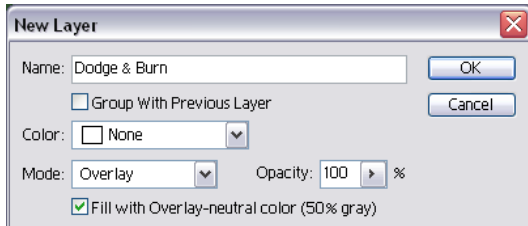


Figure 4. Dialog for creating a new Overlay Layer.

The easiest way to create an Overlay Layer is to press Command-Shift-N or select Layer|New|Layer... from the Photoshop menu. A dialog will open, and you can change the name of the layer. You should change the Mode to Overlay and check the box labeled “Fill with Overlay-neutral color (50% gray).”

This will create a new Overlay Layer and fill it with 50% gray. Then all you have to do is press the “d” key to restore the background and foreground colors for the Brush Tool to black and white.

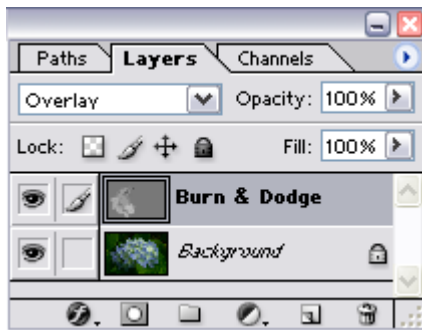


Figure 5. Layers palette for a dodge and burn Overlay Layer.

Again, brushes with soft edges work best for dodging and burning via an Overlay layer. You paint directly on the image

with the Brush tool. You can adjust the **Opacity** and the **Flow** of the brush. This gives you very precise control of your dodging and burning. Where you paint with white, the image will lighten. Where you paint with black, the image will darken.

It is best to start with a low Opacity setting, somewhere in the range of 15-20%. You can compound the effect with multiple strokes. Slow, gradual build-up of the effect increases your control over the effect.

If you overdo a burn or dodge effect, you can simply change the foreground color of the brush, adjust the opacity, and then paint over the area to reduce the effect. You now have more control than a simple Undo operation.

Another benefit of using a layer for dodging and burning is the ability to adjust the opacity for the entire layer. As long as you save the layer inside your file, you can even make a change in the layer’s opacity at a later time.



Figure 6. The effect of selective burning with the Overlay Layer technique in this article.

Figure 6 demonstrates how a bit of dodging with the Photoshop Brush Tool and an Overlay Layer can improve an image. The left side of the image shows

improved contrast. More detail is evident, as a consequence.

Conclusion

Making selective adjustments to the contrast of an image is possible with Photoshop's Burn and Dodge tools, but you cannot be certain of their effect until you actually brush a stroke, and then your only choices are to accept the adjustment or reverse it completely with an Undo operation.

For more control over burning and dodging, you can use a combination of the Brush tool and an Overlay layer. Simply by changing the foreground color of the brush tool between black and white, you can reduce a burn or dodge adjustment, even if it was made many brush strokes before. For even more flexibility, you can change the opacity of the entire layer and make a wholesale change to your dodge and burn adjustments.