

Using Levels Layers and Masking (PE5)

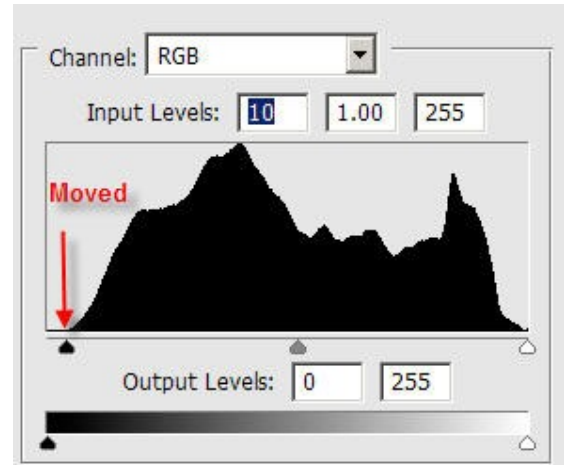
Check Your Picture First

Before you start any color or contrast correction in your photo, 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 add a 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

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



If we look at the picture, it brings out the clouds 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 visibility of the Levels layer, or throw it away in the trash.

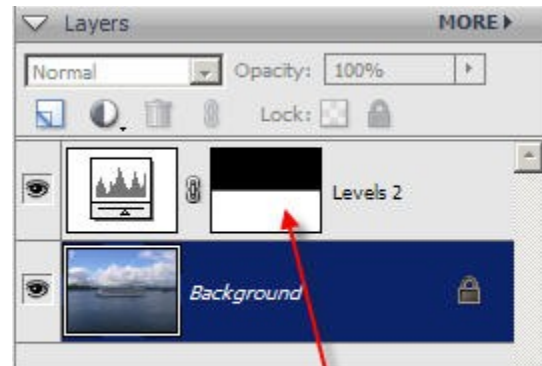
Using Selections in Levels Layers

Looking at the original version of the ship, what we want to do is lighten up the water in the picture. The clouds look pretty good as they are. 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.



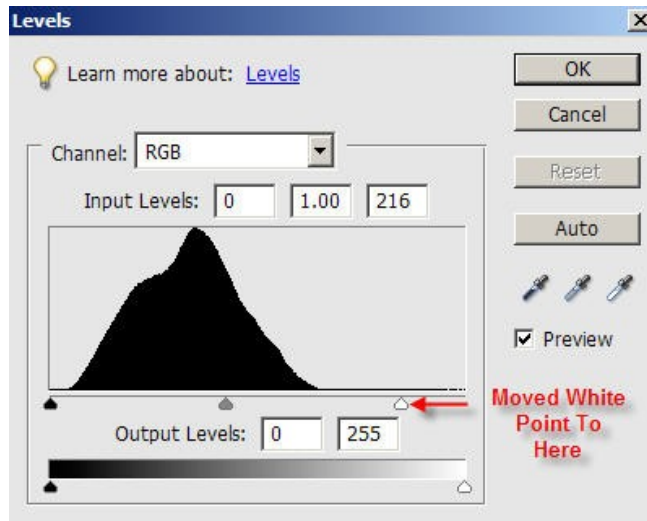
Now, add a Levels Adjustment layer using the icon at the bottom of the Layers palette. Because we started with a selection in place, we get a mask that is part black and part white. The white part is where the mask will allow any changes in the Levels layer to affect the photo. Anywhere it is black,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

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.



Levels Layer Mask

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 of the brush, 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. Ok, here is the finished version of the picture.



Variations on Selections

This tutorial 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.

jcdurett@gmail.com