

## Using a Levels Layer

### Layers

Photoshop Elements is most frequently used to modify or enhance photographs that have been taken with either digital cameras or scanned into the computer with a flatbed scanner. Using layers is at the heart of any Photoshop process. Layers allow you to try various modifications to a photo in measured stages. Using the Levels layers is one of the first basic tools to learn with Photoshop Element's Full Editor.

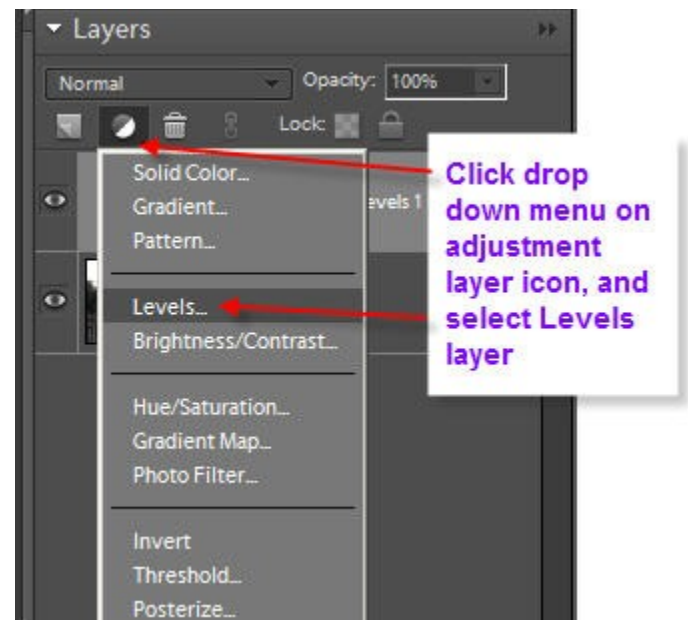
Look at this photo, taken of the San Marcos hotel in downtown Chandler, Arizona. The shot was taken with the digital camera on automatic, and the brilliant white sky forced the camera to narrow the aperture resulting in a dark front for the hotel.



We can lighten the shot and get a better exposure using a Levels layer. To begin the process, open the Layers palette on the right side of the screen. If necessary, check the menu and under Windows, be sure there is a check mark next to Layers. There are three important symbols on the Layers palette: the Adjustment Layer, the New Layer, and the Trash icons.

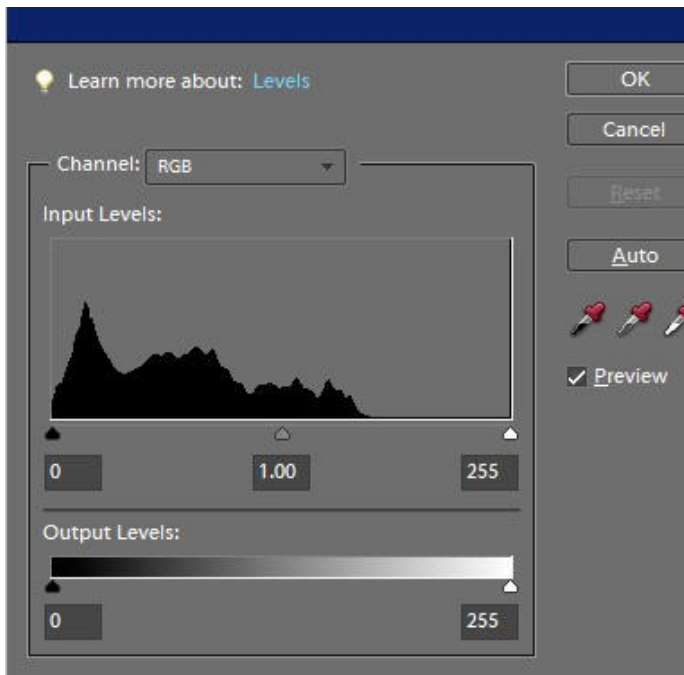


When you open the Layers palette for a photo file, the first layer you see (the lowest one) is the Background Layer. That represents all the information in your picture. You want to protect this layer and NOT change it during the editing process. Now we need to add a Levels Layer. To do this, **select the Adjustment Layers icon** (the Circle Icon that is half black and half white) and **choose Levels** from the drop-down menu. [Adjustment Layers protect the Background Layer]

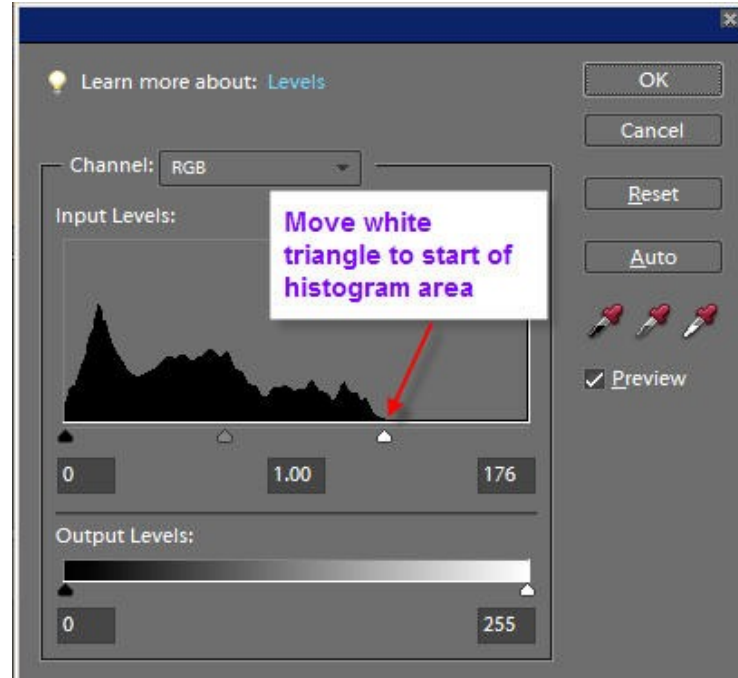


A Levels Layer will be added, and you will be looking at the Levels dialog box. The black uneven area in the middle of the figure is a histogram showing the distribution of the color intensity of the photo as it goes from its darkest pixels to its lightest pixels. Most digital pictures that we have do not span the full axis. This histogram shows a picture that

has a lot of dark pixels, but is lacking definition in the light pixel region.



What we do when we use Photoshop Elements is to take the photo's intensity profile and effectively stretch it out to fully span the dark-to-light axis. When we do this, we redefine the picture's darkest pixels to be black and the lightest pixels as white. This adds color definition to the photo. For the histogram above, we click on the white triangle at the right and immediately below the histogram. Then we drag the white triangle to the left until it is under the leading edge of the first main rise in the histogram. It will look like this when we are through.



If your photo also requires that you move the black triangle from the left to meet the far left portion of the histogram, then do that. Don't worry about the other icons and buttons for now. Click OK, and the Levels Layer will be added to your Layers Palette. **Save** your file. (You will be saving the file as a PSD file, and that is important because only PSD files preserve the layers in a picture.)

You may notice a significant change in the color intensity of your picture after you apply the Levels Layer. If you do, then that is why we use this layer first. It tends to have the biggest, most immediate payoff.

Our resulting picture here is a much more pleasing photo of the San Marcos hotel.

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