

## Digital Dodging and Burning

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I'll give an example of when this might be helpful. [Here's a photo that I took of a sidewalk saxophone player](#) in Lexington KY. The camera did what it was supposed to do and the exposure is about as good as what I can usually expect to get. First, to my eyes at least, the trouble areas are the shadow on his face caused by the hat, then the drummer to his side doesn't add anything to the scene, plus the white truck in the background really distracts my eyes. Using digital dodging & burning, I burned in the right side of the image quite a lot to decrease the brilliance of the truck and to hide the drummer in some shade and then burned the left side just a minor amount. I then dodged his face to lighten it up some. After getting the image somewhat balanced out to my eyes, I used just a couple more steps to selectively saturate & desaturate in a few places and to change the midtones some. [Here's the result.](#) The brightness & colors may look different on your monitor than on mine, but I believe it should still demonstrate how a problem image can be adjusted in the digital darkroom and that a traditional dodge/burn process can be a part of the workflow.

Here's a quick summary of this email so you can decide if it's worth your time: First I'll talk about the advantages of digital burning/dodging on a layer & how easy it is, and then I'll explain about using adjustment layers themselves, since this is the main hurdle in understanding how to apply the technique. Then, I'll post a link to a site that has screen shots with a good written explanation and lastly I'll post a link to a video tutorial since videos often help me better than written pages. If working in a digital darkroom is new to you then this will be time well spent, as everything you learn will be a stepping-stone to something else that we can talk about in the future.

Many image-processing programs have a burn and dodge tool but most of these are heavy-handed damaging tools and offer little flexibility if you want to later redo or undo an earlier step. The technique presented here will preserve your original image as a master file because you create a dodge/burn layer and it is placed on top of the image so it can later be altered or removed. It never becomes a permanent part of the pixels. You will then paint with black or white onto this adjustment layer in order to darken or lighten your selected portion of the image below it. Visually, the image on the screen changes just as if you were in the darkroom and were able to dodge and burn while immediately seeing the effect. As the kids say, it is way cool and much easier than the trial and error that we used to do in the wet darkroom.

This technique has the advantage of:

1. Not requiring much dexterity and can be done with a regular mouse since it doesn't require much precision. Don't worry if you can't aim too well or if you have fingers that tremble, this will in fact probably help a bit.
2. Requires very little time. If you initially spend a couple of evenings figuring it out, then I can assure you that the next day will see you doing the whole dodging/burning thing in just a few minutes.
3. Works with any photo editing program that supports layers. At least the later versions of Elements will do this but I don't know if the older versions do. If you don't have a photo-editing program, good buys are Photoshop Elements and Paint Shop Pro (which is \$39 at Amazon and is very much like the full blown Photoshop but priced for the rest of us regular working folks.) I use an older versions of Paint Shop Pro as well as my son's Photoshop education version that he bought at student deep discount and may be available to you if you have a child in school or work in education.
4. Allows you to lighten or darken only the parts of the image that you think needs it, just like you are working in an old fashioned darkroom with the exception that you immediately see the results.
5. You can reverse the effect if you mess it up or change your mind. For instance, if you think I've gotten the saxophone player a bit too light then you could always darken his face without actually changing and thus damaging the original pixels.
6. If you are early in your knowledge of the digital darkroom, this technique will give you some essential knowledge that can be built upon for later techniques. The learning curve is time well spent and we can use the knowledge in later discussions.

Ok let's just say you know enough about post processing that you can open the file, save a copy of it, and just do the basics. The first thing to understand is how to work on layers and what they actually are. In post processing terms, a "layer" is a way to do an adjustment to an image so that the change is applied to what you see on the screen but does not permanently affect the pixels of the image. It is sort of like having your original photograph lying on a table and then stacking layers of cellophane on top of the image and then doing your adjustments on the clear cellophane without having them actually touch the image itself. Then imagine being able to put the whole thing in a file cabinet and being able to pull it out tomorrow or even in a few years and change these adjustments to fit your taste. That's the beauty of using adjustment layers.

Imagine doing exposure adjustments on the first cellophane layer, then contrast adjustments on the 2nd cellophane layer, then color correction on the third cellophane layer. If a year from now you want less saturation, you can go back to any layer and revise the adjustments. That's how layers work, basically being filters that save your adjustments and allow them to be tweaked or deleted in any order. Eventually the burning/dodging layer that we're talking about today will be just one of several adjustment layers that you may elect to use for a problem photo.

I found a pretty good written tutorial on the web to explain this. This tutorial uses an outdoor wedding portrait of a couple and I think it shows a good simple use of the

technique. The tutorial begins with the "before" and "after" photographs and I would bet that the whole adjustment would not have taken a couple of minutes. It's that easy.

This tutorial is written by Steven Patterson at [photoshopessentials.com](http://photoshopessentials.com). [Click here.](#)

Once you've studied the written tutorial, it might help to see this in action. Here is a video by **Yanik Chauvin** that is very good at showing how it is actually done. His method of demonstrating is to really burn down the image, so keep in mind that usually you will be doing more subtle darkening or lightening of areas of the image just like you would be doing in the traditional darkroom. [Click here.](#)

I should point out that when you are finished and have the image just the way that you want, be sure to choose "save as" and then rename the file so that you are saving a copy that has the adjustments as layers and not overwriting your original file. You are saving a master file that we could call a "master negative" but you also need to save an additional jpg or tiff copy where the layers have been merged together (or flattened) that you'll send to the printers. Be sure to also never write over your original file.



Before



After