A Flexible Approach to Dodging & Burning

A Tutorial by Ray Grace ARPS DPAGB

Dodge & Burn

The Dodge & Burn tools in Photoshop are known to occasionally increase contrast unnecessarily when used extensively. They are not the best tools for the job. As with many things in Photoshop there is more than one way of achieving the effect. The method outlined below provides a much greater degree of flexibility in dodging and burning and is ideal for making graduated neutral density adjustments.

This tutorial has been prepared using Photoshop CS5 but will work with any version.

Method

Open an image in Photoshop.

There are a number of ways to create a new layer in Photoshop. You can:

- **From the Menu, select Layer > New layer**.
- **Click the New layer icon at the bottom of the Layers panel** (second from the right next to the trash can).
- **Click the sub-menu box at the top right of the Layers panel** (outlined in red) and **select the top option; New Layer**. This is the method recommended here as, doing it this way, it opens up the New layer dialog box offering a number of options.
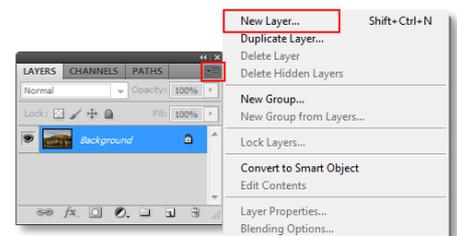
Note: The New layer dialog box will open when creating a new layer with the first option shown. The third option is just quicker.

In the New Layer properties dialog box (right) you can name the layer. Naming layers is a good idea as, with a multi layered file, it can occasionally get confusing identifying specific layers.
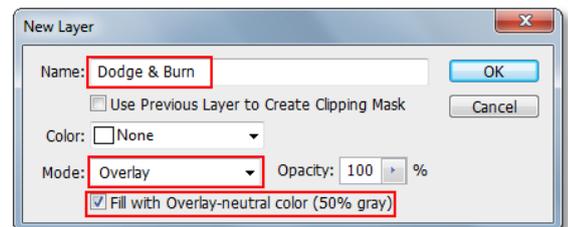
Change the Mode to Overlay.

Tick the Fill with 50% Grey.

A new layer will appear above the image layer and the Blend Mode will show as Overlay.

Although the layer is filled with grey you will still be able to see the image. Overlay is one of the contrast grouping of blend modes and it will ignore neutral (50%) grey.

Painting on the layer with black will darken where you paint and painting with white will lighten where you paint.
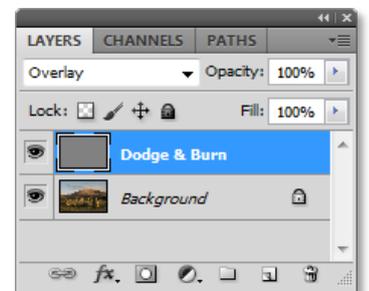
Select the Paintbrush Tool and paint with black (one stroke) on the layer at 100% opacity. Where you paint will appear black (or almost so) on your images and the effect is not what is wanted at all. Hit Ctrl+Z to step back in history and remove the painting. Painting should be done at very low opacity whether you are dodging or burning. Try a brush opacity of somewhere between 10%-15% initially and see what effect that has. With practice and experience you will soon determine how much you need to

apply. Remember, each time you paint over an area the effect will intensify so a good option is to start lightly and increase gently. Vary the brush diameter to meet the needs of the area you are working on and vary the brush opacity as required. You will find that different densities will require a different amount.

Graduated Neutral Density

A graduated neutral density filter is often used in landscape photography to darken bright skies. That same effect can easily be applied in a similar way to the dodging and burning with Overlay.

First, you need to create a separate Overlay layer to apply a neutral density affect. If you wish to apply the affect in 2 different areas of the image: perhaps to darken the sky and burn in the foreground then 2 separate layers will be necessary.

We know that painting with black darkens the image, painting with white lightens the image and neutral grey (R128, B128, G128) does not affect the image. So if the Foreground colour is black and the Background colour is white a gradient on an Overlay layer filled with neutral grey will darken the image from black at the top, fading through neutral and then gradually lightening the image to white at the bottom. Thinking laterally, a gradient from black to neutral grey will give a gradual neutral density effect. A white to neutral grey gradient will have the opposite effect.

Method

If the file you were working on is still open, **create a new Overlay layer** as you did previously.

If not, open a new file in Photoshop and create a new Overlay layer as described in the Dodge & Burn method above. If you wish to name the layer, call it Gradient.

Ensure your colours are set to default. If they are not, hit 'D' to restore them. If black shows as the Foreground colour hit 'X' to make white the Foreground colour and black the background.

X key to switch between black & white as the foreground colour
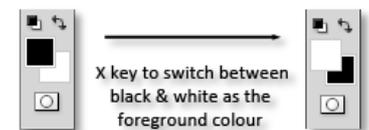
**Click on the (white) Foreground colour to activate the Color Picker**.

We now need to make the foreground colour mid grey (50% Grey). The quickest way to do that is to **change the B (Brightness) checkbox 50%.** (Outlined in red). This will make the RGB colours 128, 128, 128.

Once that is done, **hit 'X' to bring black back as the foreground colour**.

Select the Gradient tool from the Toolbar.

Check the Options bar to ensure that Foreground to Background is the selected gradient.

All that is required now is to draw the gradient. If you are darkening the sky, drag from the top of the image to the horizon, or as far as you want to darken. If the effect is not what you want, draw the gradient again. Redrawing will overwrite the existing gradient, it will not add to it. Holding the shift key while dragging will ensure a perfectly vertical gradient.
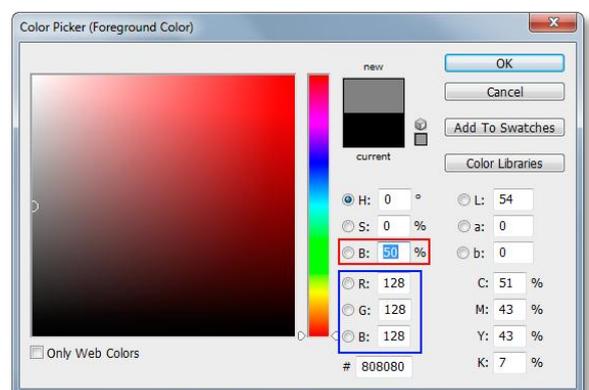
If the effect is too severe reduce the opacity of the Overlay layer. If the effect is insufficient, duplicate the Overlay layer.

This technique is ideal for darkening foregrounds as well as darkening skies.

The pictures below show the effect of a single gradient on a sky and then a duplication of the gradient layer to double the effect.

Original Image   1 Gradient   2 Gradients

(Gradient layer duplicated)