



Fundamental Photoshop

Little things make a big difference when working in Photoshop

BY BEN WILLMORE

Photoshop offers a huge arsenal of adjustment choices. With all these choices, it's all too easy to overdo it and end up with a less than optimal image. But, if you know a few safeguards, then you can adjust your images with confidence.

The Levels dialog box gives you the power to radically transform the contrast and brightness of an image in a matter of seconds. By moving the upper left slider you can quickly force areas to black, thereby increasing the contrast of the image. Or, if you move the upper right slider, you can force areas to white, which also gives your image a contrast bump. Be careful, though, because you can just as easily force large areas of your image to black and white without noticing if those changes are affecting areas that should retain detail. Photoshop 6.0 offers a safety-net feature that gives you the ability to see what's really going on with your image when you're using Levels. By holding the Option key (PC: Alt key) while you move one of those two sliders, you'll get an onscreen preview of those areas that will become pure black or pure white (they'll show up as black or white surrounded by some color).

Now let's move on to the Curves dialog box. With this feature, Photoshop

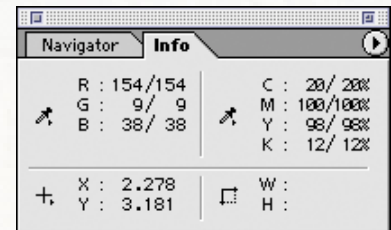
doesn't offer any special features to indicate if you'll be losing detail, but with a little insight, you can quickly see if you're going to be destroying any crucial data. All you need to do is look for areas of the curve that become horizontal. When a curve is perfectly flat, then there will be no detail whatsoever in that area. That means you can adjust an image to your heart's content and, as long as no areas are flattening out, you should still have detail across the full range from light to dark (assuming there was detail to begin with).



When using Curves, make sure no part of the curve becomes completely horizontal.

Does the Hue/Saturation dialog box have any similar safety features? Well, just as with Curves, there's no obvious "safety net," but there is a secret to knowing when you've gone too far.

If you're working with an RGB image, you'll want to keep the Info palette open and move your cursor over the most saturated colors in your image while you make an adjustment. You can safely increase the saturation of an image until one of the RGB numbers starts to near either 0 or 255 (assuming they didn't start there). Just don't let them go all the way to those numbers, otherwise you will lose detail in the most saturated areas and the relationship between colors will no longer be correct.



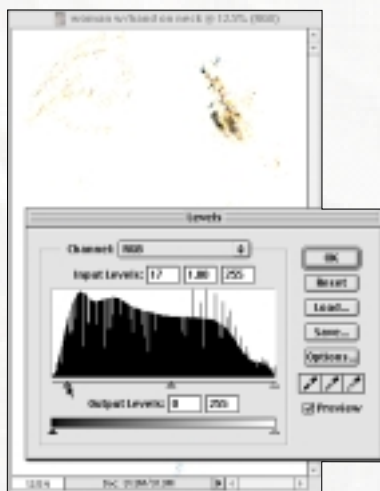
Make sure the RGB numbers don't become 255 or zero when adjusting saturation.

If you're working on an image that will be converted to CMYK mode, you'll need to take a different approach. In this case, choose Image>Gamut Warning and then start to increase the saturation of the image. As you do that, you'll start to notice areas of gray showing up in the areas that are not reproducible in CMYK mode. You can continue increasing the saturation until those gray areas just start to cover important areas of your image. Just make sure they don't cover large areas of your image.

If you'd like to see what would happen to those areas of your image, then choose View>New View and then choose View>Proof Colors. That will give you a second window, which will show you what things will look like after being converted to CMYK mode.

If you keep these ideas in mind, then you can adjust your images with confidence, knowing that you're not destroying important detail in your image. ■

Ben Willmore is founder of Digital Mastery, a Colorado-based training and consulting company that presents the national seminar tour of "Photoshop Mastery." Ben provides hundreds of free Photoshop tips and tutorials on his Web site, www.digitalmastery.com.



Option/Alt dragging a slider in Levels will give you an onscreen preview of the areas that are becoming white or black.