



Photoshop Mastery

Taking Photoshop to the next level

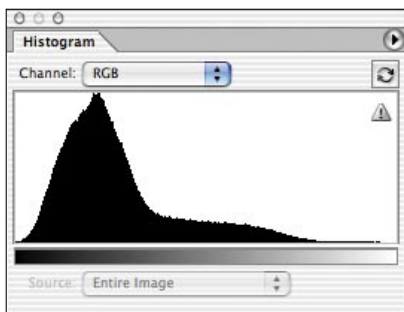
BY BEN WILLMORE

Unlocking the Power of the Histogram Palette

Photoshop CS offers a new twist to an old method for getting valuable feedback on your Adjustments. The Histogram palette is like your seeing-eye dog: It helps you get through an Adjustment safely, allowing you to push an image to its maximum potential, without letting it get run over by the Adjustment.

A Histogram is a deceptively simple-looking bar chart that indicates which shades of gray (or color) are present in an image and how prevalent each shade is compared to the others that make up the image. Let's see how this new palette can help you figure out when you've taken an Adjustment too far.

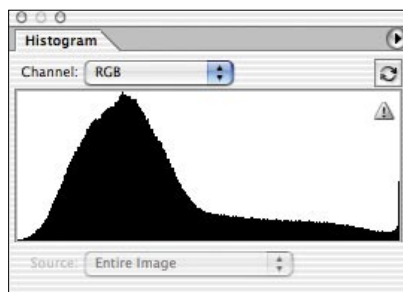
When you look at the Histogram palette (Window>Histogram), imagine that there's a gradient with black on the left and white on the right just as is shown when you choose Image>Adjustments>Levels. Then think about each bar on the Histogram as it relates to the shades of gray that would appear in that imaginary gradient directly below the Histogram. The bars simply indicate how prevalent each shade of gray is in your image. Tall bars indicate a shade that takes up a lot of space, while short bars indicate a shade that isn't all that prevalent in the image. If you ever find a gap in the bar chart, it indicates that the shade of gray that would appear directly below the gap is nowhere to be found in the image.



When you look at the Histogram palette, try to visualize a gradient with black on the left and white on the right.

Now that you have an idea of how a Histogram works, let's see how it acts as your guide so that you don't take your Adjustments too far.

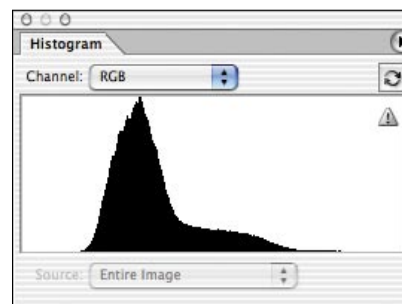
The width of the Histogram indicates the overall contrast of your image. The wider the bar chart is, the more contrast your image has. With high contrast images, it's rather common to have blown-out highlights or clogged up shadows. You can see if your image has one of these problems by the first and last bars on the Histogram. If those bars are much taller than the bars that surround them, then the brightest and/or darkest areas of your image take up a lot more space than the shades that surround them. That's usually an indication that a Brightness or Contrast Adjustment was too extreme. If you see those spikes while you adjust your image, you might want to consider backing off on the Adjustment until the spikes go away.



The spike on the far right of this Histogram indicates that the highlights are blown out.

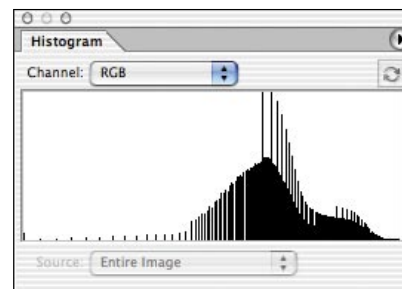
If you see a Histogram that doesn't extend across the area that's available, then your image doesn't contain the full range of shades available. When that happens, the image can usually benefit from a boost in Contrast. If you decide to adjust the Contrast, however, just make sure you don't go so far that spikes appear on the ends of the Histogram.

When you get a Histogram that contains lots of large, evenly spaced gaps ("comb-like"), it's usually an indication that the Adjustment you just applied was



A Histogram that doesn't extend all the way across the available area indicates a low-contrast image.

so extreme that part of your image no longer has smooth transitions between shades. If that's the case, look at the image to see if you can find any "stair-stepped" transitions (also known as posterization) where things used to look smooth—usually an artifact of brightening your image an excessive amount.



Gaps in a Histogram indicate posterization.

If you spend the time to get used to thinking about Histograms, they can really change the way you approach adjusting images in Photoshop. □

Ben Willmore is founder of Digital Mastery, a Colorado-based training and consulting company that presents the national seminar tour of "Photoshop Mastery." He's also author of Photoshop 7 Studio Techniques. Check out the free Photoshop tips and tutorials at Ben's Web site, www.digitalmastery.com.