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Learn Photography

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Photoshop Elements > Workflow > How to Edit



Walk to Paradise Garden

W. Eugene Smith

Limitation

Can you learn the ins-and-outs of editing by reading this?

No—but it will help.

What Are We Editing?

A photograph is a complex device.

Go to [What's a Good Photograph?](#)

With Photoshop Elements, your photographs have "adjustment knobs."

Three Goals

You're achieving three goals when you edit a photograph.

The goals, below, are 1, 2, 3.

But they're all poured into the same glass and shaken until they glow.

Deep Structure

Context

Tools

Goal #1 - Deep Structure

Your first goal is to find and understand the deep structure of the photograph.

Because Balanchine had studied music as well as ballet, he had an uncanny way of "seeing" the deep structure of the music he was setting and of rendering it visible.

Where as lesser choreographers might respond to the ornamentation of the score and set a trill, say, or a clash of cymbals, Balanchine ignored the surface irritation of the music and went right to its unfolding principles of development and contrast.

That was the source of the exhilarating beauty of those evenings.

City Boy, Edmund White

In plainer language:

- What are trying to communicate with the photograph?
- What's the "star" of your photograph—amongst its other elements?
- What do you want the viewer to see and feel?

For example, in the photograph below by Henri Cartier-Bresson, the subject may be a girl running.

Cartier-Bresson is famous for clicking the shutter the *decisive moment*.

He is also well-known for his love of geometry in his work.

Therefore, the "star" in the photograph may be a girl well-positioned in a "playground" of well-arranged geometric shapes and tonalities.



[Henri Cartier-Bresson](#)

[GREECE. Cyclades. Island of Siphnos. 1961.](#)

Goal # 2 - Context

Your second goal is to find and understand the context in which the photograph operates.

Context includes:

- Why you pressed the shutter release.
- The audience for the photograph.



- Knowledge of the subject.

For example, the director Carlos Reygadas, knows the Mennonite community in Mexico.

His film, Stellet Licht (Silent Light) used residents of the community as the actors, and filmed in their community.

- The conventions of the genre to which the photograph belongs.

Why reinvent them?

By knowing the conventions right away, you can bend and break them if needed.

- Your visual style.

60s

Baroque

Mixture of Mel Torme and Mel Brookes

Or ?

- What's being communicated.

That's the primary guide to editing.

Let's say you're editing a street scene in India.

If you're communicating . . .

The color of the scene . . .

Make a Hue/Saturation adjustment layer.

The poverty of the children . . .

Burn and dodge their bedraggled clothing.

The booming economy of India . . .

Crop the scene to where there's the most sense of motion.

- Presentation.

A print, matted and framed

Web gallery

Hand-made book

Stickers

T-shirts

- If part of a larger project, appropriate consistency with, or departure from, the other photographs in the project.

Goal #3 - Command of the Tools

Your third goal is to command and flow your cognition, judgment, luck, and intuition via the tools.

Here, intuition is a mixture of stored thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

You command and flow the knobs on the photographic device.

Ways to Reveal

Deep Structure & Context

Judgment

Suspend judgment when brainstorming.

There's plenty of time for judgment later.

Wizard's Hat

Place it on your head.

Don't worry.

No one can see it except you—and the photograph.

Text

Set a timer for five minutes, and write as much as you can about the photograph.

Who, what, where, when, why

Nouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs

Text Bubble

Draw a rectangle in the middle of a sheet of paper.

That's your photograph.

Draw a cartoon text bubble coming from the photograph.

Write in the bubble what the photograph is saying.

Light

Where's the light coming from?

Light from the direction of the camera encourages flatness.

Light from the side encourages texture and a stronger sense of volume, due to shadows.

Backlighting encourages separation from the background.

How contrasty is the light?

Bright shadows with diffuse edges?

Dark shadows with distinct edges?

Color!

If you didn't set the white balance to match the color of the light in the scene, you'll probably need to

correct the color.

Cloudy	Too blue	Add yellow
Shady	Too cyan	Add 81 filter or red
Tungsten	Too orange	Add 80 filter or blue
Flash	May be too blue	Add yellow
Florescent	Too green	Add magenta

Use the [color wheel with photofilter layers.psd](#) to learn how to identify color casts.

Play with saturation.

Try black-and-white.

Explore the psychology of color, too.

Geometry

Set a timer for three minutes, and sketch the photograph.

Start with straight lines.

Then, curved lines.

Then, shapes (rectangles, squares, circles).

Highlights are little x's or ?.

Shadows are little circles or ?

Label motion with cartoon speed lines or ?.

Label stasis with underlines or ?

Two Dimensions

Place a tic-tac-toe grid on the photograph to apply the [Rule of Thirds](#).

Go to [Rule of Thirds & Grid Lines](#).

Where do the elements of the photograph sit and hang from the grid?

Vignette the middle of the photograph.

Hold your fist between your eyes and the monitor.

Do the edges and corners add, or subtract, from the photograph?

Three Dimensions

Look for flatness and depth.

Does the foreground, if present, contribute to photograph?

If it's not present, should it be?

How about the background.

Focal Point

Where do the viewer's eyes look, at first?

Do they stay there?

Is there a secondary focal point?

Do the viewer's eyes stop scanning?

Or, do they keep moving around?

The Tools

Tools have rules, to be broken, of course.

Rules

Rules are applied without gray.

They're black-and-white.

But, you work in a gray world.

Rules make you confident and comfortable, when you should be anxious about the myriad choices between the photograph and you.

That's okay.

Use your rules "blankie" to balance yourself as you cross the high wire of choices.

Then, float.

Break the rules, as needed.

Deletion Tools

Delete what get's in the way.

Crop.

Deemphasize Tools

Deemphasize what you can't delete.

Darken.

Blur.

Lower contrast.

Desaturate.

Add Tools

Add what's needed.

Collage.

Emphasize Tools

Emphasize.

Lighten.

Sharpen.

Increase contrast.

Saturate.

Good Work Habits

KISS

Keep it simple, at first.

Mathew Carey Lea made the suggestion in 1868, and it still applies today.

CHAPTER IV.

A FEW GENERAL RULES FOR BEGINNERS.

1. INVARIABLY wash the fingers under the tap immediately after they have been in *any* solution, but most particularly after hyposulphite. By neglecting this you will transfer portions of one solution to another, and lay the foundation of long series of failures, which may prove utterly distressing and perplexing.

2. Do not have the ambition to commence with difficult work. Point the camera out of the window, and take the view, such as it is, until you can do it with certainty and success. After that will be time enough to try portraiture—last of all, copying.

3. Begin with small plates, and do not try large ones until you have mastered the smaller. Half-size will be the largest proper to begin with.

4. Do not undertake to make collodion before you have learned how to use it. Be satisfied to purchase that which some experienced friend recommends.

5. Do not tend towards intensifying thin pictures by after

A Manual of Photography (1868)

Mathew Carey Lea (1823-1897)

Global → Local → Global

1) Edit globally, at first.

Do things that change the entire photograph, such as Levels.

2) Then, do local editing, such as burning and

dodging.

3) Finally, return to global editing by doing noise reduction and sharpening, if needed.

Housekeeping

Foreground & Background Colors

To start, the foreground color should be black, and the background color, white.

If you haven't already, go to [Foreground & Background Colors](#).

Reset All Tools

An unusual setting in [options bar/Tool Options](#) can create havoc until you look there.

You may want to reset all the tools to their default settings.

Go to [Reset the Tools](#).

A/B

Always check your work.

Click the eye icon on a layer, on and off.

Or, click the blue Undo/Redo arrows.

This is how you teach yourself what looks good.

Separate Layers

If possible, create a new layer for each step.

By putting the editing on a new layer, you can:

- Delete it.
- Reduce its effect by lowering the opacity of the layer.
- Apply a correction to only the layer, such as Levels or Hue/Saturation.
- Erase or blur the edge of the image on the layer.

To avoid confusion, rename new layers.

Editor Anxiety

You have many choices.

That can be daunting.

Take a break.

Doing Levels get's the photograph to 80%.

Correcting the color, and doing some burning and dodging, gets the photograph to 90%.

That's a big improvement.

As you do more, you'll get closer to 100%.

Three Helps

Help #1 - Umpf

Experience = umpf.

If you edit enough, and it doesn't have to be hundreds of photographs, you'll develop umpf.

Umpf appears when you're making a choice.

Let's say you're choosing which shade of gray to use to dodge.

The cursor is hovering over the color swatches.

You look up and to the right, and the cursor moves almost like a divining rod to 65% gray.

Help #2 - Passage of Time

The passage of time increases your ability to judge your editing.

Reopen photographs that you've edited, and check them.

Help #3 - Project

Work on a project, a body of work that's related.

What you want to communicate, with the help of editing, with one of the photograph, can often be applied to the others.

Feedback Loop

By editing, you've added a powerful feedback loop to your endeavors behind the camera.

By editing, you become a better photographer.

Reward Yourself

When your all done, compare the original version with your edited version.

Do the following.

- 1) Press and hold Alt key.
- 2) Click the eye icon for the background layer.
- 3) Keep the Alt key pressed down.

The eye icons for all of the layers are now turned off.

- 4) Click and unclick the eye icon for the Background layer.

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