

Dodging and Burning: Forming a Foundation

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Dodging and burning provide important enhancements and/or corrections to tonality, which, in this approach, serves as the base for other advanced operations. While in this tutorial they are considered best used as a foundation, dodging and burning can be done at any point in the workflow.

Note: Exposure optimization should be attempted only on properly exposed images. Images with badly underexposed shadows or overexposed highlights are NOT good candidates for dodging and burning. Refer to your histogram to determine how your image is exposed.

Note 2: Before dodging or burning be sure to run noise reduction software if necessary. This should always be one of your first processing steps.

Step 1 Create a new layer with specific settings.

From the pull-down menu bar select layer > new > layer

When creating the new layer:

Set blend mode to 'overlay' and be sure to check the 50% gray box (very important)

Drop the opacity to around 30% (important to keep it fairly low). The opacity can be adjusted later.

Step 2 Select tools and brushes

Select the dodge or burn tool in the tools palette

Select a soft brush with a fairly wide diameter (to insure seamless blending)

Note: Brush should cover around 20% of the image on each stroke for even blending.

Set the exposure level of the brush to around 30% or less (again for smooth blending).

Finally, select the dodge or burn target - either shadows, mid-tones, or highlights.

Step 3 Dodging and burning

Paint across the area you want to affect with even, sweeping strokes. The idea is to develop the center of interest or focal point in your image and blend the effect out.

Note: Because the settings are low, and the effect is gradual, you can sweep back and forth quickly.

Tip: If you like the effect and want to increase it quickly simply duplicate the layer. If you don't like the effect of the duplicated layer either delete the layer or reduce its opacity.

Tip: In many cases all the work can be done on one layer.

Step 4 Advanced dodging and burning

For more controlled dodging and burning, create a new layer for each burning step, and one for each dodging step. This also allows you to do finer adjustments later.

For the most control possible six choices for new layers are possible. It is best to name each layer as you create them so you can identify each of them easily later. Using six layers would be a rare choice but it is available if you need it. Usually one layer for dodging and one for burning are enough.

The six choices are:

Burning/highlights

Burning/mid-tones

Burning/shadows

Dodging/highlights

Dodging/mid-tones

Dodging/shadows

Note: Each layer can be adjusted for opacity as needed.

Before and after examples

Original un-retouched image



After light dodging and burning



Note: Applied early in the workflow, dodging and burning is meant to be a beginning step. Dodging and burning prepares the image for additional optimization such as curves, levels, color correction and sharpening.

Summary and some final thoughts

If done properly, the results of this processing are undetectable.

Painting with light by dodging and burning is more of an art than a skill. Like anything else, it requires practice to know how and when and to what degree to apply the effect. The more you practice the better you will get. In time it will become fast, easy and fun to make powerful changes.

Don't overdo it. Less is always more. Only so much exposure latitude can be recovered so don't try to force out detail that isn't there to begin with.

Learn to recognize which images can and cannot be corrected. Images with grossly underexposed or overexposed areas are NOT good candidates for dodging and burning.

It is always better to get exposure right IN THE CAMERA then make dodging and burning adjustments.