

Improve Your Exposure in Tricky Lighting

By [Dave Johnson, PCWorld](#) Oct 11, 2010 4:00 PM



You've probably seen breathtaking photos using HDR (High Dynamic Range) techniques, and you might even have read some of my suggestions for how to make them yourself (such as "[Stunning Photos With High Dynamic Range](#)"). The problem is that making an HDR image isn't simple; you need to take several photos while bracketing the exposure, and then combine them afterwards in a program designed to process HDR. You might experiment with these kinds of photos once in a while, but it's probably not something you'd want to do every day--and it's certainly not the first thing you'd think of to improve the exposure in lackluster photos.

Thankfully, you can make photos that mimic some of the deep dynamic range of HDR with nothing more than a single image and a photo editor that supports layers. Let me show you how.

An HDR Primer

First, a refresher. Digital cameras don't have the exposure latitude to fully and properly expose the full range of lighting in a typical outdoor photo, from bright sunlight to deep shadow. That's why your shadows turn to murky black regions completely devoid of detail, and the sky is often an undifferentiated bright gray instead of blue or cloudy.

HDR software solves that problem by combining photos of the same scene taken at different exposure settings--but you can simulate that effect with your usual image editor and a single photo. You'll get the best results if that image is shot in your camera's RAW format, since RAW has a lot more exposure information in it than is ordinarily displayed on screen. If you shoot in JPEG format, though, don't worry. The technique still works, though obviously the results won't be as impressive.



Making a Single-Photo HDR Image Start by opening a photo in your favorite image editor. Any photo editor will do as long as it has [support for layers](#) and includes an eraser tool. I'll use Adobe Photoshop Elements to demonstrate.

You can see that the photo I'm using is kind of terrible: The sky looks overcast and bleached from overexposure, and the foreground is dark and murky. In other words, the camera chose an average exposure that didn't suit either extreme, and it's pretty bland as a result.

To proceed, we'll need two copies of the photo. Choose *File, Save As* and save a second copy of the photo using a slightly different file name. Then open both copies of the photo in your photo editor. Or, if you're using Photoshop Elements, you can take a shortcut--choose *File, Duplicate* and both copies of the photo will appear in the Elements Project Bin.



Now it's time to edit the copies of your photo. We are going to adjust the brightness and contrast of one photo to optimize the exposure for the shadows, and then do the opposite to the copy to get the best look from the highlights.

First, let's optimize the shadows, as I did in the photo shown on the right (click it if you want to see a larger view). Select the first photo and choose *Enhance, Adjust Lighting, Brightness/Contrast*. Drag the brightness slider to the right to improve the detail and tone of the foreground. When it starts to look about right, adjust the contrast as well. As a rule of thumb, you'll want to change the contrast along with the brightness to keep the image from getting washed out. This is a setting you'll need to apply by eye, using your own judgment.

When you're satisfied with the results, move on to the photo copy. We'll add some punch to the sky and other highlights, as you see in the photo linked to the left. Choose *Enhance, Adjust Lighting, Brightness/Contrast*, and this time reduce the brightness and contrast until the sky and other highlights in the image have some definition and detail.



Finishing Touches

Now it's time to combine the two photos. Select the copy, and then copy it--in Elements, press **Ctrl-A** and then **Ctrl-C**. Switch to the first photo and press **Ctrl-V**. You should have both images stacked in two layers.

We're almost done. Now it's time to selectively erase the parts of the top image that are poorly exposed, revealing the improved exposure from the alternative image in the layer below. Choose the Eraser tool (16th down from the top of the toolbar on the left side of the screen) and start erasing. You might want to adjust the size of the eraser in the Tool Options palette at the top of the screen. Indeed, you might want to change the Eraser size a few times--use a big brush for large sections, and then reduce it when you need to work around small details. Here's what my photo looks like after using this technique.