

Making Better Skies With Lightroom/Adobe Camera Raw

There's almost no landscape or outdoor photograph that can't be improved by having a better sky. And at the same time, nothing detracts more from an otherwise good photograph than a stark, bald sky. So, good skies help improve a photograph. And the good news is that better skies are in reach. Thanks to the dynamic range of digital imagery, even reasonably well exposed RAW photos contain a wealth of data, and can capture both the subtleties of shadows and luminous glory of an interesting sky. Yes, you can always change the sky and add a new one, but there's something to be said for working with the sky you captured on location. It's just a matter of teasing out the details in post processing. There are many, many ways to do this,. Here are a few techniques I have found useful. With the exception of removing halos, all the tools for these techniques reside in Adobe Camera Raw or in the "Develop" module in Lightroom.

A quick fix

In the "Basic" panel, use the "Highlights" slider-this slider, moved toward the left, will nearly always give you a better sky. You decide how far to move it. As you use the slider, keep an eye on the brighter elements of the picture that are not sky to make sure you're not moving the slider too far.

Alternatively, for better but still simple control, go to the masking panel, and at the "Add New Mask" prompt, select "Linear Gradient" and drag the gradient down from the top of the image to near the horizon, then use the "highlights" slider to reduce highlights in the selected area, in the sky, only.

You might also explore what "Presence" sliders-"Texture", "Clarity" and "Dehaze" can do to create better definition in the sky. Move "Clarity" and/or "Dehaze" to the right for a sharply detailed sky, or left to impart a softer, dreamier look.

Remember that the gradient, even with adjustments made, can be easily moved, condensed or extended simply by going to the gradient and moving it by selecting the box, or extending or reducing it by moving the top or bottom lines.

To cool the sky and make it more blue, go to the Color panel and move "Temp" to the left. For a warmer look, move that slider to the right. Move the sliders very slowly, a little goes a long way. Lastly, adjust "Saturation" and/or "Vibrance" slider together the look you want.

Back to “Basic”

Throughout the process, and for all the techniques listed below, you may return several times to the “Basic” or the “Tone” panel to readjust exposure, contrast or any of the other sliders there.

Using Dehaze, in particular, will introduce significant changes that may require readjustment in the “Basics” panel.

Tip: instead of using the “Contrast” slider, experiment with using the “Black” and “White” sliders for more precise control of contrast. You might want to make the darks darker but leave the lighter colors as they are—moving just the “Black” slider will accomplish that easily and far better than the “Contrast” slider.

For more precise control, go to the masking panel

Step one is to make the most accurate mask of the sky you can. Open the masking panel, and at the “Add New Mask” prompt click “Sky”. But you’re not done yet—the resulting mask will be feathered and likely to overlap parts of the landscape, or whatever subject matter is beneath the sky.

Instead, and yes, this is odd, but go back to the masking panel, in the box with your sky mask, hit the “subtract” option, and hit “sky”. Yes you are subtracting the sky from the sky. Now, go to the “Sky 2” selection in the mask box, and hit “invert”. This makes a cleaner, better defined sky mask. Check all around the mask—if you need to add or subtract from it, select the appropriate box, select “Brush” and use that to paint in any corrections.

Next, go to the top row of the mask adjustments and click on the three dots, select “intersect mask with” and choose “Linear Gradient”, tap the top of the sky, and bring the gradient down to just above the horizon. Don’t worry about being overly precise, you can adjust its position later. The idea is that in real life, skies are often brighter toward the horizon than they are overhead; using the gradient so your future adjustments to not reach all the way down to the horizon yields a result that looks more realistic. You may opt to rename the final mask, “sky” or whatever; click on the three dots to get the rename option.

With the completed mask ready, you can start exploring the “Tone” section of the masking adjustments panel; explore the effects of using the “Highlights” slider, the “Exposure” slider and adjust “White” and “Black”.

Then go to the “Effects” panel of the masking adjustment tools and use the “Texture”, “Clarity” and “Dehaze” sliders to better define the elements in the sky, things such as clouds, light rays, or patterns of color made by, say, the setting sun. Move the sliders right to create a grittier, crunchier sky with sharply defined elements, or left to create a softer, more dreamy sky.

Moving “Dehaze” to the right will definitely add blue, probably more than you want-make corrections adjustments by going to the “Color” panel of the masking adjustments section and move the “Saturation” slider as needed and/or use the “Temp” slider to warm up (or cool down) the adjustment. You may even need to make changes to the “Exposure” slider if you are using lots of Dehaze.

Lastly, return to the “Tone” panel and revisit the “Exposure” “Contrast” “Highlights”, “Black”, and “White” sliders to readjust as necessary

Making color adjustments to parts of the sky

At this point you probably have created a much more attractive sky, but taking your skyscape to the next level means making local color adjustments in the sky, highlighting and intensifying existing colors, adding new color to the clouds, altering the blue of the sky, or whatever.

Here’s how

Enhancing existing colors

To enhance existing colors in the sky portion of an image, duplicate the sky mask you used for the previous steps, and then in the “Color” panel try moving the “Temp” and/or “Tint” sliders. Move “Temp” left for cooler, bluer skies, right for warmer, more golden skies. Use the “tint” slider to reduce any green color casts, or introduce a touch of magenta to the sky-it often complements sunrises and sunsets.

Consider defining parts of the sky-use the “Color Range” mask or the “Luminance Range” mask to select clouds, the blue of the sky, or any other element which you can then manipulate using the “Color panel”. In the “Color” panel, using the Color Picker (the unnamed tool in lower right of the box -a white rectangle with an x). Open it up and experiment by sliding the cursor around while seeing a live preview in the image. This can be especially useful for enhancing the color of sunlit clouds.

Sometimes a part of the sky is just not the color you want-some of the blue may be too cyan, or a cloud not as saturated as you might like. This the time to try Point Color. Select your color

using the eye dropper tool, and alter it as needed by changing the “Hue”, “Saturation” and/or the “Luminance” slider. This the best way to make subtle changes to a specific color. For more precise control, go to the Color Mixer panel, and work on the “Hue”, “Saturation” and “Luminance” of any colors present in the sky. Just experiment, but keep your eye on the overall image since this also works globally and you don’t want to make a sky that is perfect at the cost of those color changes ruining something else in the scene.

If you want spot treat any areas within the sky, clouds around the setting sun for example, make a “Radial Gradient” mask, center it in the appropriate area, and proceed using the sliders mentioned above. In general, you will have better results if the gradient is feathered to 100%.

Try the Calibration sliders

Though this introduces a global rather than local adjustment, try opening the “Calibration” panel, and increase “Saturation” of blue, as this often improves all colors in an image, not just the sky. For sunrises and sunsets, you might try the red “Saturation” slider.

Adding new colors

A good trick to add interest to a cloudy sky is to intersect a “Sky” mask with the “Luminance Range” mask. Then use the eye dropper tool to sample the brightest side of the cloud(s), and then adjust the mask if needed (by expanding or reducing the feather, or the sampled area, which is indicated by a box, the feathering extends on either side). Then go to the “Color Picker” panel (click on the small white rectangle with an x in it) at lower right. Move the cursor across the color spectrum and up and down to add color to the masked area. It’s pretty easy to make it look like a sunset using this technique.

You can also use a radial gradient to affect parts of the sky. Make your gradient, then use the “Color Picker”, “Temp”, “Tint” and “Saturation” sliders to see what effects you can create.

Adding glow

As a finishing touch for any sky that includes the sun in the frame or just outside the frame, add some glow. Go to “Add New Mask”, select “radial gradient”. Center the gradient over the sun’s position (even if that position is just outside the frame), and enlarge to a size that seems appropriate. Be generous. Make sure the gradient is feathered 100%. In the “Tone” panel, raise “Blacks”, in “Effects” reduce “Clarity” and perhaps “Dehaze”. In the “Color” section, you may want to add warmth by moving “Temp” slider to the right.

Unify the image

Overall color management is the last step in crafting an image. The simplest way to do this is to match your sky to the terrestrial part of the image. You may want to use the Sky mask you created earlier. Click on the three dots in the upper right of the mask's panel, and select "Duplicate and Invert". You'll get a mask that is the exact opposite of your sky mask; run through the "Basics" panel to dial in brightness and contrast then go to the "Color" panel and use the "Temp" and "Tint" sliders to bring the land part of your image into harmony with the sky. This is a highly subjective task, just go for what looks good to you.

Other Lightroom/Adobe Camera Raw tools to work on your overall color theme include the Color Mixer panel-use the HSL sliders to adjust the individual colors that contribute most strongly to your color theme. And, equally important, use those sliders to reduce, desaturate, or darken colors that detract or are not part of the color scheme.

The Color Grading tool is also excellent for this, and is well worth the time and effort required to master its learning curve. Experiment.

Clean up halos

If you've made lots of strong edits, especially using various masks, and extremes with the "Highlights" and "Shadows" sliders in the "Basics" panel. You are likely to have some halos at the margins of high contrast areas. There can be bright halos, but there can also be dark halos.

Unfortunately, once you've introduced a halo in to your image, cleaning it up is going to be a bit tedious. It's best to avoid them by checking throughout the editing process to see if you've introduced any, and, if so, to back off the adjustments enough to remove the halo.

One way to clean them up is to review the masks you've made and used. Go through them one by one, turning them on and off by clicking on the eye symbol in the upper right of each mask's panel, and see if you can discover which mask or masks caused the halo and if you can adjust the halo-making mask enough to diminish the halo.

Otherwise, the best and most all encompassing correction is to open the image in Photoshop. Make a new layer of your image by pressing Command + J in a Mac, or Control +J in a Windows machine.

With the new layer active, enlarge the image enough to easily see the halo, which could be more than a single pixel wide.

Select the clone tool. In the Layers panel, if the halo is light, set the blend mode to Darken, if it is dark, set the blend mode to Lighten. Adjust the width of the Clone stamp brush to just a bit wider than the halo itself. For a light halo, position the cursor in the sky just outside the halo, press Alt in Windows, Option in Mac to sample the color, then paint along the halo. You may have to refresh your sample from time to time, or if you move into a differently colored part of the sky. If it's a dark halo, set the blend mode to Darken, and follow the same process above, sampling in the dark area adding the halo.

Since you're making these corrections on a new layer, any mistakes are easily corrected and if not, delete the layer and start over. You can't really make a mistake, as the Clone tool will only correct areas lighter than the sky-like the halo. It will not affect darker areas. So, you don't have to be that careful with the painting, But it will take some time to rid your image of the halo. Be patient.