

Basic Photo Tips: Fixing Pictures After the Shot

Sometimes, that perfect moment gets captured in your photo in an imperfect way. So what do you do? Here's a quick guide to salvaging those photos that are almost there, but not quite.

Why should you edit a photo anyway?

There many schools of thought when it comes to editing photos – some media outlets don't allow any editing of a photo at all. But, in journalism, typically the following adjustments are OK: cropping, toning, and color correction. Such adjustments will enable you to better serve your readers with a more accurate representation of what happened. After all, if the shutter speed was slightly off, why should the reader see the world through your error? Fix it.

Below is an example from a wedding shoot:



The raw shot, right out of the camera on the left and the edit on the right.

In reality, the scene that day was not as dark or as blue as the raw shot on the left. It definitely was more like the one on the right – and that's the key to remember here – depict the world as accurately as you saw it, not the way the camera saw it. But don't cross the line and depict as better or worse than you saw it. More on that later.

For now, let's talk about the three skills you'll likely need the most as a student photojournalist: Cropping, levels and color-correction.

The basics of cropping

So you didn't get quite the composition you wanted when you took your photo. Maybe you got a little more than you wanted – this is OK. Cropping becomes your best friend in this case. Didn't get as much as you wanted, or cut something off? Well, then you're probably out of luck.

The beauty of modern digital cameras is that they have high megapixel counts that make it easy to crop a picture. You can cut out a little bit and still be OK. I can hear the "get-it-right-in-the-camera" purists gnashing their teeth at this, and rightfully so – it is always best to get it right in the camera because it means you don't have to take the extra steps later to correct something.

Start with a tight crop around your center of interest in the photo, your subject. Then, grab one edge and pull it out until there ceases to be useful things that add information to the photo, and stop there. Grab the other edges and then do the same. This helps keep dead space and unwanted artifacts to a minimum in your photo. Check out the illustration below:



The way the crop tool works in Photoshop is simple. Click the icon for it, which usually looks like this:



The crop tool.

Then, if you're not cropping to a specific size, make sure the bars at the top of Photoshop labeled width, height and resolution are clear. Otherwise, your crop will be forced into a specific size. Drag the box around your image and then grab the squares at the edges to manipulate the crop. When you're done, hit enter and the crop will be made.

If you do need to crop to a specific size, then enter it into the width and height boxes in pixels at the top, using "px" at the end (like this: 700px) or Photoshop will default to inches, which is probably not what you wanted.

Remember to always work on a copy of your photos and not the originals – because once you make the crop and save, there's no going back to the original.

Fixing under- or over-exposure

When you shoot with a shutter speed that's too fast or too slow, an ISO that's too high or too low, or an aperture that's not right for your situation, you'll often get overexposure (the picture looks overly white, or "blown out") or you'll get underexposure (the picture looks too dark). Sometimes this will also happen when your camera's meter (the sensor that determines what settings your camera will use) gets tricked by bright objects (lights, the sun, LCD screens, etc.) and ratchets back the exposure to compensate for what it thinks you want and not what you actually are trying to get.

Sometimes this can be an easy fix, sometimes it may not be such an easy fix. Something that looks all-black or all-white is probably not salvageable, but just a little bit off, and there may still be hope. To give it a try, check out the "Levels" tool under the "Image" and then "Adjustments" menu in Photoshop. You'll be greeted with a graph-like screen with three triangles, much like this screenshot below:



Grab the black, gray, and white sliders to adjust the levels of each in a photo.

Without getting too technical, the curve should generally look like a bell curve – lower on the ends and peaking in the middle, for most exposures. Exposures with more black (shadows) in them will tend to look like the one in the example above, with the curve to the left, and pictures with more white (highlights) will tend to look like the opposite, with the curve being heavy on the right.

By grabbing the three triangles below the curve, you can manipulate it artificially and bring back some of what was lost in the photo – the black triangle controls shadow levels, the white triangle controls highlights, and the gray triangle controls everything in-between (midtone). There's a science to the numbers, but at this stage it's not something to worry about. Just click the "Preview" button in that window and see what your photo looks like.

Once you are satisfied, hit OK and save your photo – again, work on a copy, not the original!

Color correction

Cameras see light differently than humans do – and so to compensate for this, there's a control "white balance" on the camera. White balance compensates for the various colors of light thrown at the camera, since florescent light is a very different type of light from sunlight, or tungsten light.

Have you ever seen a picture come out too blue, or too orange? Have the people in your photos looked like Smurfs? An incorrect white balance was likely the culprit.

Luckily, it's something that can also be fixed after the fact. Check out this example:



Fix incorrect colors by using the "Color Balance" tool in Photoshop.

The photo came out a bit bluer than it was in reality, so a quick trip into Photoshop was in order. Working on a copy of the photo, I went into the "Image" menu, then "Adjustments" and then the "Color Balance" tool. There's an art here to how the color balance works – take a look at the photo, and look at what colors are dominant. In this case, it's mostly blue with a little bit of cyan thrown in there for fun. I take the sliders and move them *away* from blue and cyan until I achieve the desired effect.

You may need to do this individually for the shadows, highlights and midtones in the picture, as each is affected differently. You can toggle between the three by using the radio buttons below the slider. Just like the "Levels" tool, checking the "Preview" box will show you the changes in real time.

A word about ethics

While the skills used here can't do too much damage to photos – you haven't exactly learned how to clone out poles or add basketballs to photos here – there's still a lot of harm that can be done if you're not careful.



Don't manipulate photos this way!

Don't edit photos like this in photojournalism.

Don't edit photos as seen in this example. Using the color tools, the two photos on the right (one of a skater and one of Montauk Point) have been severely altered to come to represent something completely different from what actually happened. This is bad. Do this, and you'll lose your job, the trust of your editors, and, most importantly, the trust of your readers.

The key to remember is that this is not art photography. This is photojournalism. Your job is to capture the moment as it happened, as you saw it, without any sort of manipulation. The art you bring to the photo is in the angle, the perspective, the lens selection – not in what you can do in Photoshop. You shouldn't use any of these methods to the extreme – only to the extent that the photo more accurately depicts what happened.

There's way more to Photoshop than what we've covered, but in terms of "need-to-know," this should at least give you a head start.

Now there's no excuse to turn in a poorly processed photo.
