Dodging and Burning

Today I want to introduce inexperienced users of Photoshop Elements to two key features of this program (and of Photoshop CS4, too). The features have many uses but I will use them for two common editing activities called dodging and burning (don't worry, no photographer will be injured doing this). The image that I used, and the results, are on the Marlborough Camera Club Flickr site in the discussion area right here.

I got the light wrong; can I fix it?

The short answer is maybe. If you can, go back and do it right. If you can't, here are two well-worn techniques used by new and old photographers alike, called dodging and burning. There are several ways to do dodging and burning. I will describe one method that is easy, flexible and non-destructive, and is also an introduction to one of Photoshop's most powerful features.

Here are step-by-step instructions for Photoshop Elements (I used version 7 but it varies very little between versions).

Open the image you want to adjust in the Editor window. Look for the Layers palette on the right. If you don't see it at all, click on Window on the menu bar and and then on Layers so that it gets a tick mark. You may need to open the palette: click on the flippy triangle.

In the Layers palette, now, you will see a single layer with a eye icon, a thumbnail-sized copy of your image, and the layer title, Background . Now look for the line of tiny icons near the top of the Layers palette and click on the second from the left; it looks like a circle, half black and half white. A list will open up; click Levels . The Levels dialog box pops up; just click on OK . Above the line of tiny icons in the Layers palette is a text box which shows the current blending mode, Normal . Click the associated flippy triangle to open the list of blending modes and select Multiply . Look at your image; it's much darker. This is called burning . So, double-click on the name of your new layer, now Levels 1 , and change it to Burn .

In this case, we only want the upper part of the image darker, so we must use a mask to protect the areas that are already dark enough. The mask is already there; it's the white rectangle in the Layers palette, associated with the Burn layer. The mask has no visible effect, so far, because it is completely white, effectively transparent. We will make it completely black, effectively opaque, and then paint in white where we want the darkening to show.

First, make sure the foreground and background colours are the default black and white. (Look at the bottom of the toolbar, usually on the left of the Elements window.) If necessary, click on the double-headed arrow by the icon for the foreground and background colours to make the foreground white.

Go back to the Layers palette and click on the Burn layer's mask so Photoshop knows we want to change it. Go the the menu bar and choose Edit-Fill Layer. In the dialog

box select "Black" for the Use box and leave the other boxes at "normal" and "100%". Click "OK". See the Burn layer mask has turned black. Now it is masking the effect of the Burn layer and the image is back to where we started. Finally, we will do the actual "burning", by painting white on the layer mask.

Select the brush tool from the toolbar and click and drag it in the image. If the brush size is too small, click the "]" key on the keyboard to make the brush larger. The "[" key makes the brush smaller. Start with a very large brush and fine-tune with a smaller one. See how the darkening, or burning, appears where we paint white onto the layer mask. If you mistakenly "burn" an area that should be left alone, it's easy to fix. Just change the foreground colour to black in the toolbar and paint black over the erroneous white.

The burning is done!

This is a rather all-or-none approach but it can be made more flexible by painting shades of grey on the layer mask as well as solid black and white. You can increase the darkening effect by stacking another Burn layer on top of the first one. Just right-click in the Layers palette and choose "Duplicate layer .." from the right-click menu, then click "OK" in the dialog box. Again, you can paint in the new layer mask to adjust the effect.

Note that completely white areas on the image ("blown-out" whites) cannot be rescued with this method. Those need to be recovered from the RAW file, if you have it, before burning.

The same method can be used to "dodge", or lighten parts of an image. The method is identical except that the blending mode is "Screen" instead of "Multiply". You might also want to name the layer "Dodge" instead of "Burn".

Very dark areas may become "noisy" if you dodge, or brighten, them too much. This is especially true if your shot was taken at a high ISO value. It also depends on the size and quality of your camera's sensor.

The success of this method depends on the quality of your image, but in cases where the necessary changes are not too drastic it provides a very flexible, non-destructive way to carry out selective dodging and burning.