

Digital ...

A monthly column by Harry

This month's column is about using the gradient tool to improve landscape photographs. It just mimics, in the computer, the physical gradient filter that may be used in front of the camera lens. I've started a discussion on this topic with an example on [the Club Web site](#).

The sky is too bright on my landscape shots. What can I do?

The quick answer does sometimes work. Do you need the sky at all? Can you crop it out or change the angle of view to remove the sky? In some images, the sky is a distraction and removing it works well.

In other images, the sky may be necessary, for example for an interesting skyline or interesting clouds or to convey important information about the scene. And, yes, the sky does often come out too bright. This is because the display cannot show the full range of light intensity that is found in many landscapes. Before digital, photographers placed a gradient filter in front of the camera lens before taking the photograph. This filter was grey at the top and clear at the bottom with a smooth gradient in between. Such filters work with digital cameras, too. Just be careful that the front of the lens doesn't rotate the filter during focusing; the darkest grey part of the filter should be at the top, making the sky look darker to the camera.

A similar effect but with more control can be achieved in the computer. It works best with the RAW file using one of the local adjustment tools found in Lightroom. Unfortunately, this particular feature appears to be missing from the version of ACR in Elements 7; there is probably a workaround but I don't know an easy one. HDR ("High Dynamic Range") techniques can also be used to address the bright sky problem but are more time-consuming.

The gradient tool in Adobe Lightroom is very easy to use, in my opinion. Open the RAW file in the Develop module of Lightroom. In the panel on the right, under the histogram, is a rectangular icon that is dark grey at the top and light grey at the bottom, like a gradient filter. Click on this icon. A panel of sliders appears just below. For this example, set the Exposure slider to -4.00 and all the others to 0. (You can experiment with the other sliders later.) Now use the mouse to click and drag from near the top centre of the image down to the horizon or below. If you hold down the Shift key while you drag, your gradient will be horizontal; otherwise you can make it any angle you like. Notice that this simple mouse movement has created an exposure compensation of -4.00 where you started the gradient (and any part of the image above that point) fading away to zero at the point where you finished the gradient. Click the "Close" button at the bottom of the gradient panel. It's easier to do than to describe.

A gradient starting at -4 works well for the example on Flickr but if it is too much for your image, you can change it. Click on the gradient icon below the histogram again. Look in the image. A white circle with a black surround has appeared. Click on this white circle and the gradient panel will show the parameters currently applied to this

gradient. You can now change the values and the changes will apply to the original gradient. You can also drag the white circle with the mouse to change the position of the gradient. Click the “Close” button when done.

For the example on Flickr, I added two more gradients, one from each bottom corner, with the initial exposure adjustment set to +2.00, to brighten up the foreground. The difference is already quite startling and a little more tweaking in Lightroom brings up what the photographer was probably looking for.