DESPITE THE POINT-AND-SHOOT EASE of most digital cameras, getting a perfect shot is hardly a simple process. Hey, even professional photographers don’t always get it right. So why do their pictures look so much better than ours? True, the pros have had lots of practice; however, they also know how to use image-editing software to give their images a little extra oomph.

But here’s a little-known fact: these tricks aren’t hard. We went to the photography experts and asked them to share the secrets of the trade. They offered hands-on tips—on everything from exposing harsh shadows to correcting bad colors—to help you get great-looking images. And these experts had plenty of practical advice about printing and managing images, too.
13 EASY WAYS TO GIVE YOUR PHOTOS A PROFESSIONAL POLISH

Almost all images can benefit from some tweaking, whether it's with a simple sharpening filter or by full-fledged color correction. These minor nips and tucks can mean the difference between just another humdrum vacation photo and a frame-worthy work of art.

To help you fix your flawed photos, we went to the experts and asked them to share some of their favorite techniques. Each of these tried-and-true tricks works in Adobe Photoshop and/or Adobe Photoshop Elements, two of the most flexible and most widely used image-editing programs on the Mac (see "The Software"). Even better, they're all quick and easy, so you can get away from your computer and get on with enjoying your photos.

Straighten Crooked Images

The first thing I do when I open an image is check to see whether it's straight. You can quickly restore a sense of balance to off-kilter photos with Photoshop's Measure tool. First, find a straight line in your image that should be horizontal or vertical (the horizon or the side of a building, for example). Click on and hold the Eyedropper tool in the Tools palette, and select the Measure tool (it looks like a ruler) from the pop-up menu. Then click on one end of the line in your image and drag your cursor to the opposite end of the line. This tells Photoshop what needs straightening. Next, choose Image: Rotate Canvas: Arbitrary, and use the default Angle setting, which is calculated from the line you drew.

If you can't find an obvious horizontal or vertical line—or if you're using Photoshop Elements and the Straighten Image command doesn't solve the problem (Image: Rotate: Straighten Image)—there's another option. Press &-A to select the entire image. In Photoshop, go to Edit: Free Transform. (In Photoshop Elements, go to Image: Transform: Free Transform.) Now, click on the Angle setting in the Options bar at the top of your screen and press the up- and down-arrow keys on your keyboard until your image looks straight. Press return twice when you're done.—BEN WILLMORE

Get a Better Perspective on Buildings

If you have an image with converging lines—such as a photo of a very tall building shot from the ground—you can use the Crop tool to minimize the effects of perspective and rehabilitate the building's perpendicular lines (see "Straighten Up").

With the Crop tool selected, click and drag your mouse to create a cropping rectangle over your image, and then click on the Perspective check box in the Options bar at the top of your screen. Now drag each corner of the cropping rectangle until the corners are aligned with the four corners of the building you want to straighten. If you can't see all four corners in the image, you'll need to estimate where to place a few of the corners. (In my example, I used a lower floor on the building as a guideline for the crop.) After you continue

THE SOFTWARE

There's no shortage of image-editing software on the Mac. In fact, Apple has built some useful editing tools right into iPhoto. But to go beyond the basics of lightening, sharpening, and cropping your photos, it helps to have a dedicated application. And we think two of the best are Adobe Photoshop and Adobe Photoshop Elements (www.adobe.com).

Adobe Photoshop 7.0 is the professional standard for image-editing applications. It offers a complete suite of tools for correcting, polishing, and publishing your images. It also comes with a professional price—$609. However, if you spend a lot of time getting your photos just right and feel constrained by more-limited applications, Photoshop may well be worth the money and effort.

Adobe Photoshop Elements 2.0 includes a lot of the features and tools found in Photoshop, but it has a simpler interface and a much more inviting price—$99. Adobe designed the program specifically for casual digital photographers, building in easy-to-use features for eliminating red eye, scaling down photos for e-mail or the Web, and correcting color casts. It also comes bundled with some scanners and printers. You can download a trial version from Adobe's Web site if you'd like to try it out first.

All of our tips work in one—if not both—of these programs, and most also work in older versions of the software.
LIGHTEN HARSH SHADOWS

Even the most sophisticated digital cameras have trouble capturing scenes with strong shadows or harsh backlighting. In these cases, your camera’s fill-flash feature can help by adding some much-needed illumination. However, if you forgot to turn it on when you were taking the photo, you can create the same effect after the fact with Photoshop.

The idea is simple: You find a channel that shows the strongest contrast between the photo’s subject and its background. Then you use this channel to create a mask of the troublesome shadows. Once you’ve selected the problem area, you can easily apply a host of image-correction tools to just these areas, leaving the brightly lit portions of the image untouched.

The process requires only a few minutes of work, and the result is very similar to the real thing. In fact, this technique makes a lot of images look better, regardless of the shooting situation.

STEP 1: CREATE A MASK CHANNEL
In Photoshop, open the Channels window and examine the Red, Green, and Blue channels in turn. Find the channel that shows the best contrast between the image you want to lighten and the background. (For this example, we chose the Blue channel.)

When you’ve found the channel, duplicate it by dragging its title onto the Create New Channel icon at the bottom of the Channels window. A copy of the duplicated channel appears at the bottom of the list. Double-click on its title, and rename it “Mask.”

STEP 2: MODIFY THE LEVELS
To make an effective mask, you’ll need to exaggerate the tonal difference between your subject and the brighter background. With the new Mask channel selected, open the Levels control panel (Image: Adjustments: Levels). Adjust the sliders to make your subject as dark as possible, while also lightening the background and eliminating most of the tonality there.

STEP 3: INVERT THE IMAGE
Photoshop’s masking features follow the metaphor of film masks: white areas allow an effect to take place, while black areas are treated as opaque and are therefore unaffected. Since you want this mask to affect the image’s shadows, you need to invert (Ctrl-I) the current image to create a negative.

STEP 4: REFINES THE MASK
Your photo’s background probably contains at least some shadows (represented by white or gray areas). Because you don’t want to lighten these areas along with your subject, you’ll need to remove them from your mask. With the Brush tool set to black, paint over any areas that you don’t want to change. When you’re done, add a small amount of Gaussian Blur (Filters: Blur: Gaussian Blur)—usually between 0.25 and 1.5 pixels. This will soften the edges of the mask, preventing its effect from being too obvious in the final image. You don’t have to be terribly careful here, as this process is very forgiving.

STEP 5: APPLY THE MASK
Once your Mask channel is complete, return to the image’s RGB view by clicking on the RGB title in the Channels window. Your original image should appear unaltered. Next, open the Select menu and choose Load Selection. If it’s not already selected, choose Mask from the Channel pull-down menu and then click on OK. Photoshop will create a selection area based on your Mask channel. If you find the moving selection indicator too distracting, you can hide it by pressing Shift-H.

You can now use Levels or Curves to lighten your subject appropriately. Keep in mind that if you go too far, the image will have areas of posterization.

If an overall tonal adjustment is needed, simply deselect the mask (Shift-control-D), and you’re free to modify the entire image. If you want to preserve the Mask channel in case you need to make future adjustments, save the image as a TIFF or a Photoshop file.

--BRIAN F. LAWLER

This article originally appeared on creativepro.com. You can find the full version at www.creativepro.com:80/story_feature/18468.html.
Heavenly Beauty
By darkening the sky, you can turn a pretty landscape (left) into a dramatic vision (right).

have all four corners positioned so that the sides of the cropping rectangle line up with the sides of your object, drag the side handles (not the corners) of the crop outline until most of your image is within the cropping rectangle. When you press return, the top of your image will stretch to straighten your lines and give the illusion that the photo was taken from straight rather than from the ground.—BW

Create Stunning Skies
For a truly dramatic landscape, darken the skies in your images while keeping the lightest areas of any clouds bright (see “Heavenly Beauty”).

First, select the sky in your image. If there's a well-defined edge between the sky and the foreground, you can use the Marquee tool to select the general tones of the sky—be careful not to include any other elements—and then choose Grow from the Select menu. (If this doesn't produce an effective selection, use one of the lasso tools to create a more accurate selection.) When you have your selection, choose Layer: New Fill Layer: Solid Color. Set the Mode pop-up menu to Color Burn, and click on OK. When the Color Picker appears, click on the white area. Slowly select darker and darker grays until the sky looks the way you want it to.—BW

Control Contrast
Photoshop’s Levels feature (X-L) is great for tweaking the brightness and contrast of your image. By moving the three arrows beneath the Level’s histogram, you can quickly adjust your image’s shadows, highlights, and midtones. The only prob-

Our Favorite Digital Cameras
When you buy a new digital camera, there’s no shortage of options. In fact, it seems that every few months a new generation of cameras appears in our lab, sporting a slew of new features and new, lower prices.

Digital cameras are typically grouped—and priced—according to how many pixels they capture. If you’re primarily looking to get 4-by-6-inch prints or to publish your images to a Web site, a 2- or 3-megapixel camera will certainly do the trick. However, if you want the option of printing sharp, detailed images larger than 5-by-7 inches, you’ll need more pixels. A good 4- or 5-megapixel camera will let you print crisp images as large as 11-by-17 inches and even larger.

Here are a few of our current favorites:

PANASONIC LUMIX DMC-FZ1
This 2-megapixel camera stands out thanks to an amazing 12x zoom with optical image stabilization, which helps prevent blurry images. It’s also a lot of fun to use (★★★★); see our review on page 38).
COMPANY: Panasonic, 800/742-8086, www.panasonic.com
PRICE: $449

CANON POWERSHOT A70
This 3.2-megapixel camera comes with a full suite of manual controls and an autofocus illuminator for focusing in low light. It also supports conversion lenses and an underwater case (★★★★); July 2003).
COMPANY: Canon, 800/652-2666, www.powershot.com
PRICE: $399

PENTAX OPTIO 550
This compact 5-megapixel camera from Pentax offers a 5x optical zoom, manual exposure controls, unique digital color filters, and a great battery life—considering how small it is. (Look for a full review in an upcoming issue.)
PRICE: $600
len is that this feature also has a tendency to shift the
colors in your image—and not necessarily for the bet-
 ter. Not to worry. You can prevent this by choosing
Fade from the Edit menu immediately after adjusting
Levels. In the Fade dialog box, set the Mode pop-up
menu to Luminosity. (If you used an adjustment layer
to change your Levels, set the blending mode in the
Layers palette to Luminosity.) Keep in mind that the
Fade command works only immediately after you’ve
applied an adjustment, so make sure you don’t do
anything else before setting it.—aw

Get Rid of Noise
Digital cameras are notorious for creating images
that contain colorful noise—bright specks that make
photos appear mottled and distract the eye. Noise is
epecially common in conditions of low light and
high ISO settings. Although it’s difficult to remove
noise completely, you can often reduce the appear-
ance of these colorful specks by using the Gaussian
Blur filter (Filter: Blur: Gaussian Blur).

Move the Radius slider to the right until the noise
blends into the image. Don’t worry if your image
begins to look blurry—we’ll fix that. Immediately
after applying the filter, choose Edit: Fade and
change the pop-up menu from Normal to Color.
That should bring back the detail in your image
while making any remaining noise match the color
of the surrounding image.—aw

Brighten Blush Colors
If your image’s colors are a little dull, you can give
them a quick boost by adjusting the saturation levels.
In Photoshop or Photoshop Elements, press â€”U to
open the Hue/Saturation dialog box. Move the Sat-
uration slider toward the right to make the image more
colorful. But be careful: some colors may start to look
artificially bright before others have reached their full
potential. When this happens, choose a color from
the Edit pop-up menu at the top of the dialog box
(even if the color you’re looking for isn’t listed) and
then click on the problematic color within your
image. Now move the Saturation slider back toward
the left to mellow out just the color you selected (see
“Colors of Spring”).—aw

Sharpen Fuzzy Images
Almost every digital photograph you take will benefit
from sharpening. The trick is to apply enough filter-
ing to create a clean, crisp image but not so much
that it appears edgy and, well, digital-looking.

Colors of Spring In the original image (left), the sunflowers appear dull and flat. By boosting the saturation (center), I got richer yellows but unnatural green
tints. To compensate, I then lowered the saturation in just the green areas (right).
GET BETTER GRAYSCALE

Simple Elegance With a little experimentation, you can turn a color photo into a richly textured black-and-white image.

Black-and-white images have a grace and beauty that’s hard to match. However, if you convert color photos by simply selecting Photoshop’s Grayscale mode, you may not be getting the best images you can.

When you convert to Grayscale mode, Photoshop mixes the red, green, and blue channels together, weighting each one differently according to a standard formula. But in many cases, this weighting process loses more information than it keeps.

Luckily, there are many gray-scale images hiding away in any color file—some only a click or two away. Here are three different approaches to coaxing the best black-and-white images from your photographs.

Choose a Channel One simple option is to look at the individual color channels in the image. Sometimes you’ll find the perfect gray-scale image sitting in one of them. If you find one you like, you can then copy and paste it into a new document (or select Duplicate Channel from the Channel palette’s Option menu and then choose New from the Document pop-up menu).

Desaturate First To get a different result, desaturate the image before converting it to gray scale. Select Desaturate from the Adjustments submenu (under the Image menu) or press Shift-U. This literally pulls the color out of each pixel in the document. At this point the image is still RGB. But if you convert it to grayscale now, you’ll get a different result than if you’d simply converted it to grayscale at the start.

Mix It Up If you don’t find a satisfactory image with the previous methods, try the more devious alternative: manually blend your channels to get the right mix. The process is a little more time-consuming but offers greater control over the finished image.

In Photoshop’s Channel Mixer (Image: Adjustments: Channel Mixer), you mix channels by altering their percentages. To create a gray-scale image, make sure the Channel Mixer’s Monochrome option is selected. This ensures that the image will be neutral gray.

To maintain the overall tone of the image, make sure that the percentages in the dialog box always add up to 100 percent. (Of course, there may be situations where you don’t want to maintain the overall tone of the image.) We wish there were a way to constrain the percentages in this way, but unfortunately, you’ll have to do the math.

Rather than applying the effect directly to an image, we prefer to use the Channel Mixer on an adjustment layer (Layer: New Adjustment Layer: Channel Mixer). This way, if you need to adjust your image later, you can just double-click on the adjustment layer’s tile in the Layers palette and refine the Channel Mixer settings.—DAVID BLATNER AND BRUCE FRASER

However, knowing when to sharpen your image is just as important as knowing how to sharpen it. Sharpening your image should be the very last step before you save the file. If you sharpen too early in the process, you’ll end up having to do it again. And sharpening too often can result in image degradation.

Once you’ve made all the necessary adjustments to your photograph—including resizing it to the appropriate output dimensions—you’re ready to apply sharpening. For photographs, this usually means turning to the Unsharp Mask filter (Filter: Sharpen: Unsharp Mask).

When you open the Unsharp Mask filter, you’ll notice that the default Amount setting is 50 percent. But that’s way too much! Change that to 12 percent while making the Radius setting 1 and the Threshold setting 2. These conservative settings will sharpen only the edge pixels, giving your picture more snap without adding unattractive noise. Click on OK to apply the filter, and examine the picture closely. If you need a little more sharpening, apply the filter again at the same settings. Keep applying until the picture looks clean and crisp but not over-sharpened to the point that it appears grainy. It’s actually better to apply the filter three times at 12 percent than once at 50 percent.—DERRICK STORY

Make Your Subject Stand Out

If you want one area of an image to really grab a viewer’s attention, tone down the rest of the image. I take a

In Focus To make your subjects really stand out from their surroundings, desaturate and blur the background.