

Day 10: Eliminate Distractions

The number one mistake of beginning photographers is leaving distractions in your picture. Sometimes we do not notice them, and sometimes we don't know how to remove them. To address that, we use a two-step process: (1) the Field stage, followed by (2) the Processing Stage.

Removing Distractions in the Field

- Be cognizant of potential distractions
 - Watch for things protruding from your subject
 - Keep an eye out for things creeping in along the edges
- Move around to change your angle and perspective to remove.
- Sometimes if you wait, the distraction will go away.
- **Bonus tip:** Using a super-long shutter speed will sometimes cause your distraction to move through the frame and thereby disappear.

Removing Distractions with Post Processing Software

- Start with Lightroom
 - Don't overlook a simple Crop, if it won't cause other problems with your picture.
 - Use the Spot Removal tool if you only have Lightroom, otherwise save this for Photoshop.
- Unleash Photoshop
 - Start with the Spot Healing Brush. This is an automatic method of removing distractions, but it is very powerful and you should definitely give it a try. This is fantastic for very small distractions. Just click on the distraction and it disappears.
 - Try the Healing Brush - this gives you some control over where the replacement pixels come from. It works the same, but you have to select the area where you want the replacement pixels drawn from.
 - Finally, break out the Clone Stamp Tool - a manual tool where you tell Photoshop which pixels to use to replace the pixels you don't like. This is a rote replacement of pixels with no help/interference from Photoshop. Alt+click to define the source area.
 - Make your changes on a new layer, so you can easily remove the changes if you later change your mind.
- A Process for Removing Distractions: Start with the most automatic tools and give them a try. Then clean up with the more manual tools later.

Additional Commentary

It is amazing how a small distraction will ruin an otherwise nice picture - and it happens a lot. For some reason, people just starting out in photography tend to do this. I'm not sure if they just don't see the distractions or they just don't think they are a problem. Perhaps they accept them because they just don't know how to get rid of them. In any case, today I'm going to show you how to make sure there are no distractions in your photos and how to get rid of them if there are present.

Removing Distractions in the Field

Much of what we are going to address today relates to post processing. As such, it would seem to make sense to include this near the end of the course, which is where I have all the other stuff about post processing. I'm including it here because it is something you should definitely pay attention to in the shooting phase.

When it comes to eliminating distractions in your pictures, part of what you need to do here is just be cognizant of the issue. You just need to be on the lookout. In some respects, that's all there is to it.

If you'd like a process for doing so, there are two things you should do. The first is to look around your subject. Look for anything sticking out of them. Look for anything behind them that could be a problem. Street signs and telephone poles are common offenders.

After that, you'll do what's called "border patrol." Take a quick look around the edges of your photo. Is there anything creeping in? Branches are the worst offenders.

What should you do when you find a problem? Shift your view. Move side to side. Or else raise your camera or get low. You might also zoom in a bit if the problem is things on the edge of your photos.

Eliminating Distractions in the Post Processing Phase

You should also take a lap around your photo during the editing process. Here your review will be more rigorous. Dust spots or anything that looks like dust spots in the sky. Stray grass. People that have wandered into your scene. These can (and should) all be removed.

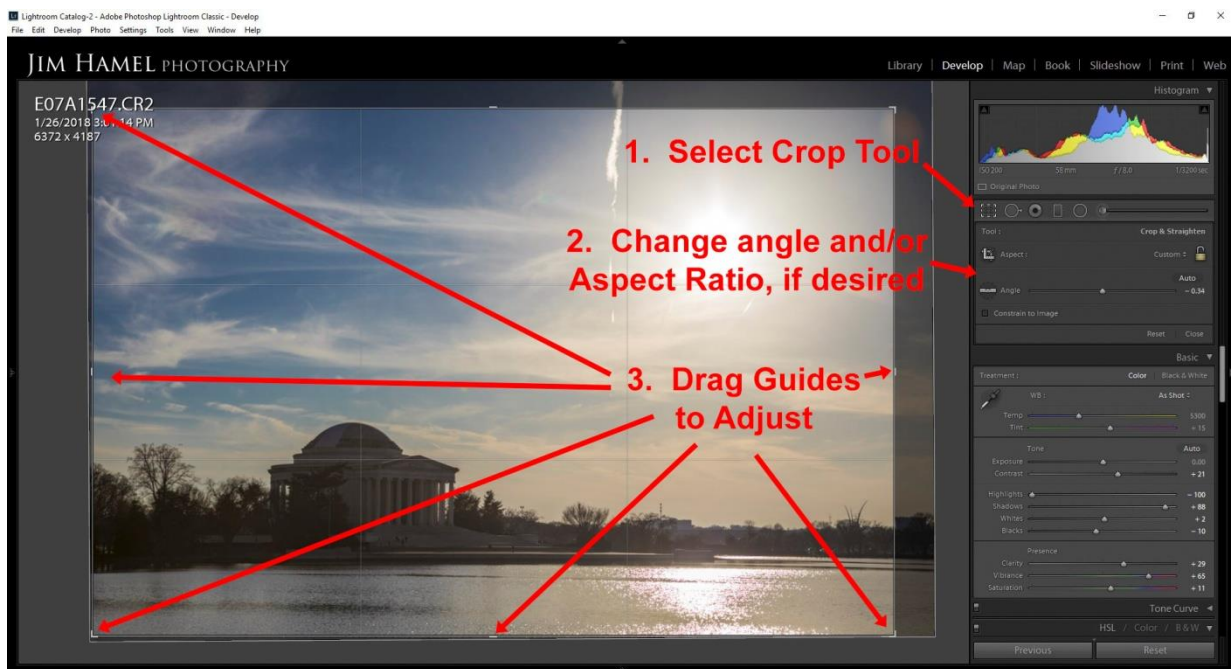
To do this, we are going to take our first trip to the land of post processing. Lightroom and Photoshop both have tools that make this easy.

The Crop Tool

The first way to get rid of distractions is simply to crop them out. That is, you drag in the borders of the picture to eliminate the portion of the image with the distracting elements. Sometimes,

this is the way to go. At the same time, you don't want to alter the composition of your picture because of a distraction. In general, only use this tool if it is enhancing the composition of your photo *and* eliminating a distraction.

The Crop tool couldn't be simpler to use. I prefer using it in Lightroom. All you do is go into the Develop module and select the box on the top right of your screen. That calls up the Crop tool and also puts a crop overlay on your photo.



From there, all you do is grab an edge or a corner of the photo and pull it in. The parts of the original picture outside the new boundaries will be eliminated from the picture.

Don't worry about making irreparable damage to your photo though. Lightroom never changes the actual photo so you can always just call up the tool again and drag the border back out to its original position. Photoshop isn't so kind in this regard, but you can press Undo (Edit > Undo) immediately after making the crop and it will undo the edit.

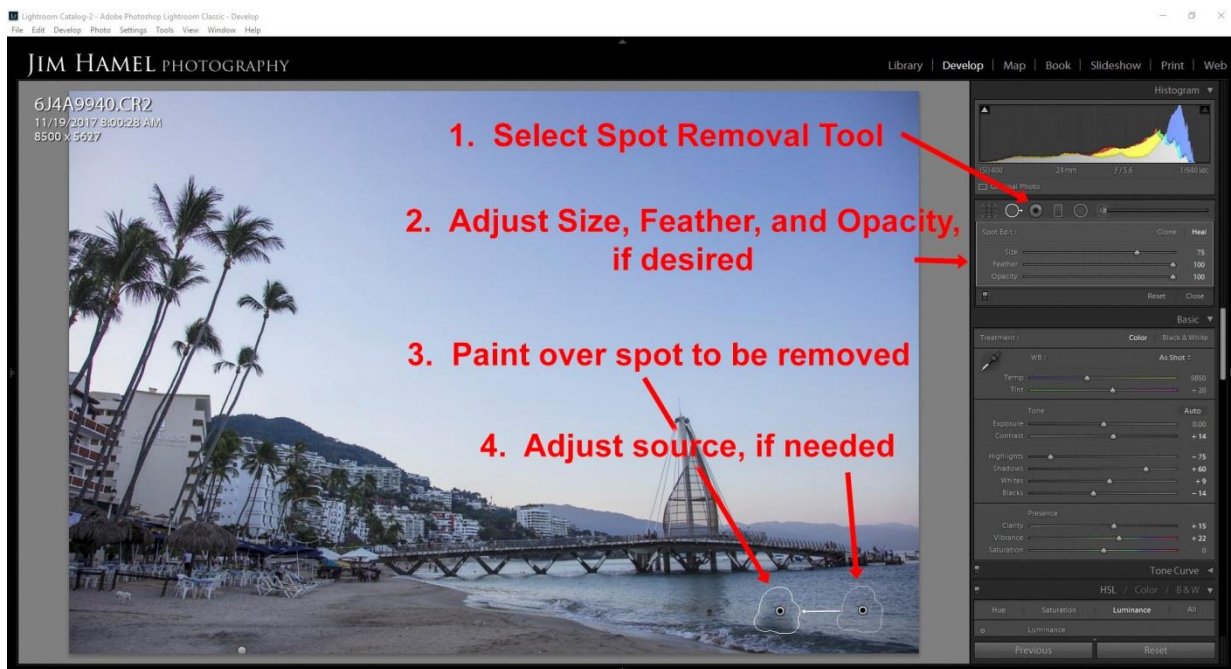
Lightroom's Healing Brush

Usually you won't want to change the whole picture just to eliminate a distraction. Rather than crop the picture, you'd rather keep it the way it is and just remove the distraction. Therefore, I'm going to show you three ways to do just that. The first way is in Lightroom, and the second two ways are in Photoshop.

Recent editions of Lightroom have a healing brush. It is actually called the Spot Removal Tool. To use it, click on the icon shaped like a circle with an arrow pointed to the right, which is right next to the crop tool that was just discussed. You will immediately see three sliders appear,

which will allow you to size and control the brush. You can also make the brush larger or smaller using the bracket keys ([and]).

After that, you just place your cursor – which will now be a circle – over the area with the item you want to remove. Just click. Lightroom will automatically select different pixels and attempt to use them to replace the item you want to remove. Lightroom will show you the area from where. You can control it a bit after the fact by moving the circle around.

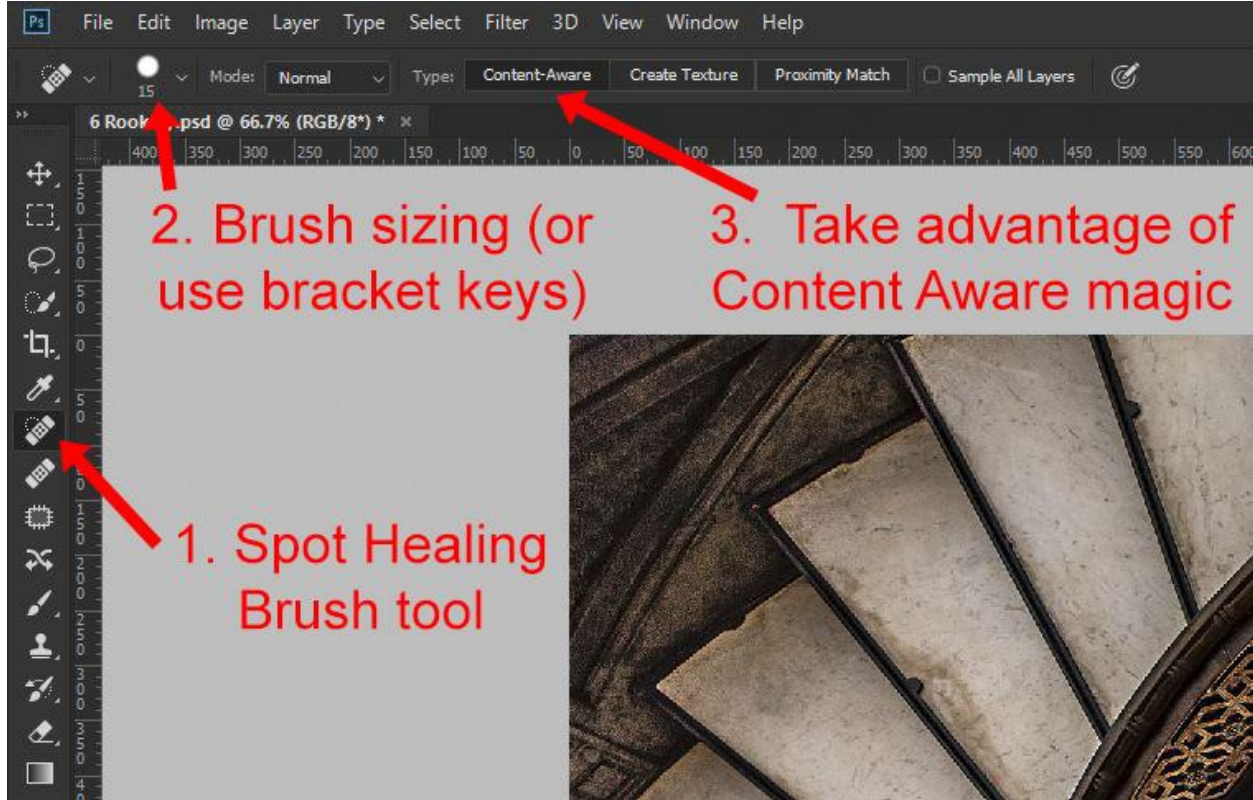


Honestly, the Lightroom healing brush is just ok. It is a relatively new addition to Lightroom, so I expect it to get better. In the meantime, however, if you want the best tool for removing items from your photos, you will need to go into Photoshop. And that's what we'll do now.

The Spot Healing Brush in Photoshop

The best and easiest way to remove items from your photos is with the Spot Healing Brush in Photoshop. Seriously, this thing is like magic. Ever since Adobe added "content aware" to the tool, it has been capable of seamlessly removing items such that you generally cannot tell where the item was removed – all at the touch of a button. That is true along edges, where there are complicated backgrounds, and other situations where you think it won't work. It is a rare instance where Photoshop works better *and easier* than Lightroom.

Using the Spot Healing Brush is remarkably like the Lightroom. You simply select the tool and then click on the area with the item you want removed.

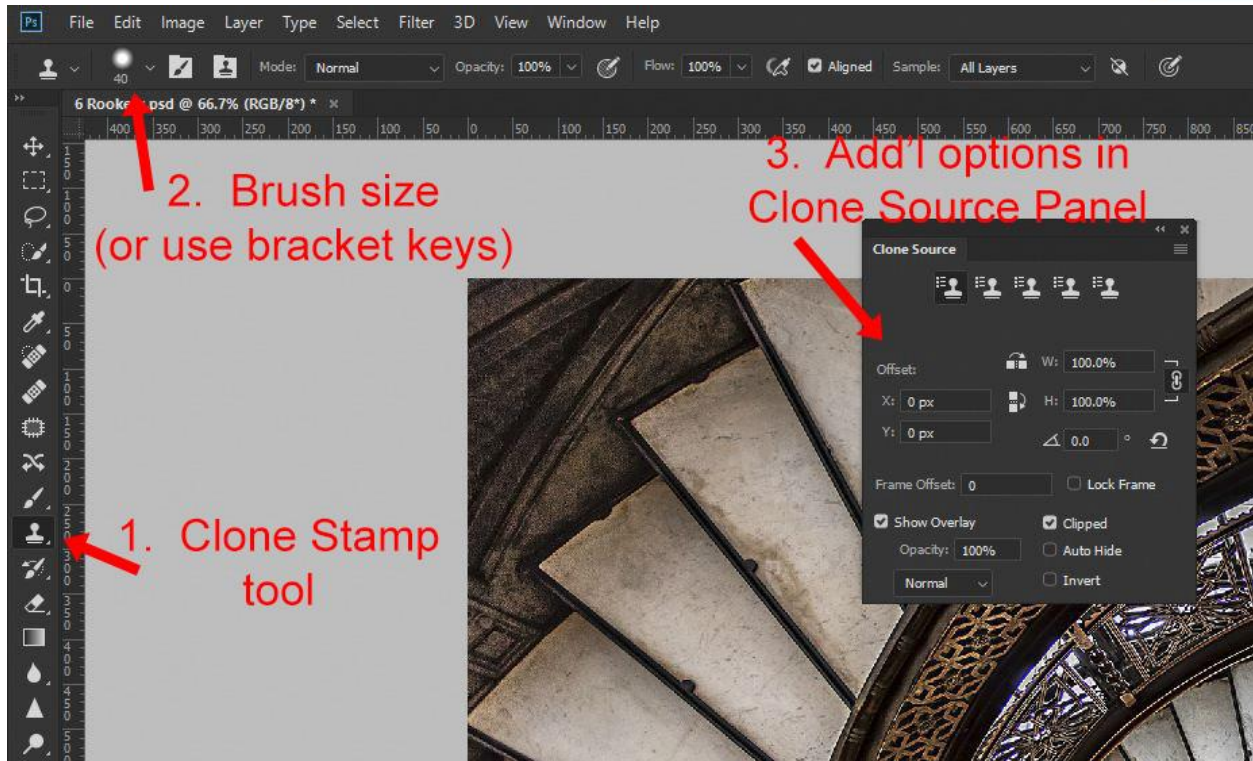


Make sure Content Aware is selected at the top. To change the size of the brush use the left and right bracket keys ([and]).

The Clone Stamp Tool

As great as the Spot Healing Brush tool has become, it cannot do everything. For those occasions when it won't work, you'll need to get manual about this. That means breaking out the Clone Stamp Tool, which is Photoshop's original method for eliminating items from your pictures.

The Clone Stamp tool is simply a rote replacement of pixels from one area to another. Once you select the tool, you first select the place you want to draw the replacement pixels from. Alt-click on that area. Then you move your cursor to the place where you want to add those pixels. Move your cursor to that area and click.



The Clone Stamp tool is often referred to as a “dumb” tool because it does nothing on its own. It is a simple rote replacement of pixels. Yet, in skilled hands, there is no more powerful tool. When the Spot Healing Brush won’t get the job done, the Clone Stamp tool will. I’ll mention a few more tips for using it in the next section.

A Process for Eliminating Distractions

These tools and techniques get even more powerful when you use them together. Here is my process for working through a situation where my picture has items I want removed from it.

- **Examine the subject and the borders.** Look around the main subject for anything sticking out. Do your “border patrol” of the image to make sure there is nothing creeping in.
- **Crop out anything major.** In Lightroom, perform any cropping right away. Doing so early will make your life easier because you won’t have to worry about those pixels anymore. If there are distractions you can eliminate in this way, all the better. Don’t mess up your overall composition because you want to eliminate a distraction though.
- **Use the Spot Healing Brush for small items.** Here we are at a crossroads. If you have only one or two easy items to remove, or you only use Lightroom, then you can stay in Lightroom and remove the items. Otherwise, head into Photoshop. Grab your Spot

Healing Brush and remove any small items. By that I mean spots due to sensor dust, blemishes in skin, stray grass or branches, etc. If these are the only problems you have in your picture, you are done. But even if you have other bigger problems, you are cleaning up the canvas from which you will later be selecting pixels when you break out the Clone Stamp tool.

- **Attack the Larger Distractions.** Now we'll tackle major issues, but don't rush to break out the Clone Stamp tool yet. Use the Spot Healing Brush on major items first. Make your brush larger and see what happens when you click on the item. It might not work for the whole thing (but you might be surprised), but it will usually work for at least part of it. Now you have made your job with the Clone Stamp tool easier.
- **Dive in with the Clone Stamp Tool.** Start by trying to tackle the problem in one fell swoop. As with the previous step, it might not work for the whole area, but then again it might. In any event, it will be better than what you started with.
- **Flit around the edges.** Next, make a series of small changes where you grab pixels from one area and paint them in. Then grab pixels from another area and paint them in as well. Just keep doing that over and over again. Chip away at the problem. What seemed like an insurmountable obstacle at first will start becoming manageable.

One of the keys to success in using the Clone Stamp tool is to make sure your lines match up. Pay attention to any lines when you are selecting pixels and then when you go to apply them be very careful to make sure they line up. Pictures are full of small lines and a seamless blend depends on getting them right.

Day 10 Assignment

Eliminate Distractions

Description:

You get a day off from shooting today. Instead, take one of the photos you have created in this course and eliminate any distractions in it. The wildlife pictures you took yesterday are probably good candidates for this project. Take a good, hard look at the photo, then use the cloning and healing tools of Lightroom and Photoshop to remove any unwanted items.

Keys to Success:

- Start with the Spot Healing Brush. Give Photoshop a chance to do the heavy lifting for you!
- Try removing the distracting element all in one move first. Even if Photoshop fails, what is replaces those pixels with will still be better than what you start with. And who knows? You might get lucky.
- Make sure any lines through the picture continue to match up. If they don't, it is a dead giveaway that you manipulated the picture.

Upon Completion of this Assignment:

You'll be able to improve any photo by eliminating distractions. You'll also save many photos that would otherwise be headed for deletion. As you gain confidence in these tools and your skills, you'll be able to remove larger and more problematic items.