

Day 29: Work in Black and White



Telluride Creek (Shutter speed of 20 seconds; Aperture f/14; ISO 400)

Black and white images can have a timeless look, a simplicity that focuses on form or emotion, and it can draw out textures much more so than color. That is why, more than 50 years after the wide-spread adoption of color photography, many serious photographers choose to take black and white pictures. Many greats choose to shoot *only* black and white.

At the same time, creating a black and white image isn't easy. Well, creating any old black and white image is easy, in that all you have to do is remove the color/saturation from the image. But creating a *good* black and white image is hard. It requires a specific process and its own set of skills.

Creating Black and White pictures: The RAW (+JPEG) Advantage



Stockyards Hay (Shutter speed of 1/10 seconds; Aperture f/16; ISO 200)

In this era of digital photography, you don't make a black and white image in the camera. Rather, you create a *color* image with your camera and later, at your computer, convert it to black and white.

Remember that you always want to create RAW files. Shooting in RAW gets you the highest quality file possible. It gets you all the data that the camera has to offer and it allows you to apply processing to your photos instead of your camera. RAW files are always in color.

You can create a black and white JPEG by setting the picture style to monochrome. If you do that, however, not only are you creating a lesser JPEG file, you are also creating one without any color data. If you ever want to see what the picture looks like in color, you are out of luck.

The RAW + JPEG setting I recommended earlier in the course pays dividends here. If you want to see what the picture looks like in black and white as you are taking it you can do so and still preserve the color RAW file. Set your picture style (Canon) or picture control (Nikon) to monochrome. That will make the JPEG a black and white image. That black and white JPEG is

what you will see on the LCD after you take the picture. That way, you'll see in black and white in the field, but you will still have the superior RAW file to edit later.

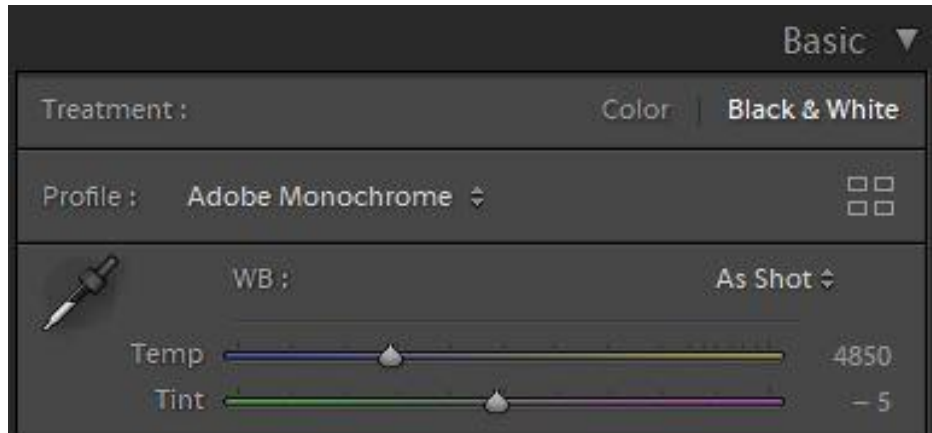
The Black and White Conversion



The Herd (Shutter speed of 1/2500 seconds; Aperture f/8; ISO 200)

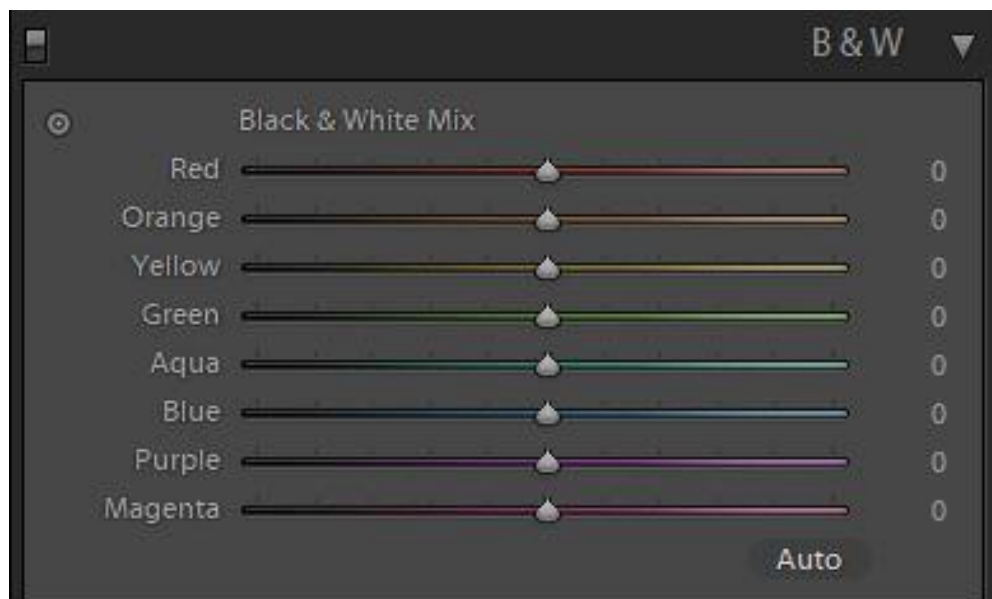
Being familiar with some of the controls in the Lightroom Develop module, you might think that you simply grab the Saturation slider, and move it all the way to the left to convert the image to black and white. Actually, doing that and removing all the color saturation in this way *will* create a black and white image. It just isn't the best way, and I doubt you will be happy with the result. It will probably generate a fairly flat and lifeless image. I'm going to show you the best way to handle the conversion, which gives you additional control over the image.

At the top of the Develop module, you will see the words Color and Black and White, and all you do is click on Black and White. Just like that, your image is converted.



Adobe just revised these controls a few weeks ago as I write this, so if you have an older version of Lightroom this might not be exactly the same. Formerly, this was in a panel labeled HSL/Color/B&W.

Now let's see why this method is better. To do that, scroll down to the individual color selectors we have been using for the last few lessons. When you do so, you will see they are now labeled Black and White Mix.



These sliders are how you will bring your black and white photo to life. They allow you to change the lightness and darkness of individual colors in the image. There is no set formulas for these sliders, just play with them and lighten some colors and darken others. Use them to create more contrast in your image and make it look exactly the way you want.

Improving the Black and White Image: Simplicity and Contrast



Cloondooan Castle Ruins (Shutter speed of 1/1250 seconds; Aperture f/6.3; ISO 200)

Now you know how to take the picture and how to convert it to black and white. Let's talk a little bit about ways to take the best black and white photographs possible.

If you remember nothing else about black and white photographs, remember that black and white pictures like two things: simplicity and contrast. The first part of that, simplicity, is something you will do at the time of capture. Keeping your photograph simple is nothing new to you at this point. We have already covered the importance of focusing on your subject and removing extraneous elements. Black and white pictures just demand that you pay particular attention to that. In addition, don't try to do anything that will result in a busy photo. Err on the side of a nice, simple little photo. The result will be much better in black and white.

The other thing you should focus on in black and white photography, contrast, is something that should be in the forefront of your mind both at the time of capture and when you are editing. Black and white pictures like a lot of contrast. By that I mean that black and white pictures tend to look the best when they have a lot of contrast. The tones should cover the scale from pure white to pure black.

Contrast: At the Moment of Capture



Texas Road (Shutter speed of 1/640 seconds; Aperture f/8; ISO 100)

When you are out photographing, be on the lookout for high contrast scenes. This will actually open up the world to you a little bit because if you are taking color photographs you may be photographing only around sunrise and sunset. The harsh contrasts created by the midday sun, which usually look terrible in color photography, are actually something that the black and white photographer can work with to create great pictures. The whole day is opened up to you. In fact, the next time you have a chance to view the work of Ansel Adams or one of the other great old-school black and white photographers, check out the number of their photographs that appear to have been taken in the middle of the day. It is a surprisingly high number.

One helpful technique is to look for shadows and use them as graphical elements in your picture. Even if you can see detail in the shadow as you look through the LCD, assume that you will not be able to see that detail in the actual picture. Assume that the shadow will be a black graphical element in your picture. This can be used to create great black and whites.

Contrast: Add It in Lightroom

Black and white photos both *need* and *tolerate* more processing than color pictures. They *need* more help because, as I just said, they tend to appear a little flat. They *tolerate* more processing because you can take the edits further without ruining the picture. By creating a black and white image (as opposed to color) you are already creating something that does not strictly reflect reality. The world is not viewed in black and white, and your viewer innately understands this. Thus the viewer, starting from this premise that they are not looking at a strict representation of reality, doesn't necessarily expect that everything else will be exactly as-is in nature (nor would they even really know what this would look like). As a result, they will give you a lot more leeway. You can push your edits a little further without it appearing fake or surreal to the viewer.

I have already mentioned the importance of contrast in your black and white images, but how do you go about doing it? Essentially, there are three ways, all of which we have already talked about.

The first way is through the use of the color sliders in the HSL/Color panel in Lightroom's Develop module mentioned above. Change the sliders one by one and see the effect, then see how they fit together. It is all art and no science.

The second way to increase contrast may be obvious to you. You just add contrast to the image by pushing the Contrast slider in Lightroom to the right. You can also refine this process a little bit by changing the Highlights, Whites, Shadows, and Blacks. As you do so, make sure that you are watching the histogram to the upper right of the screen. Make sure the tones are spread out across the histogram.

The final way is to add some local contrast to the image. That just means you are only changing part of the picture, while leaving the rest of it alone. This is important for drawing out textures.

In Lightroom, you will add local contrast by using the Adjustment Brush. Select your target area by using the brush, and then add contrast. In Photoshop, create a selection and then add a Curves Adjustment Layer. Add contrast by creating the S-curve addressed previously. That will really draw out the tones of specific areas.

Black and White Conversion

1. Make your color picture as good as possible first
2. Convert to Black and White
3. Adjust brightness values using color sliders
4. Add local contrast
5. Work with it

You can add contrast by limiting the selection to one specific thing, like a large rock or a tree. In the case of a portrait, you might make changes like this to someone's eyes. In any case, you limit the selection to one part of the picture and then add contrast to that area.

Adding local contrast in this fashion has the added benefit of drawing out the textures within an image. When you limit the affected area, you can push the darks closer to black and pull the whites up, thereby accentuating textures. Black and white photos excel at displaying texture, so adding local contrast in this manner will be a huge boost to your photo.

Day 29 Assignment

Work in Black & White

Description:

Select your favorite photo that you have taken during this course and convert it to black and white. Use Lightroom or a Black and White Adjustment Layer in Photoshop. If desired, you can also use Nik Silver Efex Pro.

Keys to Success:

- Be sure to use a picture you really like. Great color photos usually make great black and white photos.
- Don't give up on the photo when you see the default conversion. It often looks terrible.
- Check each color channel to see the effect and then move them to add contrast.
- If you feel up to it, make a Lightroom version and a Nik version. Then take them both into Photoshop as layers and combine them, taking the best parts of each. Add a Black (Hide All) mask to one of the layers then use a Brush set to white to bring in the other layer where desired.

Upon Completion of this Assignment:

You should have a black and white photo you are proud of. In addition, now you'll be poised to make stunning black and white versions of other photos.