

Digital Exposure Blend in Photoshop

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Open two separate exposures in Photoshop at the same time. This can be two different exposures from the same RAW file or two separately bracketed JPEGs files. Extracting two separate exposures from a single RAW capture is preferred so that there will be zero variance between the two files.

One file will be brighter (for shadow detail) and one darker (for details in the highlights). The two files should be identical except for differences in exposure (especially White Balance).

Arrange the two files side-by-side. You can do this by Window>Arrange>Tile Vertically. This should arrange the two files on opposite sides of each other.

Now, copy and paste the darker file to the lighter file. This can be done several different ways, but this is easiest. Highlight the darker file by clicking on it. (For PC users, press Ctrl+A to select and Ctrl+C to copy. Then highlight the lighter version and press Ctrl+V to paste.)

Now you have the darker version pasted onto the lighter version and it is represented by multiple layers on your layers palette. The light version will be the Background layer and the darker will be Layer 1.

You can now close the darker file that we originally selected. You do not need it anymore.

Now you want to create a Layer Mask for the darker layer, Layer 1. Click on Layer 1 to highlight it. Go to Layer>Layer Mask>Hide All to create the mask. Now a black rectangle will appear in the layers palette next to Layer 1. This will hide Layer 1 and only the Background layer will be visible.

Now we want to remove some of the layer mask to reveal the darker tones underneath it. From the tools palette, choose the Brush Tool. This will be found fourth down on right side. If it is not visible, click on the small black arrow and a drop-down menu will reveal the Brush Tool.

Once the Brush Tool is chosen, you need to choose the brush diameter. The bracket keys ([) and (]) will make the brush larger or smaller. You can also change the diameter at the upper left portion of the screen with the Mode (set to normal), Opacity and Flow (100 percent). The Opacity setting should be set to your desired “strength” of how much mask is being removed. 100 percent will remove the entire mask. 0 percent will remove none of the mask. 50 percent will remove half and half will be transparent. It’s your choice.

As you use the Brush Tool over the mask, it's removed, leaving it white. Remember this when it comes to masks: Black conceals, white reveals. Any areas of the mask that are white will reveal the darker layer. Areas that are still black will hide the darker layer. You can always fade the opacity by using the slider on the layers palette.

After removing the non-desirable portion of the mask (the area you want to make darker), soften the transition line by going to Filter>Blur>Gaussian Blur and adjust the radius/pixels until the line is softened and more natural (with CS4, you can use the "Mask" palette to feather the mask edge).

When you are complete, flatten the layers. At the top/right of the Layers/Channels/Paths dialog box, there is a small black arrow. Click there and choose "Flatten Image". Now the layers are gone and the editing is embedded into the background layer.

Save image and you are done.

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