Layered dodging and burning

Darren Lock investigates the dodge and burn techniques on offer for brightening up a dull pic

■ In the original picture (below), the writing on the monument is obscured by shadow, but applying a simple linear dodge blend brings out all the detail.

○ Image Workshop files: Regional Burning (before).tif, Regional Burning (after).tif

As we all know, the advantage of digital imaging is that photographers have the chance to go back and correct the mistakes that were captured at the precise moment the camera shutter was pressed. Second chances don't occur very often in the real world, so you should think yourselves lucky that you can tweak and prod images until they're pixel-perfect.

We've all shot pictures that are too dark or badly overexposed, but Photoshop gives you the chance to put things right. The temptation is probably to just dive into the contrast and brightness controls and tweak those, but you'll lose some of the piquancy of the picture. As with most things Photoshop, there's more than one way to alter the tonal quality of images – you just need to settle on the one that suits you.

In this tutorial, we'll look at how you can use layers and the many blending options in Photoshop 7 to correct tonal imperfections and give pictures added vibrancy. You can use gradient and layer blends in Photoshop to correct any dark or bright areas with a couple of mouse clicks. But you don't have to use these techniques just to correct mistakes – they're also ideal for transforming shots into something completely different.

Get with the blend

When using different blending options to alter an image, remember that each blending mode is sensitive to a different set of criteria. Once you know what these are, you can use them to your advantage.

For example, the Color Burn and Linear Burn functions don't react if you try to blend them with white, so use black or the darker tones of grey in a blend layer to achieve an effect. The Color Dodge and Linear Dodge modes work in the opposite way and don't work when blended with black layers, so use white or shades of light grey.

Soft Light and Hard Light both react to 50 per cent grey mixes, so paint the areas you want to change using a grey colour mix to get the desired effect. As with all things Photoshop, a little experimentation will help you to decide on the best method for the task in hand.
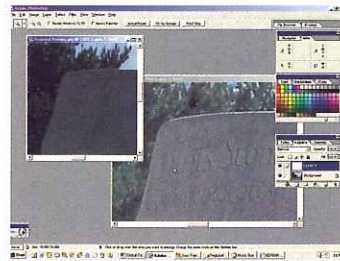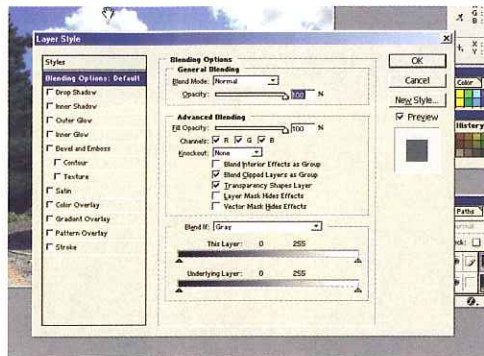
1 Creating the layer

Fire up Photoshop 7 and open the image you want to modify. Before you start experimenting, create a new layer by clicking Layer > Duplicate Layer. You will now have an identical layer that can be blended with the original image on the lower background layer.
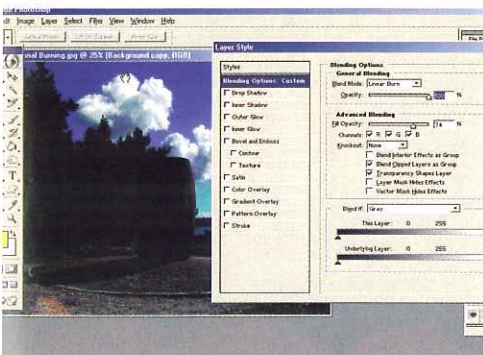
2 Blending menu

With the identical layer in place, you can now start to alter the blending options on the upper layer. Click on Layer > Layer Style > Blending Options to bring up the Blending Options window. From here you can make the necessary adjustments to your image.
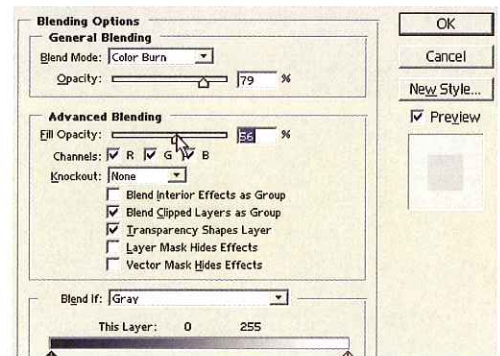
3 Colour burn

From the General Blending drop-down menu, select Color Burn to give your image a global colour wash. You'll notice that the image will now be really dark. To alter the tone of the image, make small incremental adjustments to the opacity and fill opacity sliders on this menu.

4 Linear burn

To give your picture a Liner Burn wash, select this blending option from the drop-down menu. Again, your image will be darkened considerably, so adjustment will need to be made using the two fill sliders. Notice how this blending filter picks out the detail in the clouds.
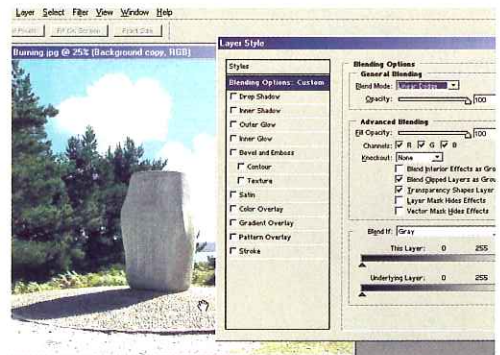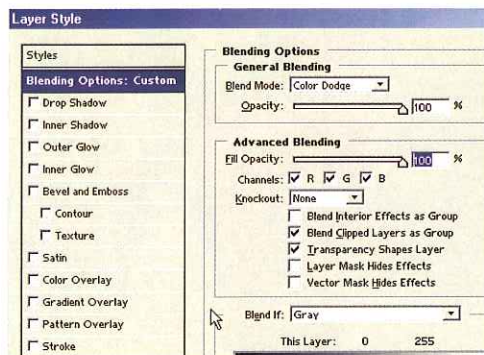
5 Colour dodge

To add a global dodge effect to your picture, select Color Dodge from the Blending Options menu. This works by decreasing the contrast of each channel. You will notice that the lighter areas of the image will now look bleached, while the darker areas reveal detail that was previously unseen and hidden in shadow.

6 Linear dodge

Another dodge filter that can be used is Linear Dodge, which brightens the base colour of each channel by increasing brightness. Try using this on your image if it's really dark. On our example it's lightened the foreground elements and you can now see much more detail on the central object.
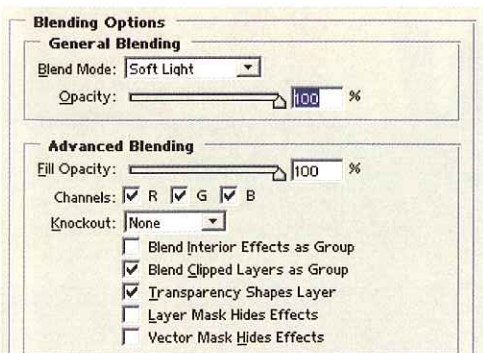
7 Soft light

If you want to increase the contrast of your image while maintaining roughly the same brightness levels, you could use the Soft Light option from the blending menu. This has the same effect as shining a diffused spotlight on the image and works by looking at the various grey levels in the image.
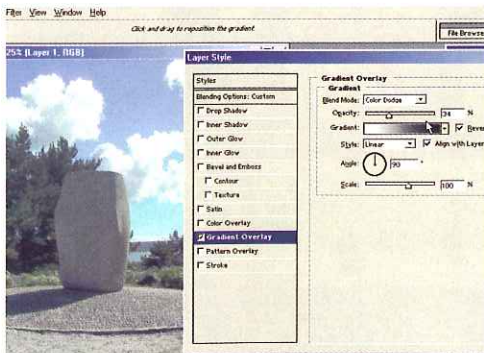
8 Gradient overlay

On a blank layer, use a gradient fill or overlay from the blending menu to create a hazy effect. In our example, we've use a black-to-white gradient in conjunction with the Color Dodge blend mode to create a graduated dodge effect. Use radial, diamond or reflected gradients for strange effects.
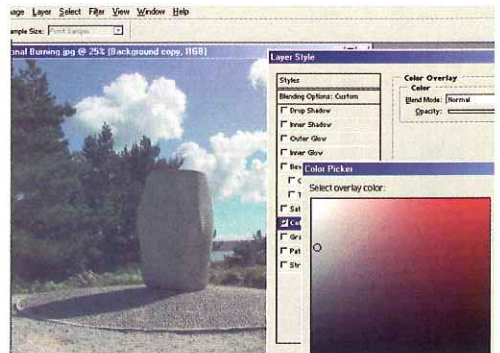
9 White overlay

You can also use a white overlay to achieve a similar effect. When using overlays, remember that these blending filters are sensitive to shades of grey. Adjust the tonality of the image by painting areas with white, black or tones of grey or use solid overlays of these colours to achieve a global effect.