Dodging and Burning in Photoshop

I think two of the most misunderstood tools found in most editing programs are the dodge and burn brushes. Too many people don't use them at all, and too many people who do use them do so incorrectly. With any kind of luck this tutorial will provide a little insight into what these tools do, and how you can use them to make better images.

Simply put, the **dodge** tool lightens the pixels you paint, and the **burn** tool darkens the pixels you paint. It's not entirely different from using Levels or Curves. The difference is that you are not applying the changes to the entire image; you're applying them only to the places you paint with the brushes. Think of it as a way of selectively adjusting the brightness or darkness of your image.

You can use these tools to improve your images in several different ways:

1. To improve the exposure of your photo and bring out detail
2. To direct your viewers attention through creative use of highlights and shadows
3. To create impact by adding dramatic highlights and shadows

Range: The range determines which pixels will be affected, and is probably the most important and most often neglected setting.


•Choosing "Highlights" will affect the lighter areas

•Choosing "Midtones" will affect the middle tones

•Choosing "Shadows" will affect the darker areas

As a rule of thumb, you will most often use the "highlights" setting for the dodge tool, and the "shadows" setting with the burn tool.

Exposure: In most applications, the key to effective dodging and burning is subtlety. If you create the effect you're after without allowing the viewer to detect the changes, the image will have far more impact. For this reason, I suggest setting your exposure to only 3-5% and use repeated sweeping movements over the area you are trying to affect. It makes the changes far more gradual and harder to detect; it also requires a little patience. It's slow, but it works. I promise. Put on some music or something to help pass the time.
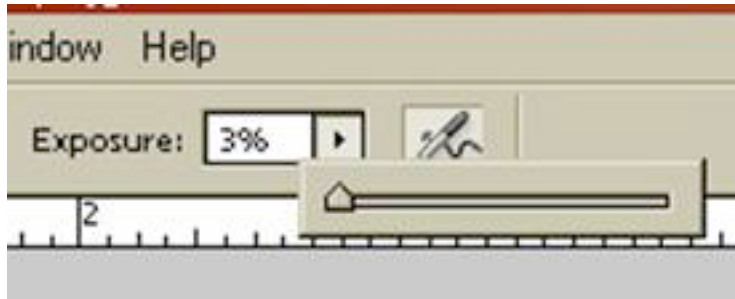
Brush: The size of the brush you should use will vary based on the size of the area you are working on. In general a larger brush with softer edges (hardness +/-50%) will make for more subtle transitions.
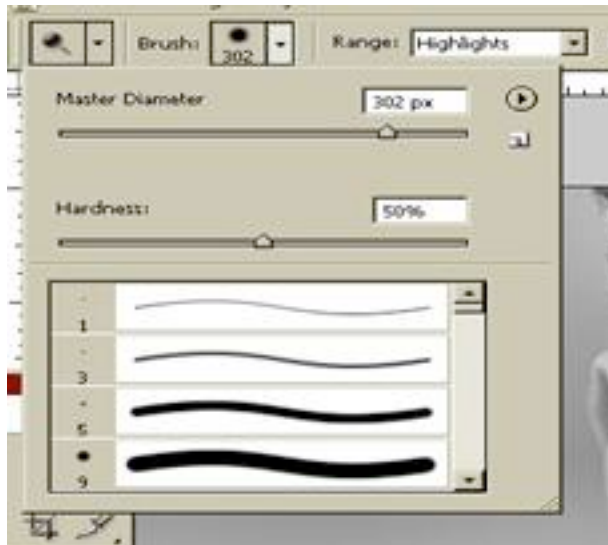
Colour vs Grayscale: These techniques tend to work better on grayscale images than they do on colour ones. Applied excessively to a colour image, dodging tends to wash out the colours, and burning tends to make for obvious grey blotches. There are certainly exceptions to this rule, but I think it's a fair generalization.

Application 1: Improving Exposure

In this example the original image was underexposed and really flat looking (i.e., very little contrast). Normally I'd start the process using curves, but for the sake of the example all edits will be done with dodge and burn. Here is how I rescued it:

Notice the whites aren't really white, and the blacks aren't really black. I selected the Dodge tool, set the Range to 'highlights', and exposure to 3%. I took a brush about ½ the size of his head (which, incidentally is a pretty huge noggin), and brushed the areas that needed lightening. I focused on the important parts of this shot - his face, his smile, the detail on his jacket). The dodge tool is also great for lightening dark circles under the eyes of groomsmen who stayed out too late drinking the night before the wedding.

Next, I switched to the Burn tool (*cool trick alert: hitting Shift+O toggles between dodge and burn) and set the Range to Shadows. Again, I painted over the parts of the photo that should be darker, going gently on his face to avoid harsh shadows; they can make noses bigger and wrinkles deeper and other ghastly stuff. I lost some detail in his jacket, but don't consider that an issue; in fact it likely shifts your attention more to his face, which makes for an unintentional yet timely segue to the next application.

Application 2: Directing the Viewers Attention

This is my favourite, and perhaps the most elusive use of dodging and burning. When it's applied well, you won't even know it's been done. Consider the following example:

The image on the left is fairly evenly exposed, and about how the lighting appeared in real life. Under normal circumstances I'd have included much of the background; it's a bit unusual and quirky, but fun (sorta like me J). But in this case we needed the model to be the focal point, and I felt the background detracted from her. I removed some of the distracting elements of the photo by burning them into shadows (I did no cloning whatsoever). The intent was to make it look as though the shadows and highlights were created by the lighting, not by post processing. I figured this meant I had to try to create the illusion of a single light source. Anything that didn't fall in the path of that imaginary light source was burned. In this case I actually burned some midtones as well for a more balanced effect. The net result is a very clear focal point with fewer distracting elements. Again only dodge and burn tools were used to edit the grayscale image.

Application 3: Adding Impact with Light and Shadow

Discussions about dodging and burning often revolve around this application of the technique. It generates all kinds of debate about what violates photographic integrity and what crosses into the realm of 'digital art'. I'm not going to express an opinion about that; rather I'll try to demonstrate how it's done and leave that debate for somebody else who enjoys things like pushing water uphill with a fork.

Not a magnificent photo by any stretch, but a competent illustration of how you can change the impact of a photo with dodging and burning. Cloudy day, flat lighting, shooting towards the sun; ideal conditions if you like really flat, low-contrast photos (*yawn*). I set the Ranges the same as I did in the first example, but I cranked the exposure up to 9% instead of 3%. Notice how when applied to the right places, a good amount of detail is recovered and emphasized. Specifically note the detail in the grain of the wood on the light post. Suddenly the photo has depth and texture. Heavy burning in the clouds gives the sky an ominous and looming presence, which is something that wasn't there in real life. For fun I also used the dodge tool to 'turn the light on'