



## Working Color

The scene at top from the Valley of Fire State Park in Nevada is what came from the camera. The second image shows the “blacks” threshold screen for Levels being used on the photo. Hold down the Alt/Option key while moving the left slider and this threshold screen appears. The areas of black are the photo’s blacks, while the colors show maxed out color channels. Move the slider until you have blacks that work for your image. This depends on what is in the photo. The final shot is the midtone curve used for the photo shown here. Curves often do not need a lot or fancy adjustment to work well.

I often get asked if I do a lot of manipulation in Photoshop to achieve the colors seen in many of my photos. I usually don’t. The colors come from a number of factors that anyone can apply. Some folks think that if you buy a great camera, you get great color... not necessarily. The shot shown here was made with a Canon PowerShot G4 camera, a good compact camera made a few years ago; it was not made with a digital SLR. The shot at the top left came directly from the camera as a high-quality JPEG file. No saturation controls were used to create the

colors seen in the image directly above. Saturation is a greatly over-used tool by many photographers. The colors above come from several things: the right exposure, use of a polarizing filter, how the black areas of the photo are set and adjustment of midtones. Setting black areas (or blacks as they are often called) is critical for good color. Digital cameras won’t always interpret the scene properly so that blacks are rendered best. Good blacks set off colors and ensure that there is a richness to the color as well. Midtones also have a strong effect

on color. Curves is the best way to adjust them, but if you only have Levels (Photoshop Elements), then use the Levels midtone slider as a separate, second adjustment. If you use adjustment layers for these controls, you gain more flexibility in your work. The layer mask then lets you paint out problem areas of a good adjustment.



## Tips to try:

**1** SHOOTING TIP: Good exposure results in good color. If an image is significantly over or underexposed, you will not be able to get the best color from it, no matter how much work you do in Photoshop. Watch your histogram to be sure you are not clipping detail in the highlights or that you are leaving too much of a gap at the right side of the histogram either.

**2** PHOTOSHOP TIP: Levels is a great way to set blacks. Hold down the Alt/Option key as you move the left (black) slider. The monitor will turn white, then details will begin to appear. Watch for the threshold where pure black shows up. Every image is different; some look best with just a bit of black, others with a lot. But except for foggy or hazy images, there should be a black in the photo. Set the white, right slider, similarly.

**3** PHOTOSHOP TIP: Midtones bring up the brightness of the photo and give the main colors more strength and detail. Use Curves, but you don’t have to make fancy changes. If you aren’t used to Curves, just click in the middle and move the line up or down until the photo looks good. If you use Photoshop Elements, use the middle slider in Levels.

**4** PHOTOSHOP TIP: These tips also apply to processing RAW files in Camera Raw. Use Alt/Option with Shadows to get the same blacks threshold screen (Alt/Option with Exposure for highlights). Use the Tone Curve for midtones if your version has it, otherwise, use Brightness.

**5** PHOTOSHOP TIP: People who want purely neutral adjustments of color will change the layer mode to Luminosity. For this technique of the month, don’t do that. Leave the layer set to Normal.