

Pro Sharpening Workflow in Lightroom 1.1

By Chris Orwig

When working to create sharp images, we stand on the shoulders of many great photographers, including Ansel Adams who pioneered and evangelized the idea that precision and sharp focus are fundamental to good photography. Yet, beyond the fundamentals, the goal is to create a compelling photograph.

One of the common pitfalls in digital imaging is forgetting the final goal and oversharpening an image—making the viewer notice the sharpness but not the image. As a result, I like to relate sharpening to cooking with spices and seasoning: Overpower high-quality food with too much seasoning and all is lost; on the other hand, use seasoning delicately and wisely and the result can be a gourmet meal.

First thing's first

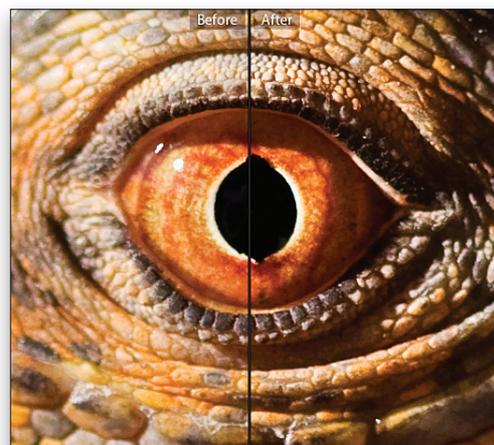
As you may know, Lightroom was built from the ground up as a photographic workflow application. Thus, the way you generally navigate through Lightroom is left to right and top to bottom—especially true with image sharpening. In the Develop module, start at the top and set the White Balance and then dial in Exposure, Contrast, etc. It's critical to set the color, tone, and contrast before sharpening. As Photoshop Hall-of-Famer Katrin Eismann often says, "Contrast and sharpness are intimately linked." When you stop to think about this, it makes perfect sense. Lower the contrast and the image looks flat and dull; increase the contrast and the image snaps. Therefore, set your color, tone, and contrast first and then sharpen. At the same time, keep in mind that after sharpening, you may need to return to your Tone and Contrast sliders to make further adjustments.

I can see clearly now

My friend Kim recently had corrective eye surgery and her new, clear vision astonished her. "I can't believe I couldn't see this before!" she exclaimed, not realizing what she'd been missing. The same is true of the new Clarity slider in Lightroom 1.1, which enhances images in subtle yet

significant ways. As Adobe puts it, the Clarity slider is a tool that adds "extra punch." In more formal terms, it adds local midtone contrast as a way to add more depth and (apparent) sharpness to the details in an image.

It's best to set the Clarity while viewing the image at 100% or higher. In the Develop module, click the image to zoom to 100%. Most photographs will benefit from an increase in Clarity, yet the amount will depend on the subject matter. To find the "sweet spot," increase the Clarity until you see a halo around the edge details, then lower it to remove the halo. If you're having a tough time identifying the change Clarity is making, press the Backslash (\) key to toggle between the before and after views, or press the Y key to view side-by-side before and after comparisons



Before view (left); After view (right) shows results of using the Clarity slider.

(as shown). Once you start using the Clarity slider, you'll say, "I can't believe I couldn't do this before—it's amazing!"

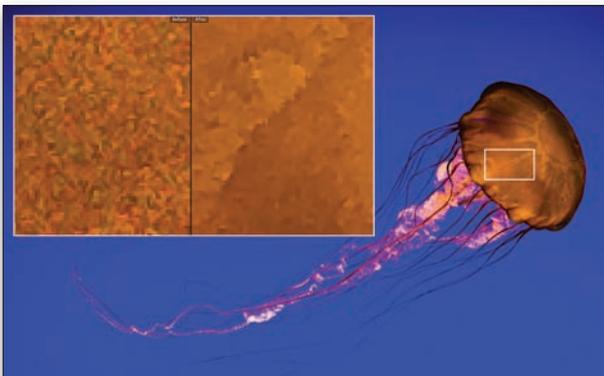
[It's tricky to convey how amazing Clarity is in one paragraph, so be sure to check out the Clarity video tutorial at www.photoshop-user.com/members/magcenter/2007.php.]

Noise reduction

Why talk about noise reduction in an article on sharpening? For starters, noise is made up of unwanted details so when you specify noise reduction, you're actually removing details and softening the image. Usually, the tradeoff is worth it, yet you need to make sure to *do this first* so you can then correct the image sharpness.

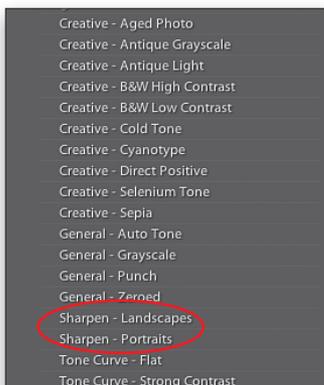
Some beginning photographers dismiss noise reduction because they've heard that noise typically occurs from using high ISO speeds or less-sophisticated digital cameras. That's only half true. Be on the lookout for noise in underexposed images, darker areas of your image, or in softer images that require more sharpening (as this will exaggerate noise). Most of your images will benefit from some level of noise reduction. I know many photographers who apply noise reduction to every one of their images.

It's best to zoom in to 100%. Increase the Luminance slider to remove grayscale noise. Increase the Color slider to remove color (or chroma) noise. I recommend first using Lightroom and then applying additional noise reduction with a Photoshop plug-in, such as Noiseware or Noise Ninja.



Ready, set, sharpen!

New to Lightroom 1.1 are two sharpening presets: Landscapes and Portraits located in the Develop module's Presets panel. The presets work well when you're in a hurry or as a starting point to learn more about the Sharpening sliders.



The Landscapes preset is useful for sharpening traditional landscapes, architecture, and more. It works best on images with lots of edges and fine details. I applied the Landscapes preset for this image of a California Oak Tree.



The Portraits preset, as the name implies, works extremely well for people. It improves the image by sharpening the important details without sharpening skin. I applied the Portraits preset to this photograph of my daughter, Annika. Remember, when applying the presets, it's best to zoom to 100% and then apply the desired preset.



Sharpening Amount

The Amount slider (in the Sharpening panel) controls the overall amount (or intensity) of sharpening. Again it's best to zoom to 100% and then increase the slider. In Lightroom 1.1, the slider now goes all the way to 150. If you look closely, you'll notice that the slider bar becomes more red the closer it gets to 150. Why would you want to reline the sharpening? You can crank up the sharpening to the red zone because it's possible to pull back the sharpening with the subsequent sliders, as you'll see below. To view the sharpening in grayscale mode, press-and-hold the Option (PC: Alt) key when you drag the slider. This view will help you identify how far to increase the Amount. Typically, an Amount of 50 or less works best.

Sharpening Radius

I like to think of the Radius slider as “reach.” It defines how far the sharpening extends out from an edge. You don’t want to overextend the sharpening because you’ll start to see halos in areas of contrast. Thus, Adobe set the maximum Radius to 3, but I haven’t found an image that needed or looked good with a 3. Typically, you’ll use a low setting of 1, and occasionally, for soft or blurry images, crank it up to 2. Zoom in to 100%, press-and-hold the Option (PC: Alt) key, and drag the slider to view Radius in grayscale.



Grayscale view with Radius set to 3 (left); Radius set to 0 (right)



After Radius sharpening

Detail slider is a powerhouse tool that keeps everything under control. It acts to automatically remove undesirable edge halos.

The slider ranges from 0 to 100, but you’ll typically set it to 50 or less. A setting of 0 constrains the sharpening to the highest contrast edges (such as the hair and eyes) while removing (or reducing) halos. This is especially important with portraits because a high number, such as 100, will detrimentally extend sharpening to the skin tones (as shown in our example). At the same time, remember it’s beneficial to increase the Detail slider if the image has lots of small edge details.

Sharpening Masking

As you may know, a mask in Photoshop allows you to apply an adjustment to a specific area of the image. When painting on a mask in Photoshop, white reveals and black conceals and the same is true in Lightroom. While you can’t create a custom mask in Lightroom, it does a great job of limiting the sharpness to non-edge areas of the image.

A setting of 0 equals no masking. Increase the Masking slider to limit the sharpening to high-contrast edges. Option-click (PC: Alt-click) and drag the slider to view the mask in grayscale mode. As you increase the slider, the high-contrast edges remain white, the flatter areas where there’s smoother tone detail will turn black and are masked and thus not sharpened.



Original (left); Masking set to 40 (center); Masking set to 100 (right)

Sharpening Detail

Every little detail counts, and that’s true with the Detail slider. This tool can make or break an image, so it’s a good idea to get a handle on it. As you know, sharpening can easily get out of control but the



Original (left); Detail set to 0 (center); Detail set to 100 (right)

Becoming a photographer who creates compelling photographs is a journey. The best photographers never “arrive,” rather they continually create. Their focus isn’t on the destination, but the process. And now that you’ve finished this article and arrived at a new understanding of sharpening, the adventure begins. Go out and shoot and may this new sharpening knowledge catapult your images to new heights! ■

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