




Using Gradient Layer Masking for Tonal Balance and creating a Collage

Using The Gradient Tool:

The Gradient Tool (G) found on Toolbox provides a flexible way to blend photographs seamlessly and is the ideal tool to use for a collage. The basic function of the Gradient Tool is to make a gradual blend in the selected area from one colour to another. A blend can be achieved by selecting the Gradient tool from the Toolbox, or by pressing the (G) key. Then click and drag a line of any length and angle where you want the blend to happen. The Tool is often used in conjunction with the Quick Mask tool or in an Adjustment Layer mask to blend two or more images together by making a blend from Black to White. Black represents one image, and White the other.

This procedure takes you through using Quick mask and the Gradient Tool to set up a selection that will allow a gentle transition to occur from full opacity to fully transparent regions across the image. You can then use Levels or Curves to apply tonal balance or a Hue/Saturation to saturate colour in a smooth manner. Think of the Gradient tool as if you are applying feather. Remember also that a 'mask' is a form of selection. Using a mask allows an area of an image to be fully or partially affected by any editing commands that are applied afterwards.

1. For this procedure it is assumed all basic editing has been completed and you now want to apply Levels control to both the top and bottom of the image.
2. Using the Quick Mask and Gradient tool you will be able to create a seamless transition from full opacity to transparent, just like 'feather' might do but with better control. You can then use any command to apply tonal, colour saturation or sharpening adjustment. Basically use what command is required.
3. With an image you want to apply the technique open on screen, press Ctrl+0 (zero) to fit the image on screen.
4. Now to make a little room around the outside of the image, press Ctrl+- (minus) once. This makes it much easier to start working on the image from the outside 'grey' border. Or PhotoShop users can switch to Full Screen mode (press the 'F' key once).
5. Now choose the Quick Mask from the Toolbox. The Quick mask tool is located just below the Foreground/Background Colour Picker icon or press the 'Q' key. (PhotoShop users only)
6. Press 'D' to reset your Foreground/Background colour to default Black/White .
7. From the Toolbox click to select the Gradient Tool  or press the [G] key. This is a nested tool so you may need to select the correct tool from the menu if you see the Paint bucket tool.
8. On the Gradient Tool Options bar select the Gradient Editor drop-down menu and choose the second option (Foreground to Transparent). Because you selected the default Foreground / Background colours the Gradient is Black to transparent. Still on the Gradient Options bar select the **Linear Gradient** , the first of the five options, check **Mode** is Normal, **Opacity** is 100%, **Reverse** is unchecked and both **Dither** and **Transparency** are checked.
9. For the sake of this tutorial let's assume we have an image that has an overly bright sky and a darker foreground and that we want to even out and balance the image tones.
10. Move into your image window and click at the top of your image, in the grey border area you made in Step 4, click and drag to the bottom of the image. Hold Shift to constrain to a straight line or drag freehand.
11. Release the mouse button. A Quick Mask (red ruby lith default colour), which is an opaque to transparent gradient mask, is displayed from the top to the bottom of the image.
12. Press the 'Q' key to revert to 'Edit in Standard Mode' or click the tool icon option on the Toolbox.

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13. Where the Quick mask is actually fully opaque (solid red) will depend on where you initially started to drag. Because we dragged from the top of the image the solid red Quick mask is at the top and will fully protect that part of the image. Remember the whole point of using a Quick mask (an alternative selection method) is so areas of an image can be selectively protected either partially or totally from any changes that you make afterwards using commands like Levels, Curves or Hue/Saturation.
14. Where the Quick Mask is solid red (ruby lith) any pixels beneath the masked area will not be affected at all as the Quick mask protects them. Pixels covered partially by the Quick mask will be affected progressively until all pixels are effected in fully transparent areas.
15. Now when commands such as Levels, Hue/Saturation or Curves are used, areas that are unprotected or partially protected by Quick mask will have varying degrees of change applied.
16. It is important to appreciate that you are unable to do anything while still in Quick mask mode. So press 'Q' on the keyboard or click the 'Edit in Standard mode' tool on the Toolbox.
17. The ruby lith mask will be replaced by a selection marquee (marching ants). Now you can apply any of the Photoshop commands. For example select Levels from the Image > Adjustments> Levels or press 'Ctrl+L' or a Levels Adjustment layer from the layers Palette.
18. With the Levels dialogue displayed on screen use the middle slider only, click hold and drag to the right to darken the image midtones or to the left to lighten image midtones.
19. Notice that when you do, the effect will be very gradual. This is because the Gradient Mask is protecting some areas while allowing full affect of the levels adjustment on other areas where the mask is transparent. Simply stop when the tonal changes look good.
20. The length you drag the Gradient through the image in Step 11 determines the point at which the transparency starts and ends. Experiment to see the difference this has on the image once Levels has been applied.
21. A slight play on this is where you have an image that requires different tonal adjustment at the top of the image and at the bottom of the image. For example in an image where the exposure has made the sky very light and the foreground dark.
22. Use the technique above to drag a Quick mask gradient from the top of the image to the very bottom of the image. This will apply full protection to the sky region and progressively less until no mask protection applies at the very bottom of the image. This means you can exit Quick mask and apply Levels to lighten the foreground using say a Levels command.
23. Once you have lightened the foreground area of the image to your satisfaction you can use the same gradient to make changes to the top of the image. To do this we will need to inverse the selection so the bottom of the image is protected and the top unprotected.
24. To inverse the selection just press Shift+Ctrl+I to inverse the selection (marching ants).
25. Now apply a second Levels command again. Only apply sufficient adjustment stopping when the image looks good. You should have balanced the image tones in a seamless manner.
26. Basically you have made use of the earlier Quick mask but inversed it. So this time you will have the opposite part of the image protected resulting in a wonderful seamless crossover of tones that is very difficult to achieve otherwise.
27. You can also limit the distance you drag when using Quick mask. For example if you dragged from the very top to part way down the image, the point at which you stop will be the transition point and all pixels beneath this stop point will be affect partially or totally by changes made using Levels for example. So varying this stop point provides additional control over areas of the image that are protected or unprotected.