

IMAGE SHARPENING

Introduction

More pictures have been ruined by bad technique in sharpening than almost any other factor. There is much ignorance about sharpening, with many so called “Experts” laying down rules that quite simply do not hold up to closer inspection. Quite often you will have to work out for yourself which method or methods and what level of adjustments work best for you, in what circumstances. This article is solely designed to point you in the right direction and enable you to make the most of your photography.

There are various different methods you can use to sharpen images and again the “Experts” tend to have their pet theories and favourite methods. Whilst I would not set myself up as an expert I cannot absolve myself from having my own preferences; it is perhaps unavoidable as one always develops through one’s own experiences.

In this article I have included a number of sharpening methods; there are others that for a number of reasons I have not included, but I hope that the ones included will offer at least one process that works for you.

Common Factors

1. I rarely sharpen the “Background” layer but instead create a duplicate layer for sharpening; indeed some of the methods require a duplicate layer for the concept to function. Generally though this has two main advantages. Firstly if you get it wrong or at a later date decide it needs changing, you can do it by deleting the sharpened layer and creating a new one. Secondly it allows you to use the ‘Opacity’ slide in the ‘Layers’ palette to alter the amount of the sharpening effect if you wish.
2. Ensure that you are able to see the effect of your sharpening on the image. Normally you will find that your image on the screen is much smaller than it will be when printed and therefore it is not possible to see the sharpening effects in proper detail. Many will advise you to set your image at 100%, but to be truthful I would not advise this as 100% will most likely be a far greater enlargement than your print will ever be. You will find that selecting 25% or 50% is quite sufficient. Do not choose enlargements between these figures as you will find the image is not displayed on your screen as sharply as it is at 25%, 50%.
3. Be aware that if an image is pin sharp from two feet to infinity it can look unnatural to the human eye. Whilst not absolutely essential it is a good maxim never to sharpen skies. Use a layer mask in one way or another to prevent sharpening of the sky showing through.
4. The use of layer masks also applies when you wish to achieve selective sharpening or partial sharpening of parts of the image. This can be done by simply painting black into a layer mask at either 100% to block the effect altogether, or at say 50% opacity to allow only partial sharpening of that portion of the image. Where you have recessional elements that you feel may need variable sharpening to look realistic, you can either use a gradient mask with the ‘Gradient Tool’ or create selections using the ‘Polygonal Lasso’ feathered to whatever degree you feel applicable, but generally at least 100 and possibly up to 250 pixels.

Unsharp Mask _____ (*Filter – Sharpen – Unsharp Mask*)

The name may well confuse many but it derives from an old photographic dark room process where a soft and unsharp negative of a subject was sandwiched with the original positive. This technique tended to increase edge sharpness in the resulting photograph. The digital version seeks out changes in contrast and emphasises them.

When you open the filter you are presented with a palette with a number of options.

1. I suggest you ensure the 'Preview' button is ticked as you will then be able to see the effects of what you are proposing to do.
2. "Amount" - This slider affects the intensity or amount of sharpening that is to be applied. So, set at '0%' there is no effect and set at 500% the effect can be very substantial and, without other controls not in Unsharp Mask, diabolical in its effects. You will have to assess the correct figure, but there are a number of factors that will influence your choice, including file size, resolution, print size etc, which can all have a bearing. That being said for A3 prints with a reasonable resolution of 240 or more I find myself using a figure somewhere between 100 and 175.
3. "Radius" - This controls the width of the sharpening effect. By all means experiment and you will see the potential effects. Adobe used to recommend setting this slider at 1.6 as a starting point and I have found this to be a good guide, but subject to variation from 1.0 to 2.0 in some cases.
4. "Threshold" - This is slightly more complicated and many shy away from using it and recommend setting it at '0' on a permanent basis. However the lower the setting the more pixels are sharpened, because this control decides which shall be sharpened by the amount of difference in tonal brightness. Set at a very low level sharpening will even occur where you would normally expect to see a smooth continuous tone, eg in the sky or in skin tones. I normally leave it a '0' unless portraits are involved when you may find it beneficial to set it at between 4 and 10. As mentioned above I mask of skies so this is not relevant to me for skies.

High Pass Filter _____ (*Filter – Other – High Pass*)

1. You will need to create a duplicate of the Background layer for this process. Once you have done this go to your 'Layers' palette and change the "Blending Mode" from Normal to either Hard Light or Soft Light (more about this choice later).
2. With the duplicate layer active open the High Pass Filter. There is only one control, a radius slider. As a starting point try it at about 4.0 pixels, although again image and print size etc may affect your choice here. If you run it too high the effect will be over obvious and not acceptable.
3. If you now change the blending mode of the sharpened layer between Hard Light and Soft Light you will see that the Soft Light mode offers a softer more subtle effect than the Hard Light mode. The subject matter may well dictate your choice.

Smart Sharpen Filter (Filter – Sharpen – Smart Sharpen)

Available from CS2 on, this filter could be described as a more advance version of Unsharp Mask.

In the Basic Mode you can set the “Amount” and “Radius” as in Unsharp Mask. There is no ‘Threshold’ control. You can now choose to remove ‘Gaussian Blur’ in the way that Unsharp Mask works, or to remove ‘Lens Blur’, which provides a more detailed sharpening of the image; or ‘Motion Blur’ to counter slight movement of the camera or subject. In this last option use ‘Angle’ control to have the correct effect. In the Advanced Mode you will find the options to vary the sharpening in Highlight and Shadow Areas, which will allow you to fade the sharpening over variable tonal widths and also the radius. For example, a low tonal width in say ‘Shadow’ will restrict the effect to the darkest areas only, whilst a larger one will spread the effect to lighter shadow areas. Obviously the same principle applies to the ‘Highlight’ control. Once again you need to experiment and take care not to over use the tools at your disposal.

The way I sometimes use this method is to use the “Sharpen” tab, select “Advanced” and also “More Accurate” and remove “Gaussian Blur”. Working on an A3 sized image at 300 dpi I would set the ‘amount’ at 100 and then choose the radius, probably somewhere between 1.1 and 1.6, depending on the image.

Channel Masks

I often use this method of sharpening as I feel it allows a natural sharpening effect and, rarely if ever creates those dreaded halos. This process is based on Unsharp Mask controlled by a specific type of layer mask created from one of the colour channels, called a ‘Channel Mask’. It provides an infinitely variable mask, reflecting the content of the image through which sharpening can be applied. It does involve a learning curve, but you will find that experimentation and perseverance will produce superb results.

1. Create a duplicate of the Background Layer.
2. If you have a sky in the image then create a selection of the sky, if one does not already exist. If one does exist open it. Invert the selection and leave it active (with the marching ants showing). Create a Layer Set and, with the Layer Set active, click the New Layer Mask Icon in the Layers Palette. This will put a layer mask on the Layer Set, blocking off the sky. Now drag the duplicate of the Background Layer into the Layer Set. (if you have no sky ignore this paragraph and go to the next)
3. Open the “Channels Palette”. This reveals, along with the RGB Channel a Red, a Green and a Blue Channel, as well as any selections you have saved. You will now need to experiment; un-tick two of the colour channels and observe the resulting monochrome image displayed. You are looking for a balance between black, white and grey that most nearly matches those areas most in need of sharpening. The lightest areas will let through most sharpening effect whilst black or darker areas will let none or less sharpening effect show through. If you have gone through the process at 2 above ignore the sky area, it is already blocked off. Additionally do not forget to think in terms of an inverted channel. By this I mean you can choose a channel where the Darker areas match those you want sharpening and the lighter ones where you do not want sharpening.
4. Decide on which channel offers you the best choice, tick the RGB channel to return to a colour image. Open the ‘Calculations’ palette (*Image – Calculations*) and a new palette will appear. In both the ‘Source 1’ and ‘Source 2’ boxes select the colour of channel you have chosen. If you need the of choice inverting (as above) tick both the ‘Invert’ boxes as well.

5. Go to the 'Blending' drop down menu. You will now have to experiment, remembering to create a layer mask that will control which areas will be sharpened and by how much. The blending modes I find most useful are Normal, Darken, Multiply, Overlay and Soft Light. Select the mode that most suits your needs.
6. Ensure that the Result panel shows 'New Channel' and click 'OK'. A new channel will appear in the Channels palette, probably called 'Alpha'.
7. In the Layers Palette, ensure that the duplicate layer is now active.
8. Go to the 'Channels' palette, place the cursor on the image thumbnail of the new channel and click 'Control'. This will place the channel selection on the main image (with the marching ants). Now go to the 'Layers' palette and click the "New Layer Mask Icon" and this will place the channel selection in the new Layer Mask on the Duplicate of the Background Layer.
9. Make the actual layer active (not the layer mask) and then open Unsharp Mask.
10. You will find that you can now apply Unsharp Mask without many of the problems that can normally be encountered. As a starting point set Radius at 1.6 and Threshold at 0. You will find that depending on the nature of the 'Channel Mask' you will be able to move the 'Amount' slider from anywhere about 150 up to 300 or more with no ill effects, but creating a very naturally sharpened image. I generally find I am using values around 200 to 300 (but on occasions higher still), as I say depending on the density and nature of the 'Channel Mask'.

Other Methods

There are other methods such as using Lab Colour Mode and only sharpening particular Colour Channels that you may wish to explore but I have not included them here. There are also other sharpening tools in the 'Sharpen' Filter box but I do not feel able to seriously recommend them at this time.

There is however another method of sharpening that I do use quite often and this is a proprietary piece of software that acts as a plug in to the Photoshop, accessed via the Filters drop down menu.

This **Nik Sharpener Pro**, an excellent piece of software. The version I have is restricted to 8 bit files but that is its only draw back. I find it especially useful where there are trees and shrubbery etc, but also in more linear and graphic images.

Its dialog box is explanatory and it has slides to specify, print size, printer resolution, print quality, extent of sharpening etc. It will then advise you as to whether there are enough pixels and warn you if you are asking too much of your file before you apply the filter.

Post Sharpening or "Clarity"

With some of the methods offered you may find that applying what is often described as a "Clarity" action may help at the end of the process. Open "Unsharp Mask", and with an A3 image, set the radius to somewhere about 0.9 or less and the amount to between 150 and 200 or so. This may appear to amount to a further sharpening, but its effect can be effective in many (but not all) cases.