Using Adjustment layers

An adjustment layer applies color and tonal adjustments to your image without permanently changing pixel values. For example, rather than making a Levels or Curves adjustment directly to your image, you can create a Levels or Curves adjustment layer. The color and tonal adjustments are stored in the adjustment layer and apply to all the layers below it; you can correct multiple layers by making a single adjustment, rather than adjusting each layer separately. You can discard your changes and restore the original image at any time.

Fill layers let you fill a layer with a solid color, a gradient, or a pattern. Unlike adjustment layers, fill layers do not affect the layers underneath them.

Adjustment layers provide the following advantages:

- Nondestructive edits. You can try different settings and re-edit the adjustment layer at any time. You can also reduce the effect of the adjustment by lowering the opacity of the layer.
- Selective editing. Paint on the adjustment layer’s image mask to apply an adjustment to part of an image. Later you can control which parts of the image are adjusted by re-editing the layer mask. You can vary the adjustment by painting on the mask with different tones of gray.
- Ability to apply adjustments to multiple images. Copy and paste adjustment layers between images to apply the same color and tonal adjustments.

Adjustment layers have many of the same characteristics as other layers. You can adjust their opacity and blending mode, and you can group them to apply the adjustment to specific layers. Likewise, you can turn their visibility on and off to apply or preview the effect.

Creating an adjustment layer

Photoshop offers two different methods for creating an adjustment layer up to CS3..

- **The Layer menu.** You can create an adjustment layer by choosing an adjustment layer type from the New Adjustment Layer submenu (under the Layer menu).

  Choose **Layer > New Adjustment Layer** and then choose an **adjustment layer type**.
- **The Layers palette icon.** You can choose an adjustment layer type by clicking on the Layers palette’s New Content Layer icon.

If you have **CS4** or **CS5**, there is now an Adjustment Panel as another choice.
Multiple edits
You don’t have to limit yourself to a single adjustment layer. You can have as many as you want, each stacked on top of the next to make successive edits. This technique is particularly useful when you want one curve to correct the image globally while another curve edits the image in selective places. However, if one adjustment counteracts another, you’ll suffer the same amount of image degradation you’d get if you applied the edits successively to flat files.

Note that adjustment layers apply to all visible layers beneath them. As a result, the stacking order makes a difference, since each layer’s result depends on the layers underneath it. Sometimes the differences are fairly subtle—you may need to check the numbers in the Info palette to see them—but occasionally the difference can be significant.

While you can’t merge adjustment layers together, you can merge them into regular, raster layers. If you want only one layer, you can flatten the whole image or select Merge Visible from the Layer menu (Merge Visible retains any transparency in the image). We don’t recommend doing this unless it’s necessary, since you lose all the advantages of adjustment layers, and they take up very little space. Instead, keep all your adjustment layers live until you’re finished with the project. Then, to save a flattened version of the image, choose Save As, and in the Save As dialog box turn on the As a Copy check box, and turn off the Layers check box.

There are 17 Adjustment Options available (CS3 and earlier versions) to you when you create an adjustment layer. I will go over them in more detail for beginners in later posts but I will give a general description now.

They are:

- **Solid Color** - creates a solid color layer on top of your layers.
- **Gradient** - creates a gradient on top of your layers.
- **Pattern** - applies a pre-defined, saved pattern to your layer.
- **Levels** - allows you to control the brightness of the various tones in your image. Playing with the slider can increase or decrease the intensity of darker and lighter tones.
- **Curves** - can use this to fix your highlights and shadows using this option.
- **Color Balance** - adjust the colors of highlights, mid tones and shadows separately using this option.
- **Brightness/Contrast** - lightens or darkens your image and increases or decreases the contrast.
- **Black and White** - turns a color image into a black and white, giving you a much greater control of output than the destructor method which is done using Ctrl+Shift+U on PC or Canid+Shift+U on Mac.
- **Hue/Saturation** - can be used to control the colors, the saturation and lightness or darkness of the image.
- **Selective Color** - allows you to add or remove percentage of a color present in your image. If you want your reds redder and your blues less bluer then this is what you use.
- **Channel Mixer** - allows you to adjust the reds, blues or greens. So you are adjusting each color channels itself.
- **Gradient Map** - adds gradients inside different colors of the image. Unlike the gradient tool, that put a solid gradient over everything, this puts colors in each color of the image.
- **Photo Filter**
- **Exposure** -
- **Invert** - changes all the colors to what is opposite to them in the color wheel.
- **Threshold** - changes stuff to black or white. The slider allows you to choose what tones it will be changing.
- **Posterize** - reduces the number of colors used in the image.

**Added in versions CS4 & CS5**

- **Vibrance** - adjusts the saturation so that clipping is minimized as colors approach full saturation. This adjustment increases the
saturation of less-saturated colors more than the colors that are already saturated. Vibrance also prevents skin tones from becoming over saturated.

So let's get started and try some of the **Adjustment Layers**, will be working with **Color Balance** and **Curves** for this lesson.

First **right click** on the image below and **Save** it to your computer.

Once you open this image into Photoshop, take a look at the image to see what needs to be fixed. Depending on your experience this can be difficult.

To start working on it go to the bottom of the layers panel and select the **Adjustment Layer** icon and choose "**Color Balance**."

The image has a blueish tint to it, so we need to bring the yellows back first. So set your settings close to what I have, but you may have some different preferences of color the what I've chosen. Note: I'm using CS5, so if your color balance dialog doesn't look the same then you're using CS3 or earlier. But the setting are still the same in all versions.
Here's what the Adjustment layer looks like in the Layer Panel. It can be selected at anytime and settings can be changed. Also you can use the eye icon to turn the adjustment layer on or off to see the original and the changes to the image.

Next let's add the Curves Adjustment to the image to finish fixing this image. Yours will have a straight line in it, not the curve that I have but I'll show you what to do.

First when working with Curves add a center point first to ensure that you don't create too much movement at once. Do this by left clicking once. Then left click and drag in the bottom left hand corner of the top right grid box and push up and to the left slightly. Do the same for the bottom, but opposite from the top.

The color is back in the image.
Let's compare the before and after images to really see the changes.

**Saving adjustment layers**

You can save an adjustment layer separately from an image. We find this method most useful when we want to apply the same color- and tonal-correction edits to multiple images.

Here’s how to save an adjustment layer into either a new or a different document:

1. Select the adjustment layer you want to save.
2. Choose Duplicate Layer from either the Layer menu or the Layers palette pop out menu.
3. Pick a file in the Duplicate Layers dialog box to save the adjustment layer into. If you choose New for the destination, Photoshop creates a new document for you; if you choose an existing document, Photoshop copies the adjustment layer into that image.
4. Click OK

The ability to copy adjustment layers also opens up some new workflow possibilities. Before we had adjustment layers, we always took care of retouching our image (dust and scratches, and so on) before we did any editing for tone or color. However, with adjustment layers, the order of these tasks doesn’t matter. Two people can even work on the same image at the same time—one doing the retouching while the other edits tone and color—then later, you can apply the adjustment layer(s) to the retouched image.

Another workflow option is to make your color- and tonal-correction edits on a low-resolution version of a large image. The edits may go faster on the low-resolution version, and when you’re done you can apply the adjustment layers to the monster 500 MB high-resolution version of the image. Of course, if you’ve done any painting on the layer mask, that won’t translate properly when placed into the high-resolution file.

**Tip: Copying adjustment layers quickly.** The Duplicate Layer feature is useful, but we find it faster to copy an adjustment layer simply by dragging it from the Layers palette in one image on top of another image. Again, if the two images...
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have different pixel dimensions, any layer mask will probably transfer incorrectly