

Sharpening in *Photoshop Elements*

UNSHARP MASK – An Ancient Darkroom Technique Goes Digital!

Before starting, make sure you are viewing your image at 100% ... this allows you to see ALL pixels on screen and the effect sharpening has on them. Which sharpness control to use? **Unsharp Mask** is the professional's choice – it gives you ultimate control.

The Unsharp Mask Controls and Usage Guidelines

The **Amount slider** controls the strength of the sharpening effect.

Values of 50% to 100% are suitable for low-resolution images (pixel dimensions lower than 1000 x 1000, that is, those intended for web use or for email).

Values of 150% to 200% for high-resolution images (eg; 300 ppi printing to inkjet).

The **Radius slider** determines the number of pixels around the edge that is affected by the sharpening. A low value only sharpens edge pixels.

Use a setting of between 0 to 1 for low-resolution images

Use a setting of between 1 and 2 for high-resolution images

The **Threshold slider** determines how different the pixels must be before they are considered an edge and therefore sharpened.

A value of 0 will sharpen *all* the pixels in an image, whereas a setting of 10 will only apply the sharpening to those areas that are different by at least 10 levels or more from their surrounding pixels.

I generally leave this at 0 or 1, but to ensure that there is minimal or no sharpening in certain areas, such as sky or skin tone, I might set this higher - even up to 8 and more.

BASIC UNSHARP MASK STARTING POINTS ... (Amount, Radius, Threshold)

- For general photography start with - **A: 125%, R: 1, T: 3**
- Soft subjects (e.g., flowers, puppies, people, rainbows, etc.) - **A: 150%, R: 1, T: 10**
- Close-up portraits: **A: 75%, R: 2, T: 3**
- Moderate sharpening (e.g., objects, architecture, landscapes) - **A: 225%, R: 0.5, T: 0**
- Maximum sharpening (e.g., lots of well defined, detailed edges) - **A:65%, R: 4, T: 3**

OTHER SHARPENING TECHNIQUES IN PHOTOSHOP ELEMENTS

ADJUST SHARPNESS – This new and innovative sharpening was introduced in *Elements* Version 5, and an expanded version called *Smart Sharpen* is available in *Photoshop CSx*. This is quickly replacing Unsharp Mask as the standard sharpening tool, because it offers all its features ... and more! Unsharp Mask only addresses a type of blur called **gaussian blur** which introduces itself into all digital images when being captured by the digital camera. The *Adjust Sharpness* tool also deals with **lens blur** where your camera is not correctly focused on the intended subject, and **motion blur** which is introduced when there is camera shake or movement. Additionally, *Adjust Sharpness* also sports a nice large preview, which helps considerably. Here's the procedure:

1. Make sure the layer you want sharpened is the active layer (selected).
2. Go to **menu:ENHANCE>ADJUST SHARPNESS**.

3. Make your adjustments in the Adjust Sharpness dialog box. The **amount** and **radius** controls work just like in *Unsharp Mask*. Now you also have some additional settings:
 - **Remove** – Here you choose what kind of blur to fix: Gaussian, lens or motion blur. If not sure, try all three.
 - **Angle** – This is the angle of motion that was introduced in motion blur.
 - **More Refined** – This setting concentrates more sharpening on details. Generally you leave this disabled for images with lots of busy little detail, and even skin (unless you want pores and acne in sharp detail!)

LOCAL SHARPENING – This technique is used in situations where you do not want your image sharpened in its entirety. You can selectively apply sharpening by simply **painting** over the area you want sharpened with the **Sharpen Tool**. This is a special brush that sharpens instead of adding color to the areas you drag it over. To get to it, go to the *Blur Tool* towards the bottom of the tool palette, and choose the Sharpen Tool from the pop-out menu. Make sure you check out the Tool Options Bar at the top once you have it selected. Remember that you can't sharpen an adjustment layer. If necessary duplicate your image layer and work on the duplicate. Don't forget that you can also **Stamp Visible** by pressing **SHIFT-CTRL-ALT-E** (**SHIFT-OPT-CMD-E** for **Ⓜ**). This combines all your visible layers and places a copy on a layer; sharpen on this layer.

THE HIGH-PASS FILTER TECHNIQUE – Another method that is very popular because it lets you sharpen on a **dedicated layer** and you can back off later by adjusting the **layer opacity**. Try it out for yourself!

1. Duplicate your layer
2. Go to menu:FILTER>OTHER>HIGH-PASS. Your photo is now covered with gray.
3. Move the slider until you can just barely see the outline of your subject. Roughly around 1.5 to 3.5 and if you can see the colors, your setting is too high.
4. Click OK
5. In the Layers palette, set the **Blend Mode** for the new layer to **Overlay** (try **Hard Light**, too).

That's it! Hopefully you see a nice sharply rendered subject!

Sharpening Tips ...

- When sharpening, set your image view to 100% so you can see the effect on **all** pixels
- Other than "Capture Sharpening" in Adobe Camera RAW, sharpen **once only** and as you **last step** of your digital workflow.
- Sharpening is set differently according to how you will use the image (for on-screen, versus a hi-res print.)
- For **printing**, the image may appear over-sharpened on screen. This is the desired result! Apply sharpening until it just looks over-sharpened.
- Try to avoid sharpening sky and skin tone areas by adjusting **threshold** higher than usual.

GUIDELINES ARE JUST GUIDELINES! ULTIMATELY, TRUST YOUR EYES!