

The Non-Destructive Dodge and Burn Layer

Using the Overlay Blend Mode

This article will demonstrate a wonderful Photoshop technique where you use the **Dodge Tool** and the **Burn Tool** on a separate layer, giving you the ability to create very delicate tonal adjustments targeted at specific areas of your image. The end result is excellent tonal control **while preserving your original pixels**.


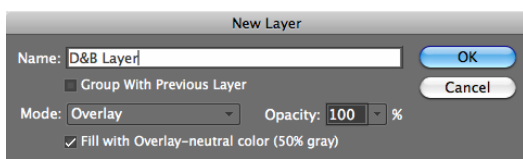

The Photoshop Dodge and Burn Tools are familiar holdovers from our wet darkroom days. However, in our digital darkroom they become problematic. These tools do indeed dodge (lighten) and burn (darken) pixels but the changes are applied to the actual image pixels, and once saved, and the file closed, you cannot undo the changes. The result – *destroyed pixels!*

Learn instead to use a special technique I call **The Dodge and Burn Layer**. You will create a separate dodge & burn layer and use the **Brush Tool** (instead of the Dodge and Burn Tools) and the **Overlay Layer Blend Mode**, so that any dodging and burning will be applied in such a way that original pixels are not affected, AND you can return to the file at a later time to tweak or undo your tonal adjustments.

Making a Safe Dodge and Burn Layer that Behaves Just Like an Adjustment Layer

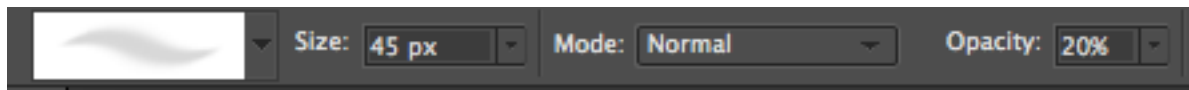
Thanks to Photoshop's powerful features, it is possible to mimic the effects of the dodge and burn tools without actually using those specific tools. And, more importantly, your pixel values are not altered. You will construct a special layer, like an **Adjustment Layer**, but one that is not available as a selection in the Adjustment Layers pop-up menu that I mentioned above.

When your image is open in *Photoshop Elements* and ready for some non-destructive dodging and burning, follow these steps below, but first, make sure you have completed all your tonal adjustments with the other *Photoshop* tools, like Levels or Shadow/Highlights. When you are ready to fine-tune your image *by painting over the details you want to enhance*, follow these steps:

1. Be certain your top layer is **active** (selected), then create a NEW LAYER. Do this by either
a: **menu:LAYER>NEW** or,
b: by **option-clicking** the little "New Layer" icon at the top of the Layers Palette. You use the option key to force a New Layer dialog box to come up. 
2. **Critical step:** In the New Layer dialog box, give the new layer a name. I suggest "D&B Layer" and choose the **Overlay Blend Mode** for your new layer. Then enable (check) the box that says, "Fill with Overlay-neutral color (50% gray)." You will not notice any changes to the image. 
3. Since you will be using the Brush Tool next, you need to make sure that the *foreground/background* colors are set to their default *black* and *white*. The shortcut for this is engaged by pressing the letter **D**. You can observe any change in the two color swatches below the tool palette. 

And, speaking of shortcuts, if you want to switch the two colors, press the letter **X**. You need to know this one because you will be switching back and forth between black and white when using this special technique.

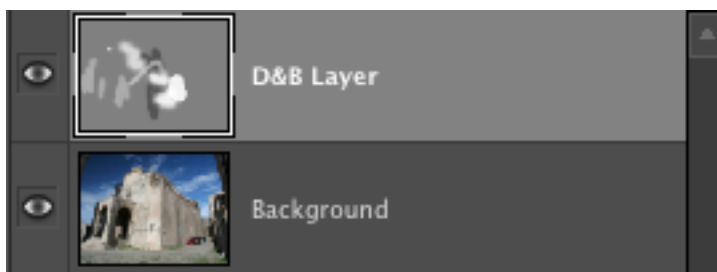
4. Select the **Brush Tool**. Verify that it is set to NORMAL mode up in the tool option bar up at the top. For this technique to work properly, you will also need to set a **low opacity** up in the tool option bar. This is called the **tool opacity**. It is *not* the same thing as the layer opacity. Start at tool opacity of 20%. It's all trial-and-error. Here's another shortcut: you can simply type a number to make an opacity change. For example, typing "3" sets the opacity to 30%, typing "0" sets it to 100%, and so on. You can also set your brush size as needed using a handy keyboard shortcut; for adjusting the brush size press the left bracket key ([) to reduce the brush size and the right bracket key (]) to increase its size. If you add the **SHIFT KEY**, you can also change the brush hardness; **shift-[** to soften and **shift-]** to harden the brush.



5. Now, with the **Brush Tool**, you can paint on the new layer right on top of the areas of the image that you wish to adjust. Here's the thing: *paint with white to bring up detail in the dark areas*. This is equivalent to **dodging**. *Paint with black to darken overly-light areas*, which makes this the same as **burning**. Remember to use the **X**-key shortcut to switch between black and white.

Remember that, as with the standard Photoshop Adjustment Layers, this special layer you created can be revisited at any time for tweaking and adjusting, or to hide the layer, or delete it altogether. In all cases, **your original pixels are preserved**.

Finally, you may be wondering **what exactly does the Overlay Blend Mode layer do?** An Overlay Mode causes any underlying pixels to be changed based on the values in the dodge and burn layer. The neutral color for the Overlay mode is 50% gray, which is why the layer has no effect on the underlying layer – it's filled with 50% gray. Black darkens the underlying layer, and white lightens.



This is a screen shot of what my layers palette looked like when I made some tonality adjustments on a Dodge & Burn Layer.

I use this technique all the time to make my images more exciting and pleasing to the eye. Give it a try!