



At one time, if you were interested in black-and-white photography, you had to have access to a wet darkroom. Yes, your local photo lab could provide black-and-white prints, but they were flat and unimpressive compared to what you could achieve on your own under the glow of the red safelight. Now you can produce black-and-white images from your digital files and, most importantly, produce stunning monochrome prints that are as good as anything created on silver-based papers.

An evocative black-and-white photograph involves more than just removing the color, however. It means seeing the world in a different way, breaking down each scene to its elements of light, tone and pattern. Combine this way of seeing the world with the power of the digital darkroom, and you can create beautiful photographs.

Shoot Digital For B&W

Light, Tone And Shape

Not every color image looks good as a black-and-white photograph. Though there are qualities that both share, such as lighting and composition, there are certain intrinsic elements that are essential for a quality black-and-white photograph.

Lighting, in a color or black-and-white photograph, often makes or breaks an image. But unlike some color images that can retain your interest based solely on the presence of vibrant, saturated colors, a good black-and-white image is rooted in the quality of light. Though you wouldn't

have the benefit of the rich color of warm, late-afternoon light in a black-and-white image, the direction of that same light, positioned low on the horizon, could be used to enhance contrast—the linchpin of many a great monochrome image.

It's the contrast of tones and often the gradual transitions from dark to light in the landscape that help create a powerful image. The human eye is drawn to areas of greatest contrast. This tendency helps each photographer shape an image so that the viewer's eye is controlled and directed to those specific areas of the image

the photographer considers important.

Shape and patterns are also common elements found in many black-and-white photographs. From the repeating patterns in a stand of aspens or the shape of rocks along a shoreline, these qualities become powerful visual effects. Without the presence of color, it's the basic structure of natural objects that become the focus of a photograph.

Seeing In Black-And-White

Unlike black-and-white film, which has to be processed in order to see the



ABOVE: A color landscape image when converted to black-and-white becomes less about the

color of the cloud and sky and more about the shape of the mountain and the clouds, as well as the range of tones from highlight to shadow.

RIGHT: Using tools such as Photoshop's Channel Mixer, we have the ability to fine-tune how the individual colors of this plant are rendered in a grayscale world. Note the subtle differences in these two images.

All images shot with a Sony DSLR-A100





images, many digital cameras now provide immediate black-and-white results. This is because digital cameras often have a black-and-white mode that records and displays the monochrome image on the camera's LCD.

Though there are advantages to shooting in color and converting to black-and-white later in your photo-editing software, using the black-and-white mode of your camera can be a first entry into learning how to see the world in shades of gray. By shooting a scene in color and then in black-and-white, you can immediately discover how certain colors, tones and textures appear in a monochrome photograph. As you do this more and more, you'll soon be able to evaluate the natural world around you in black-and-white terms without bringing the camera to your eye.

One of the fun things about some digital cameras is that they also include filter settings in their black-and-white

modes. The cameras have the equivalent of contrast filters, such as red, orange, yellow and green filters. A yellow filter setting slightly darkens blue colors, resulting in darker, more dramatic skies. A green filter is ideal when shooting foliage, as it lightens greens but darkens blues and reds. And a red filter darkens greens and dramatically lightens reds. Using these contrast filters is a great way for learning how filtration, whether in the camera or after-the-fact in Photoshop, dramatically increases or decreases contrast.

Managing Exposure

Ensuring a good exposure is important with any type of photography, but it becomes critical with black-and-white images. With black-and-white photography, you're not only making sure your image isn't severely over- or underexposed, but you're also determining how you want tones to appear in your image.

You want to make sure that your highlights aren't overexposed, resulting in a loss of detail. But it's especially important that dark tones aren't severely underexposed in your image. When you try to pull out detail from these dark areas in Photoshop, you'll also reveal noise, which will reduce the impact of the dark tones.

Thankfully, using the digital camera's histogram ensures the best exposure for both your highlights and shadows. A histogram is a graphic representation of the entire tonal range of your image from the darkest black on the far left to the brightest white on the far right.

To effectively use this tool, take a picture and play it back on the LCD. The histogram should fall just short of the far right to ensure that the highlights aren't blown out. If the histogram is heavily weighted to the right, it will likely mean that highlights will be reproduced as pure white, with no details. The exception is when there are specular



OPPOSITE PAGE: An outdoor landscape becomes an exploration of tonality when converted to black-and-white. **ABOVE:** An image whose greatest impact is derived from its color can evoke a completely different experience when converted to black-and-white. The repeating lines of the trees and the contrasting texture of their foliage become the focal point of the image rather than the vivid greens that paint the frame.

All images shot with an Olympus EVOLT E-330

highlights, such as reflections on water, which shouldn't be expected to retain any significant details.

When evaluating and adjusting your exposure, allow for a small gap between the end of the graph and the right edge of the histogram. Avoid underexposing by too much, as this will result in a loss of shadow detail.

If you find that your exposure is heavily biased toward the left-hand side of your histogram, you should increase the exposure to retain some shadow detail without overexposing your highlights.

Converting To Black-And-White

The two simplest ways to convert an image to black-and-white generally aren't recommended. Converting to grayscale allows the computer to convert the color file to black-and-white by discarding the color data and leaving only luminosity, or black-and-white,

information. Reducing saturation, or using the Desaturate command, is also a quick way to produce a black-and-white image, but like grayscale conversion, it hardly provides the flexibility and control that most photographers prefer.

Instead, one of the most effective ways to achieve good black-and-white results is to use the Channel Mixer in Photoshop (Select > Channel Mixer). When the dialog box is opened and the monochrome setting is checked, you adjust the red, green and blue channels to achieve the final look of your photograph.

If you're enhancing an image with strong reds or yellows, work with the red and green sliders to achieve a black-and-white conversion that will allow the reds and yellows to pop. If your image contains a lot of green foliage that you wish to render with strong contrast, begin with the blue slider and then increase the red and green sliders to fine-tune the overall look of the image.

Remember that the "right" combination of channels is entirely dependent on the content of the image. There isn't one hard and fast setting that you'll use every time. Have fun and experiment.

There are other alternative techniques, which include software filters like those found in Nik Color Efex Pro. This easy-to-use software provides a variety of tools for converting an image to black-and-white with varying degrees of contrast. Using a simple slider, you can experiment and see the results immediately in the Preview window.

Once you find what works best for you, spend more time shooting and improving the quality of your digital files rather than slaving over the computer. Shooting is always much more fun. **OP**

