

# LESSON 1: THE IMPORTANCE OF NEUTRALITY



Even if you don't know the full story, you sense that this image is too pink...



...and Neutrality is the secret to quickly fixing the problems with this image.

## LET'S PLAY A GAME: WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS PICTURE?

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Before you start color-correcting any image, take some time to plan your attack. If you took the picture, you know how it should look. If not, you have to make some assumptions.

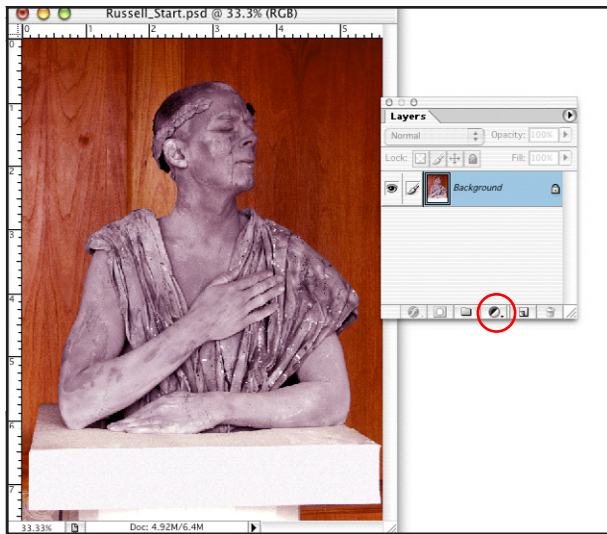
If you have no idea what an image *should* look like, it's difficult to determine which direction you should take. So, in the case of this image, a bit of back-story is helpful...

Adobe's Russell Brown loves costumes: here, he has spent considerable time having himself painted to resemble stone. Posed as a statue, he was quite a surprise to passersby. Painful for Russell, perhaps, but helpful for *us*: if we know he should be neutral gray stone, we can use that fact to help us correct the awful pink cast that's overwhelming the image.

If we make a correction that fixes the gray areas, you'll see how the rest of the image falls into place.

What if you have no idea what the "real story" is for an image? Try to find some area that you know (or suspect, or hope) should be neutral, and work from that assumption. Find a page in an open book, a concrete floor—even tree bark. You may be a little off, but chances are good that you're headed in the right direction.

# 1. Adjustment Layers



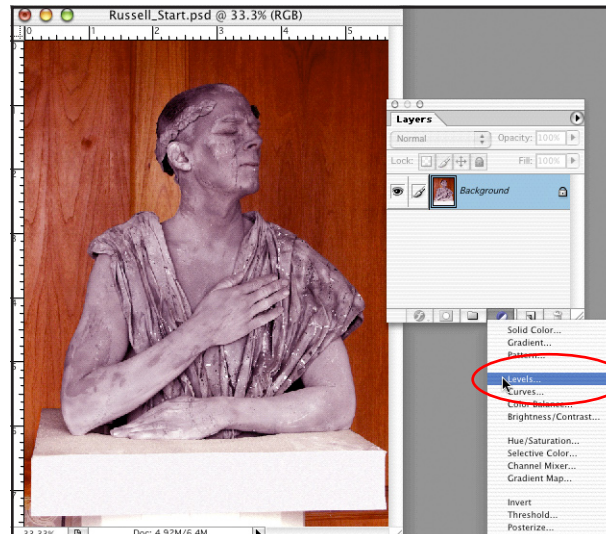
Open the file “Statue\_Start.psd.” We’ll fix the pink cast, but let’s use a safety net: **Adjustment Layers** allow you to make corrections without actually changing underlying pixels. So, if you totally blow it, you can un-do your non-destructive correction—even next week.

Not all corrections can be accomplished by using Adjustment Layers: Auto Levels, Auto Color, Auto Contrast, Replace Color and Equalize are unavailable as Adjustment Layers in Photoshop 7.0. But there are still a number of non-destructive corrections you can do with Adjustment Layers. Think of them as being like correction “filters” that float above the image: they can be turned off and on, or their effect modified by opacity settings without changing the image’s pixels.

There are two ways to create an Adjustment Layer:

1. Choose **Layers>New Adjustment Layer**, and pick the kind of adjustment you’d like to perform.
2. In the **Layers Palette**, choose the **Create New Fill or Adjustment Layer**.

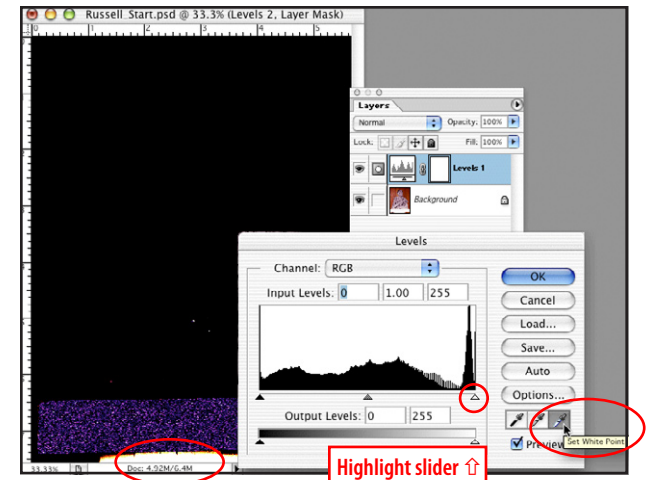
# 2. Making The Adjustment



- A. In the **Layers Palette**, choose the **Create New Fill or Adjustment Layer** icon. From the secondary menu, choose **Levels**. (**Curves** will work, too, but Levels are a bit less intimidating, and offer a handy way to determine the Highlight and Shadow areas of the image with a visual trick.)
- B. Once you’ve begun the correction, note that a new layer appears in the **Layers Palette**. You can treat it as you would any layer: turn its visibility on or off, change its opacity, change its position in the stacking order of the layers, or delete it.

This affords great flexibility: you can experiment with effects and corrections, with no repercussions. The underlying pixels are unaffected, so you can always get back to the original, uncorrected image. You can correct fearlessly!

# 3. Find The Highlights

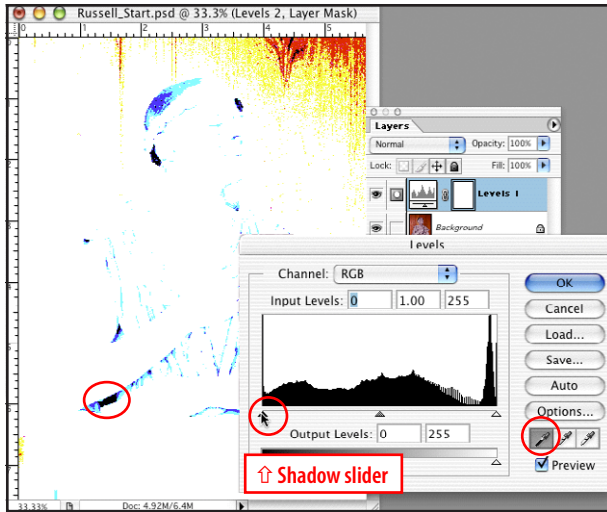


- A. In the **Levels dialog box**, select the **Highlight Slider**, then, while holding down **Option** (Macintosh) or **Alt** (Windows), drag the Highlight Slider to the left until you see the highlight areas of the image emerging from the gloom.
- B. Now that you know where the highlights are, you can map them to a healthy value. Drag the Highlight Slider back to its initial position, then choose the **White Point Selector** (the little eyedropper on the right, as indicated above). Click in the highlight area you located during your reconnaissance. Photoshop converts the corresponding values in the image to match its internal value of “a good highlight” (which you can change, if you like).

In this particular image, you won’t see a radical difference, but this is still a good starting point in most images. Keep in mind that a good highlight is defined as the lightest part of an image that retains detail, like a white shirt collar or magazine page. Specular areas, like gleams on glass or jewelry, don’t carry detail, and aren’t appropriate areas for this to work.)

You’ve “pinned down” one end of the range in the image: now you’ll go after the other end.

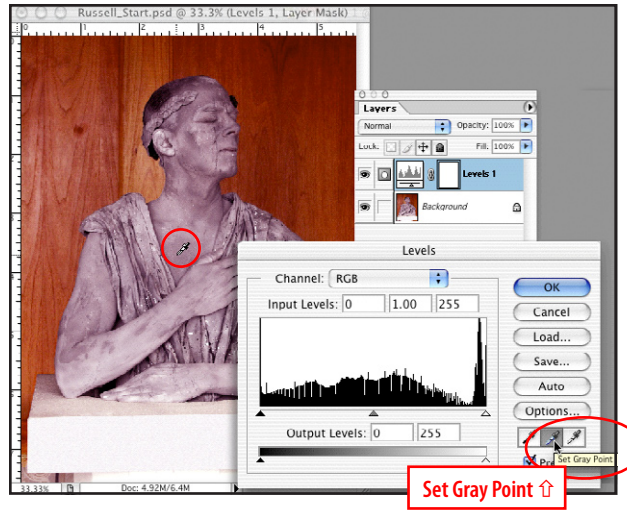
## 4. Lurking In The Shadows



- A. Click on the **Shadow Slider**, and, holding down **Option** (Macintosh) or **Alt** (Windows), drag the Shadow Slider to the right until you see the shadow areas of the image fill in with color. You're looking for the first areas to turn black, not color. (The first black areas to appear indicate a nearly-neutral area, which is what you're hunting for.)
- B. Once you've spotted the shadows, drag the slider back to its original position, then select the **Black Point eyedropper** (indicated above).
- C. With the Black Point eyedropper, click in the shadow area (we've used the darkest area underneath the statue's elbow).

Again, in this image, you won't see a dramatic change. But this should be part of your initial approach to most images, especially those with insufficient contrast ("flat"). You're mapping the image's existing pixels to more appropriate values, and improving the range of values.

## 5. Uncovering The Gray



Now for the excitement: if you can determine that some part of the image should be a **neutral gray** (that is, not pinkish or greenish or bluish), correcting that area can fix the entire image. Once the areas that should be neutral are corrected, everything else falls into place.

- A. Choose the **Set Gray Point** eyedropper, and click on the statue's chest. It's best to aim for a mid-level gray rather than the extreme highlight or shadow areas of an image when setting the gray point: you'll achieve a more realistic result.
- B. Now, check and uncheck the **Preview** box to view Before and After. Pretty amazing, isn't it? You may find that you want to mask and correct some areas that don't quite satisfy you, but this is a great (and easy) way to fix many common image problems: you've increased contrast and fixed the color cast. It's a totally different picture now!

## 6. Finished Correction



Three clicks, and your image is vastly improved, all without creating any masks. And if you discover next week that he's really supposed to be *pink* marble on a rosewood background, all is not lost: just delete or modify the Adjustment Layer.

*No pixels were harmed in the making of this correction.*