Dodge & Burn: Faces

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In this lesson, we're going to use dodge and burn layers to enhance portraits. We've covered the dodge and burn techniques in the past, but here, we're going to go a little more in-depth with the specific topic of faces.

A dodge and burn layer is a layer that can only brighten or darken what's below it. It's nice because it's separate from the underlying layer and can make it so we can take tools that we would normally need to use on the image layer and use them on this overlying, separate layer.

Dodge & Burn Layer Actions

This lesson comes with some actions that will be available for download on the course page. When you download them, they will be in a zip file. You will need to double-click on the zip file to extract the contents before installing the actions. To install an action, double-click on the file (after you've unzipped it) and Photoshop should come to the forefront. Nothing will visibly happen, but the action will be installed and you will find it at the bottom of the action list within the Actions panel. If the Actions panel is not already visible on your screen, you can access it by clicking on the Window menu and choosing Actions.

If, for some reason, the action fails to install, you can install an action manually by clicking on the little menu in the top right corner of the Actions panel and choosing "Load Actions" from the pop-up menu. You will be prompted to navigate to the location on your hard drive where your actions are stored.

There are two actions included with the lesson: "Dodge & Burn Layer in Soft Light" and "Dodge & Burn Layer in Overlay." When you dodge and burn, you're lightening and dark-
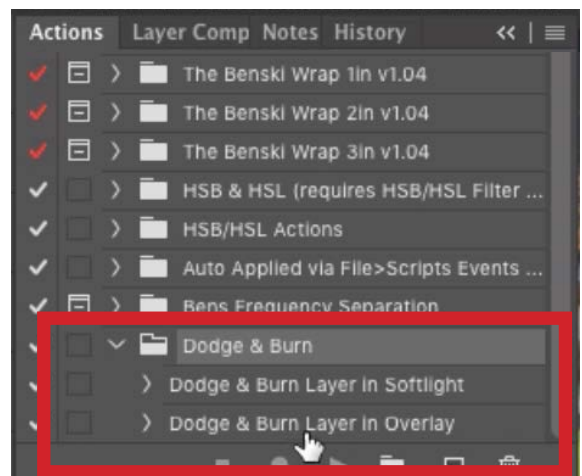
After loading the two new actions, they will appear at the bottom of the list in the Actions panel.

ening areas of the image, and these two actions give you two different options for how aggressive the effect should be. The Soft Light option will be less aggressive, where you will need to do a lot more painting in order to build up the effect. The Overlay option will be much more aggressive.

The only difference between the two actions is that the new dodge and burn layer will either be set to the Soft Light or to the Overlay blending mode. You can always change the blending mode later by using the blending mode menu at the top of the Layers panel.

The Dodge and Burn Tools

The Dodge and Burn Tools can be found in the Toolbar on the left side of Photoshop's interface. The Dodge Tool is designed to lighten things and the Burn Tool is designed to darken things. These tools both allow you to apply the effect via a brush. You can use them to paint directly on your image layer but there are two problems with that. First, the effect is not going to look as good as it will with our actions because they will not be applied with a blending mode. Secondly, when you apply the effect right on the image, it's permanent and you won't be able to go back and change it later or lessen the effect.
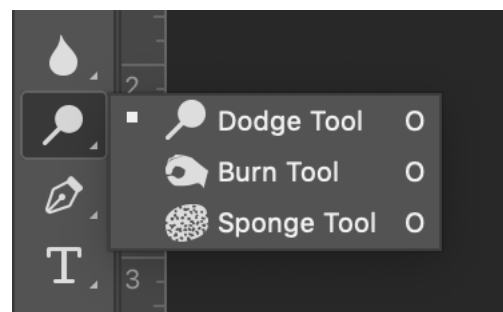
The Dodge & Burn Tools can be found within the Toolbar. They're grouped together in the same icon.

The Dodge and Burn Tools can not be applied to an empty layer. They need some kind of content in which to lighten and darken. The actions will create special layers for us that are filled with 50% gray and then set to a blending mode. Because they are filled with something (gray) the Dodge and Burn Tools can be used on them.

In the video example, we'll open the Actions panel and click on the "Dodge & Burn in Soft Light" action to make it active and then we'll click the Play button (at the bottom of the panel) to run the action. The action will run and it will result in a new layer above the image layer. The layer will be filled with 50% gray and the blending mode will be set to Soft Light. In Soft Light mode, 50% gray doesn't show up at all, so the image will appear unchanged.
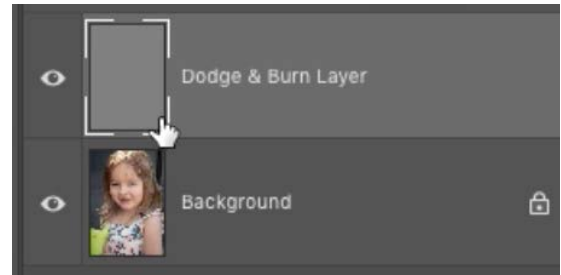
The "Dodge & Burn with Soft Light" action was run and it resulted in a new, 50% gray layer that is set to the Soft Light blending mode.

Anything darker than 50% gray will darken the layer[s] underneath. Anything brighter than 50% gray will lighten the layer[s] underneath. This means that we now have a layer that we can easily brighten or darken and we can use the Dodge and Burn Tools on this layer. In this instance, the effect of the tools will be more mellow because the layer is set to Soft Light mode.

Setting up the Dodge & Burn Tools We'll activate the Burn Tool and then focus on the settings that appear within the Options Bar at the top of the screen. (Note that the tool must be active in order for these settings to show up.) We want to make sure that we're using a really soft-edged brush, so we'll click on the Brush menu and make sure that the Hardness slider is set to 0%. Next, we want to make sure that the Range menu is set to Midtones (because 50% gray is a midtone). Finally, we want to make sure that the Exposure is at a fairly low setting. I usually start with the setting at 10%. Next, we'll activate the Dodge Tool and make sure that its options are using the same settings.
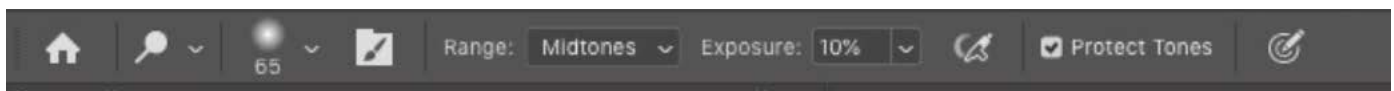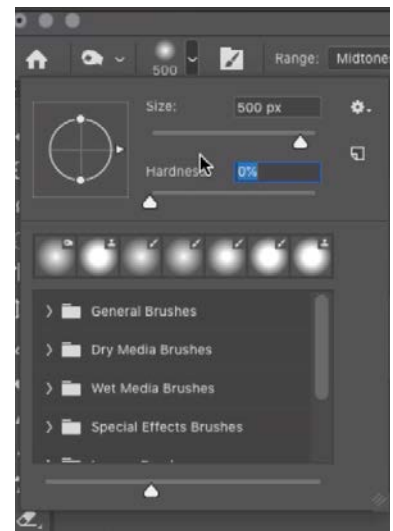
The two screen shots above show the Options Bar being set up for using the dodge and burn layer. The brush hardness is set to 0%, the Rage is set to Midtones and the Exposure is at 10%

Looking at the image, we need to decide which of the tools we'll be using the most. In the video example image, I think that we'll be darkening the face more, so we'll activate the Burn Tool. When working with these tools, you don't need to click on the Toolbar icons in order to switch between them. When working with one of the Dodge and Burn Tools, simply hold down the Option Key (Alt on Win) to temporarily switch to the other tool. For example, let's say that you're using the Burn Tool but need to temporarily switch to the Dodge Tool. Hold down the Option key and the tool will change for the entire time that the key is held down. When you release the key, you'll go back to the Burn Tool.

When dodging and burning on faces, I usually use a larger brush because the fade-out will be more gradual. The brush fade-out starts halfway from the center of the brush and extends to the edge of the brush. Therefore, the larger the brush, the softer the fade-out. Because of this, my decision on brush size is not based on the size of the area I need to cover, but rather how soft I need the edge to be.


Here, you can see the difference between burning with a small brush (the left part of the arm) vs. burning with a large brush (the right part of the arm). The large brush provides much more fade-out.

Dodging & Burning to add dimension

We're going to use the Dodge and Burn Tools to add dimension to the face. This can be useful when the photo was shot under soft or flat light, where all areas of the face are lit the same. We'll darken any areas that should appear farther from the camera (ex: the sides of the face) and lighten the areas that should appear closer (ex: the nose and cheeks on either side of the nose).

We'll make sure that the Burn Tool is active and we'll use the large, soft brush to paint in the areas we want to darken. Because the layer is set to Soft Light and we're using a 10% Exposure setting, the effect will be subtle and will take several strokes to build up. This is nice because the effect will not be blatant and it will not be so even. A little unevenness will create a more natural look. If it doesn't look like anything is happening, look at the thumbnail in the Layers panel. Here, we can see the areas where we've darkened.
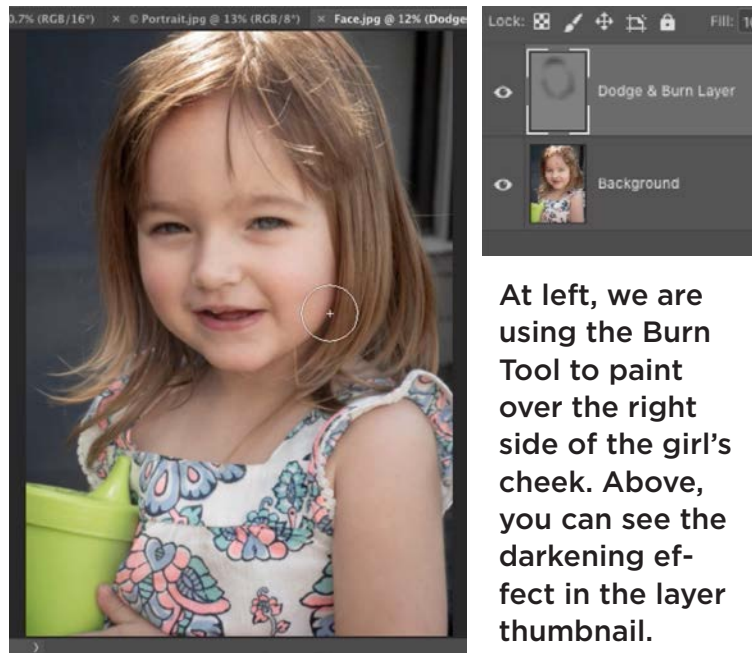
At left, we are using the Burn Tool to paint over the right side of the girl's cheek. Above, you can see the darkening effect in the layer thumbnail.

Paint with 50% gray to remove overspray If we ended up Dodging or Burning in areas we didn't intend to lighten or darken, we can fix it, but not with the Eraser Tool. In the example image, we ended up dodging the hair in addition to the face, and we want to remove the darkening effect from the hair. We'll activate the Brush Tool and paint with 50% gray over the areas where we want to remove the effect. To set the brush to paint with 50% gray, click on the Foreground Color swatch at the bottom of the Toolbar to call up the Color Picker. You will see that you can enter in values for H, S and B. Enter in the following: H: 0, S: 0, B: 50. Click OK and you'll be ready to paint with 50% gray.
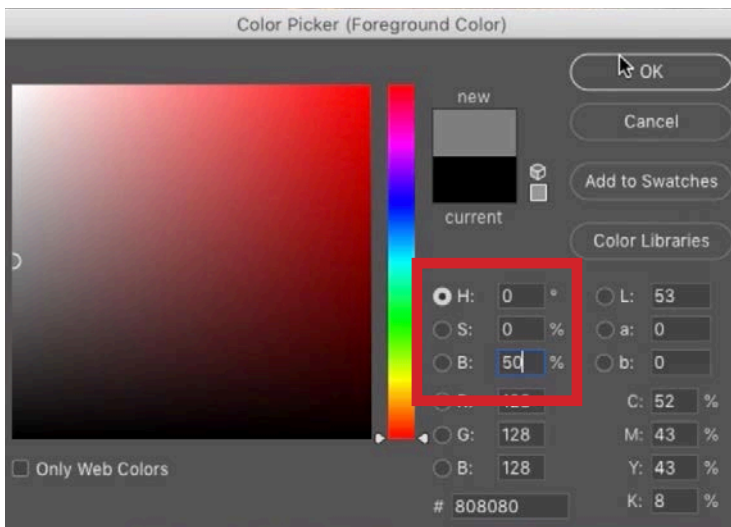
To set the foreground color to 50% gray, set the H and S values to 0 and set the B value to 50.

LEFT: We are painting with 50% gray to remove overspray from using the Dodge Tool. RIGHT: We turned off the visibility of the image layer so that we are only viewing the dodge and burn layer. This shows us where we need to clean up the overspray areas.

If you want to see your paint strokes, you can turn off the visibility of the image layer so that you can only see the dodge and burn layer. This will allow you to see whether you need to clean up the area[s] where you painted.

Applying dodge and burn in steps I usually apply dodging and burning in three separate steps, with three separate layers. One of the layers will be for the big things, where I'm using huge brushes to work on the overall areas of the face. I want this on a separate layer so that I can make changes to it after I'm done making other adjustments (without affecting some of the smaller changes I've made). This is the layer that we've just created.

Now, we'll create another dodge and burn layer to work on smaller elements in the face. We'll get this layer by running the same action (Dodge & Burn in Soft Light). We'll activate the Burn Tool and use a smaller brush to work on the smaller elements in the girl's face. We'll paint on the far side of the nose, and also paint over the nose and cheek indentations, to make them more structured. We can also paint on the eyebrows and eyelashes to darken those a bit too.

If we want to do any lightening, we can hold down the Option key (Alt on Win) to get the opposite of the tool's current setting. In this case, since we are working with the Burn Tool, holding down the Option key will give us the Dodge Tool. We'll use the Dodge Tool to paint over the girl's irises. You can also use the Dodge Tool to lighten the whites of the eyes, but be careful when doing this, as it's easy to overdo it and make the whites *so* white that they look unnatural.
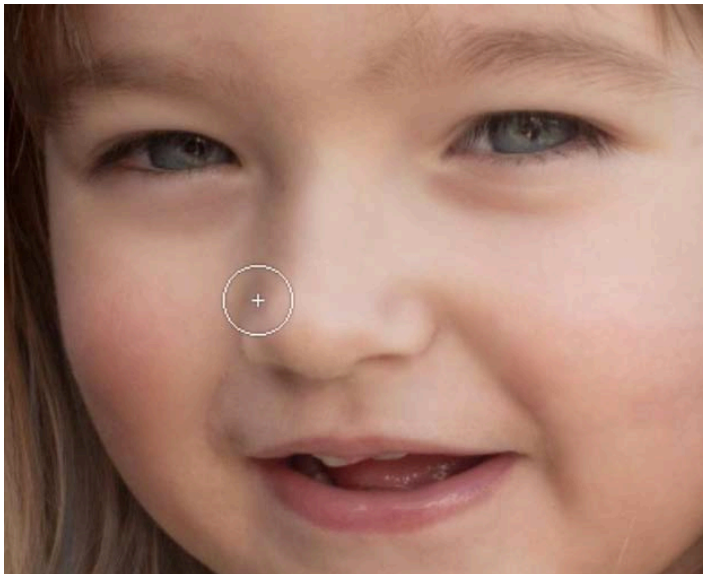
LEFT: The Burn Tool is being used to darken the far side of the girl's nose. ABOVE: The Dodge Tool is being used to lighten the iris.

Now we have two dodge and burn layers: one that contains the work on the larger areas and another that contains the adjustments to the finer, detailed areas. We can work between these layers as needed.

In the video example, we'll click back on the layer that contains the adjustments to the larger areas, as we want to make further changes here. We'll hold down the Option key (Alt on Win) to temporarily access the Dodge Tool and we'll use a large brush to paint on the girl's forehead, lightening it up a bit. We'll do the same thing with the girl's cheeks.

I mentioned above that I apply my dodging and burning in three steps and three layers. We already have two of those layers. The third layer will be used to adjust the really small details. We'll make sure that the top layer is active and we'll run the same action again ("Dodge and Burn with Soft Light"). This will add yet another 50% gray layer at the top of the layer stack. The Burn Tool should still be

active, so we'll use a very small brush to start darkening some of the tiny details. First, we'll paint around the edges of the girl's lips, making those edges more defined. We'll hold down the Option key (Alt on Win) to use the Dodge Tool over the shiny part of the lip in order to brighten it more.

The Burn Tool is being used, with a very small brush, to paint over the edges of the lips.

We'll continue refining the image by using the same techniques. We'll switch between the layers and use the Dodge and Burn Tools to add dimension to the overall face, the small areas and then the finest details. In general, we add dimension by lightening the highlight areas and darkening the shadow areas, or the areas that should appear farther from the camera.

You're not limited in the number of layers that you can use for this technique. You may want to create a separate dodge and burn layer to work on an individual area. This would allow you to isolate the area and delete any overspray from the rest of the image. In our example, we added a separate dodge and burn layer to work on the girl's neck. We used the Burn Tool on the sides of her neck (to darken) and we used the Dodge Tool in the middle of her neck to lighten it. This created much more dimension in that area. We then used the Brush Tool, set to 50% gray, and painted in the areas where we got overspray.

Remember, you can examine the dodge and burn layer individually to see whether you need to fine-tune the areas that may have overspray. To view one layer and turn off the visibility of all the other layers, hold down the Option key (Alt on Win) and click on the eyeball icon to the left of the layer's thumbnail. Do the same thing to turn the other layers' visibility back on. You can do this with the Background layer to see a before-and-after view of your work.

When looking at the final result, you may find that an area is overdone. If this is the case, simply lower the opacity of the layer targeting that area.

When you're done dodging and burning, you can clean up the Layers panel by placing all of the dodge and burn layers into a layer group, or layer folder. That's what we did in the video example and we named the group "D&B layers."

Above, you can see a before and after view of the dodge and burn work. The version on the right has much more dimension in the face, arm and neck.

Additional Dodge & Burn Tips

We used the Dodge and Burn Tools to add contour to a person in the example above, but you aren't limited to people. You can use the tools on any image that could benefit from some selective brightening and darkening.

The before-and-after images at left show that you can use the dodge and burn technique with images other than people. You can see the dodge and burn layer thumbnail above.

If you use the Dodge Tool to lighten a large area, you may paint over areas that have dark details that should stay dark. Having small areas of solid black in an image can make the image pop more. To fix this, click on the FX icon at the bottom of the Layers panel and choose Blending Options from the pop-up menu. The Layer Style dialog will appear and the blending sliders will be at the bottom. You'll want to use the bottom, "Underlying Layer" sliders. Bring in the slider on the left until you can start to see some of the dark areas come back. Then, hold down the Option key (Alt on Win) and click and drag on the right half of the slider, breaking it into two halves. This creates a softer transition. The farther the two halves are, the softer the transition is. Click OK once you've reintroduced some of the black details that were lost.
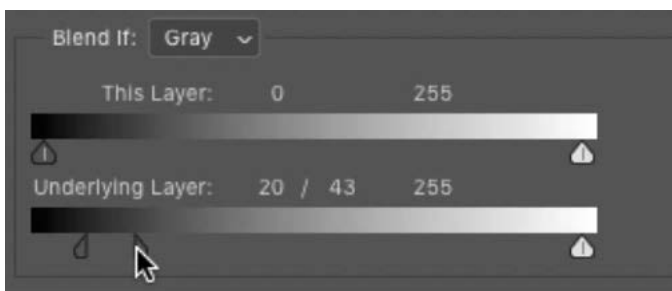
The blending sliders are being used on the dodge and burn layer to reintroduce the black details back into an image that had a lot of dodging (lightening).