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Adjust Shadows and Highlights to Rescue a Dark Photograph with Photoshop

Sometimes parts of a photograph are too dark. There are many reasons for this. One of the most common is that a camera's exposure sensors read the bright parts of a scene and cause other areas to come out too dark. With Photoshop it is sometimes possible to rescue a photograph by lightening a dark zone and bringing out the detail.

The photograph on the right was taken with a camera that was set to "automatic." The sensors picked up the bright light from the sky and reflection from the swimming pool. The camera incorrectly processed the image and as a result the subject is much too dark.

In this handout, we will use Photoshop to lighten the subject and bring out detail.

Open your photograph in Photoshop and make a copy. Remember, we never want to work on the original photograph. If something goes wrong, we may lose it forever.

> NOTE: There are several ways to make a copy of a photograph. One is to click Select, and then click All. Click Edit, then choose Copy. Click File, choose New, give your new file a name in the control panel, click OK. A blank image will appear. Click Edit, then choose Paste. The image will be pasted into the file as a layer.
>
> A quick way using keyboard shortcuts on a PC is to click Control and A, then Control and C, then Control and N. Give the file a name and click OK. Then click Control and V.

Save your new photo with the Photoshop file name extension, .psd.

Click Image on the Menu bar.

Select Adjustments on the drop down menu.

Click Shadows/Highlight on the pop out menu. The Shadow/Highlights control panel will be displayed.

NOTE: Check the Show More Options check box if you do not have the full size control panel illustrated on the right.
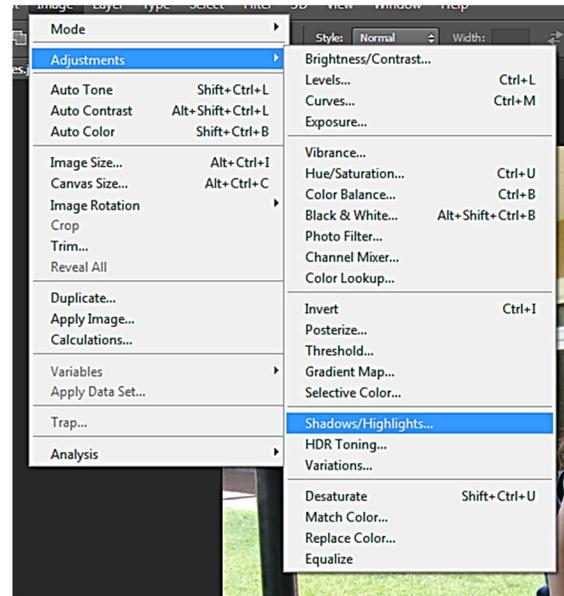
Adjust the sliders for Shadows and Highlights that are shown in the illustration on the right.
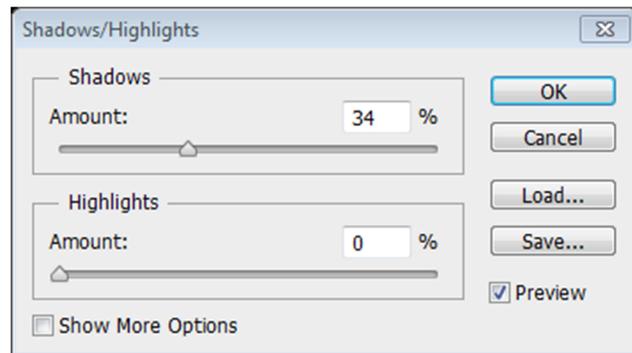
You will probably notice an immediate change in your photograph as the Photoshop defaults take effect. In the illustration on the right you will see that the subject is much brighter than before.

It is often surprising to discover how much detail the camera actually recorded. Most photographers think that if the photo is dark there is no data. However, this is not always the case. The next few steps are to make the picture look as it was originally intended.

Another option that sometimes is successful for rescuing a dark photograph is to adjust the expose setting. In a camera the exposure settings are manipulated to control the length of time that the shutter is open and the f-stop that sets the amount the shutter is open. These two functions determine how much light lands on a digital camera's sensor, or, in the case of a film camera, how much light hits the film.

Photoshop has a tool that allows imitating the exposure settings that are available with a camera. While this is not exactly the same as adjusting camera settings, the results are similar in many cases.

Click Image then Adjustments, and select Exposure from the pop out list.

The Exposure panel, shown on the right, allows you to adjust the appearance of your photograph.

Try making adjustments until your picture looks acceptable.