

Through The Lens

*A guide to digital photography for computer enthusiasts.
After the click of your camera, you're only half done!*

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How to punch up your photos

by Lynda Buske

If you regularly take photos with your cell phone, you may do very little editing (other than cropping) since cell phones, in the process of creating the jpgs, often add vibrancy, sharpness, saturation, etc. But it may end up looking a bit unnatural and can be tricky to dial back such effects in post processing.

However, if you are shooting with a more traditional camera such as a DSLR or mirrorless, you may find the opposite happens. Both the Canon and Nikon I shoot with regularly tend to process photos with a minimum of contrast. This can cause the photos to look kind of dull and muted when I first take them out of the camera and onto my PC.

I have heard folk say, “My cell phone takes better photos than my camera”. With a few exceptions (like low light situations) it can just be that you like the decisions the cell phone is making on your behalf. It doesn't bother me that my camera tends to do fewer adjustments when creating the jpg as it means I am able to adjust without overdoing it (or I can shoot RAW for full control). For instance, I rarely add saturation to an image but instead, **use contrast to punch up my photos**. That way I don't get the lurid colours that don't usually occur in nature. Besides, I always have more pixels to play with than with my cell phone and that is a big help when making fine adjustments or cropping in on a bird or animal.

So how does contrast work? Below is an image out of camera, with added contrast versus added saturation.



Colours seem dull out of camera



Colours appear unnatural with saturation



Enhanced but natural with added contrast

Adding contrast increases the differences between the brighter and darker areas of your photo. It will add more pure black and pure white to your image so rather than a range of soft mid-tones (or grey in a monochrome image), your pixels are more evenly distributed and your image appears sharper. You can see this in the accompanying histograms (shown in bottom right-hand corner of all these pictures) which show the distribution of pixels with the left side being pure black and the right side being pure white.

Sometimes the contrast is a bit too much of a blunt instrument since it may end up creating too much pure black in order to get any pure white (see “Contrast” photo below and histogram weighted to the left side). In these cases, use the *White* and *Black* sliders. In the free Photoscape X these can be found under *Colour* then *More*. In Lightroom there are clearly marked under the *Develop* tab. Pull the white and black sliders individually to get what you want. Watch the histogram to make sure you have pixels touching both the left and right side of the graph. Be careful that there are no large areas of pure white if you are going to print the image as it may affect how it appears on glossy paper.

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Dull colours right out of camera



Contrast added too much black



Using black/white slider bars gave more control