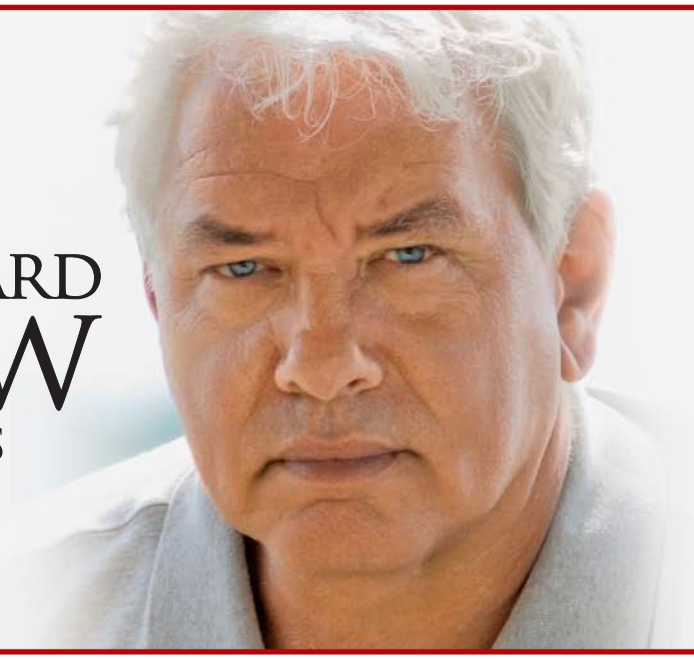
The Picture Postcard Workflow

By Dan Margulis



THREE MINUTES TO A PICTURE POSTCARD

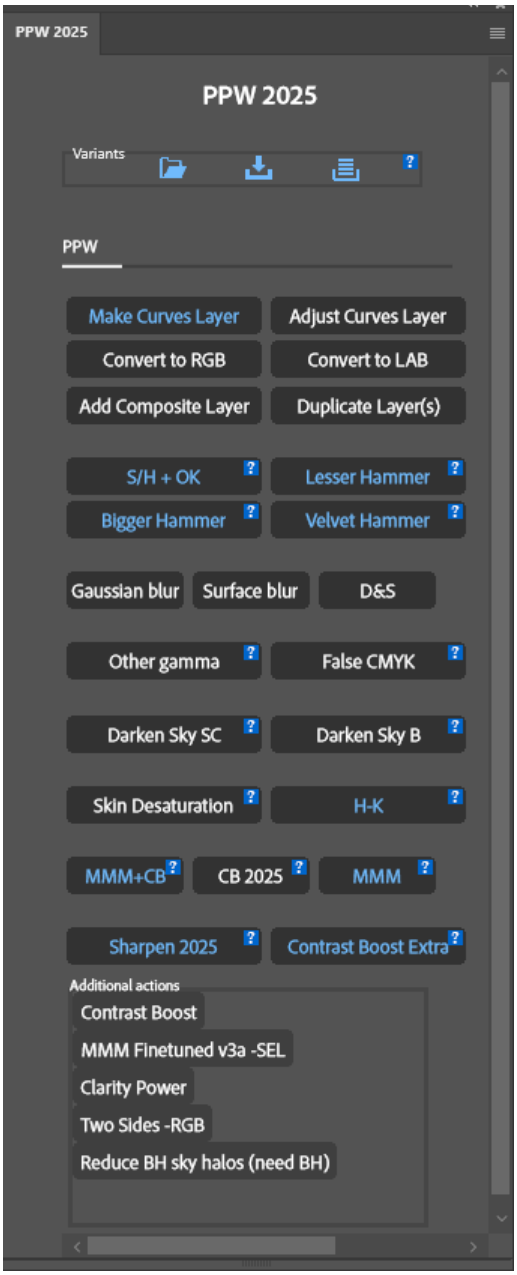
Suggested Workflow, revised August 2026

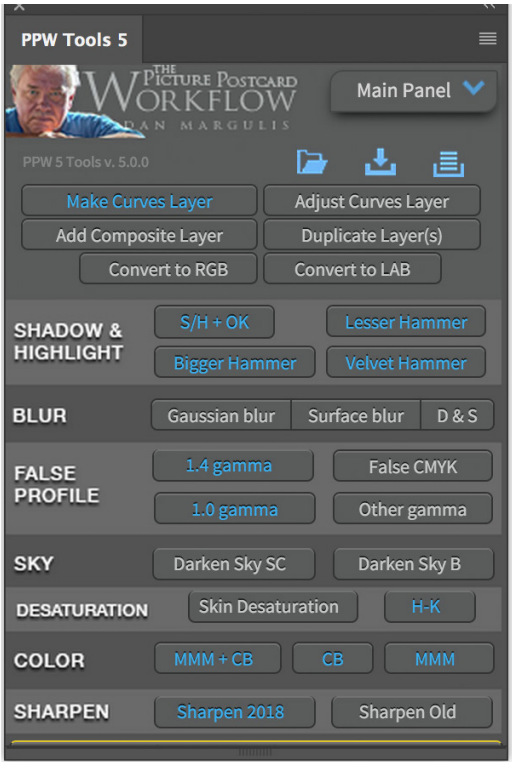
Preflight: The Power of Automation

The Picture Postcard Workflow was introduced in April, 2007 and has been updated frequently since then. Some of the PPW is simple, but other parts contain so many steps that the only practical way to apply them is to automate. The introduction of Adobe Configurator made an action-based workflow even more attractive. Configurator, short-lived as it was, enabled us to organize everything into a single panel that allowed access to each action by a single click. As the actions matured, I began using a simple Configurator-based workflow in my classes in 2010.

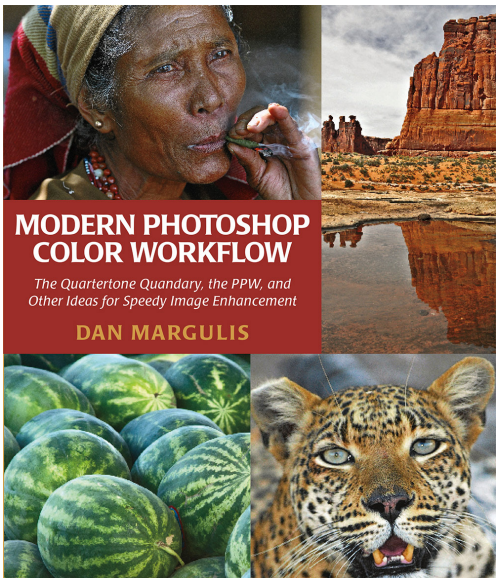
The potential of this panel was so clear that many people volunteered to improve it. I enlisted the energy of three Italian colleagues, who felt that a more sophisticated variant was possible and desirable. The design and functionality of the new panel was a group effort. The complicated scripting was done by Giuliana Abbiati. Most of the documentation within the panel is by me, but there are also important articles by Alessandro Bernardi and Marco Olivotto. I thank students in my color correction classes and also members of my Applied Color Theory mailing list for feedback that led to improvements in the actions.

In Fall 2011 we released a significant improvement: a scripted PPW Panel that also enabled certain commands commonly used in the workflow, such as blur filters. In March 2012, we released panel version 2, with certain improved actions and many new user-definable options. Version 3 came out in March 2013; version 4 in January 2015, version 5, the final one prepared by the Italian team, in May 2018.





Left, today's PPW2025. Above, the 2018 PPW Panel v.5. In both cases, blue type indicates options beyond merely clicking the script button. Below, for more in-depth coverage than this document offers, Dan's 2013 book Modern Photoshop Color Workflow.



Photoshop CS5 was the first to support such a custom panel, but every significant Photoshop update for more than a decade thereafter required a new installer and a partial rewrite. In Photoshop CC2014, Adobe withdrew support for Flash-based panels altogether, necessitating a complete rewrite into HTML5 and two different installers, one for CS5/CS6/CC and a second specifically for CC2014. When it became clear after our 2018 v.5 release that even this rewrite was shortly going to become obsolete, we reluctantly abandoned development, disappointing tens of thousands of users worldwide. Over the years, those numbers dwindled as the panel became incompatible with more computers. By 2022, we were no longer offering support for it, although many diehard users had found ways to keep it running.

In March 2025, the panel rose phoenix-like from its ashes. A Dutch team of Bart Mellenbergh and Gerald Bakker produced PPW2025, a new version coded in Adobe's Unified Extensibility Platform, which should make it compatible with Photoshop for many years to come. They have since released several significant updates.

The panel remains freeware. It contains extensive documentation of each action. All actions and documentation are loaded automatically by the installer. Everything can be downloaded at https://geraldbakker.nl/PPWF/ppw2025-latest-version-and-download-info.html

The Picture Postcard Workflow is a concept, the actions and the panel merely one way of implementing it. The underlying idea is that both quality and speed improve if color and contrast are adjusted separately, and in fact the color is adjusted both at the start and end of the process. The corollary is that the speed and power suggest a drastic change in thinking even for high-quality work. Excellent corrections are possible in an average of three minutes.

If that's all the time you can afford, fine. But if the image is worth more time, don't just slow down and take more care. Work as if you had only the three minutes, then save your work and start again from scratch. Doing so will produce an alternate version that likely will have certain strong points that can be blended advantageously into the first, with a greater gain in quality than a painstaking approach to the first version. Our 2018 release featured Variants, a new structure to expedite this procedure without relying on cumbersome Smart Objects. Complicated as it was, Bart and Gerald have duplicated it in PPW2025.

If the following document isn't sufficient, my 2013 book *Modern Photoshop Color Workflow* offers 450 pages of theoretical background, exercises, and comparisons of approach. It is intended for an expert audience, although each chapter has a section that requires little knowledge of Photoshop. What follows here is a capsule view of the entire process.

—Dan Margulis

Step One: Correct Color Problems (RGB)



Use a Threshold adjustment layer, if needed, to identify the lightest and darkest significant areas—not the areas that are literally lightest and darkest. Place a color sampler point in each for later use. Discard the Threshold layer. *Note:* this step is easier if you set the Threshold layer opacity to about 50%.

Using the Info palette, examine the image for any colors that cannot possibly be correct. If none can be found, proceed to Step Two. Otherwise, establish a curves adjustment layer to remove the objectionable colors. Although you have, in the previous paragraph, identified the highlight and shadow points, do not concern yourself with them yet unless you are certain that they should actually be white or black. In that case, neutralize them, but do not attempt to force them to their proper darkness values.

Recommendation: Although this step takes place in RGB, it goes much faster if you think in terms of LAB equivalents. Set the right-hand side of the Info palette to read LAB, and you'll only have to evaluate two channels for color, rather than three. If you aren't familiar with LAB numbering, learning it would be an excellent investment of time even if this were its only advantage.

Additional step: Unless you are an expert in this workflow, always change the mode for the curves layer from Normal to Color—even if that makes the image look flatter, worse. Since these curves are not intended to augment contrast, there is no point in pre-empting better contrast curves later.

How often is this step used? Studio photographers generally get good color off the bat and rarely have to do anything major at this point. People who shoot in difficult lighting conditions have to do it frequently. I work with images from many different sources; my experience is that around 50 percent need this step and, even if a move is made, it may be an insignificant one. But the remaining 25-40 percent of the time the move is critical.

Differences from previous recommendations: The Adjust Curves Layer was missing from the first versions of PPW2025 but has now been restored.

Step Two: Improve Contrast

After Step One, we can assume that there is nothing obviously *wrong* with the color, even if it isn't currently attractive. Livening it up is saved for later in this workflow. The current step aims to reallocate contrast in a more pleasing way, but ignores color altogether.

In simplest form, this step establishes endpoints. It can also adjust overall weight. The more radical move is to use the detail in one channel to beef up that of another. Such channel blending would be unwise if color issues were unresolved. But with Step One out of the way, the channel blend can take place on a layer set to Luminosity mode. Here's the suggested procedure:



a) Flatten the file if necessary. Establish a duplicate layer.

b) Examine the red, green, and blue channels to see if any is clearly superior to one or both others. If it is, replace the bad channel(s) with the good one, using Lighten or Darken mode if appropriate. The RGB composite, which is a grayscale conversion, can also be used as a blend source.

c) When finished with blending, if any, examine the red and green channels again (the blue contributes so little to contrast that you may as well ignore it.) If any curve is available that increases detail in the critical areas of the red and/or green, go for it.

d) Set layer mode to Luminosity. *Note:* often there is more opportunity for improvement in the green channel than in the red. If this is the case, consider running *two* luminosity layers, or, more commonly, a straight luminosity layer with a curves adjustment layer, also set to Luminosity mode. While the first layer is still in Normal mode (before setting it to Luminosity) adjust the green to be as light as possible consistent with holding highlight detail—normally a value of around 250g. When the layer is set to Luminosity mode, this number will be recalculated because the other channels are currently darker, so the new green value will be lower (darker). It is now possible, with a curves adjustment layer, to re-lighten the green, again in Luminosity mode.

At the end of this step, save a copy for possible future use in blending.

Additional option (general): An alternative way of improving contrast is by either clicking the *Contrast Boost Extra* button or running the *Contrast Boost* addition action. Each aims to strengthen contrast on a large-radius scale. As a one-click option, this fits well in the workflow philosophy; however, the only control the user has is the actual size of the radius. If more fine-tuning is required, usual techniques like masking or changing opacities have to be invoked.

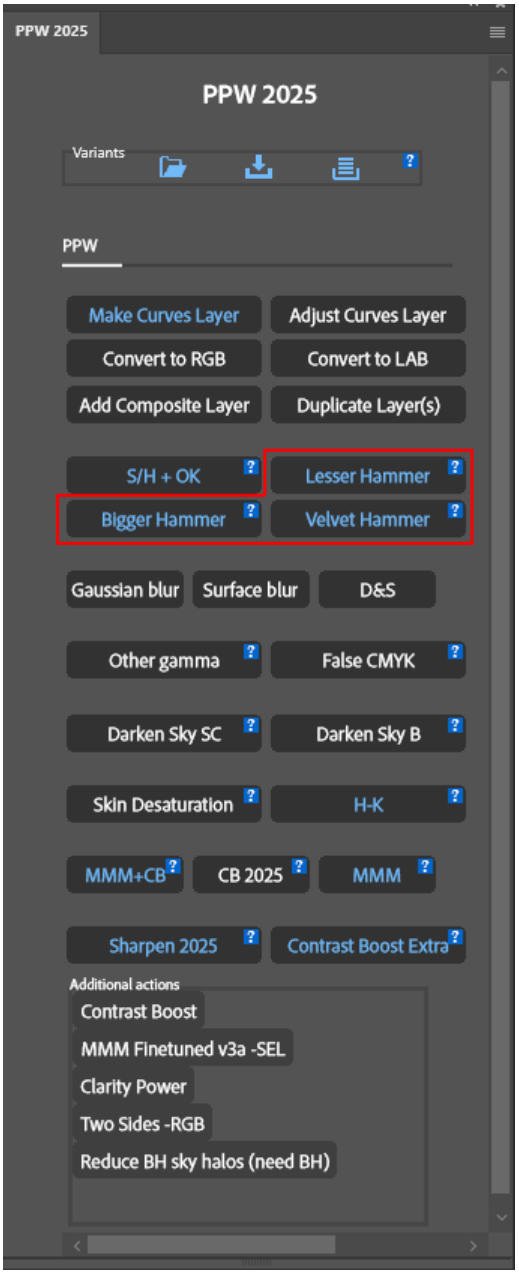
Both actions create a layer group which includes a Reduce sky halos layer. The purpose of this layer is to revert updates in blue areas in case unacceptable halos appear in a blue sky. The layer is hidden by default.

Contrast Boost Extra is the more complex of the two. It takes longer to run and generally provides slightly better results than its counterpart *Contrast Boost*.

Additional option (skies): The blue areas of certain skies seem too light for the rest of the picture. If your sense of aesthetics calls for darkening them, two similar actions are supplied. Both create an alpha channel for skies and leave you with a multiply layer with that channel as a layer mask. The primary action is called Sky Mask SC. If the sky is complex, with lots of subtle interaction between clouds and blue, use Sky Mask B instead.

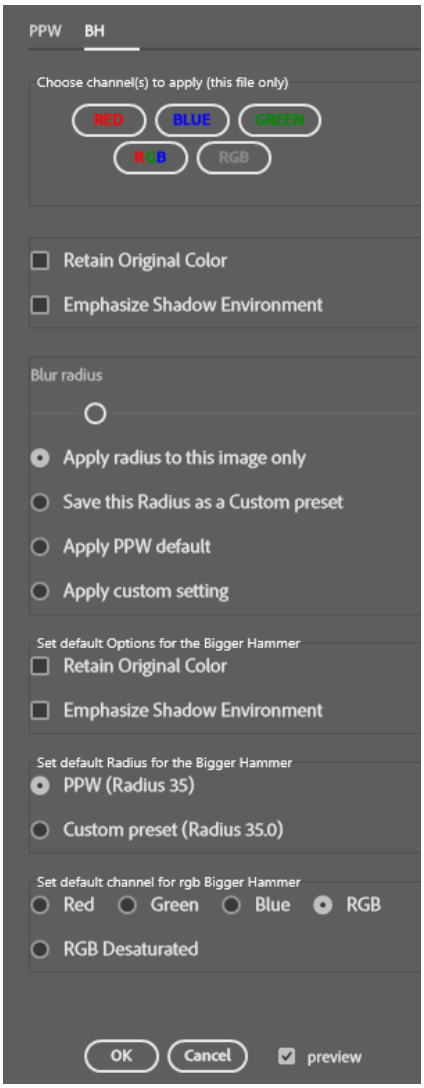
How often is Step Two used? Close to 90 percent of images benefit from luminosity moves, either blending, curves, or both.

Differences from previous recommendations: If the original image is very flat, as when it has been acquired conservatively from a raw module I usually prefer to execute Step Two before Step One, it makes curvewriting to correct color easier. Those who prefer to acquire images using very conservative settings in raw modules produce such flat originals.



Step Three: Three Different Hammers

This step pertains to cases where more detail in the highlights and/or shadows is desired. Photoshop's Shadows/Highlights command (and the Highlights and Shadows sliders in its raw modules) do this to some extent, but better ideas are needed.



Scripted options are available for all actions shown in blue type in the main panel. Above, the dialog that appears when the user Option-clicks the Bigger Hammer script button.

In certain images, such as waterfalls, highlight detail is so critical that the image can be considered a failure if it isn't brought out. Bigger Hammer was designed for this case. It is based on an inverted blurred overlay, and has become more powerful over the years with the introduction of many options within the PPW Panel options window. When it works well, the results are spectacular, but sometimes it can leave nasty halos, especially in skies. For this reason, PPW2025 has added a *Reduce BH sky halos* option under Additional actions at the bottom of the panel.

Although that action, or a big reduction in opacity, or manual retouching, can keep the halos acceptable, it also takes away the power of the script. Therefore, in early 2014 I released a script called Lesser Hammer, more complicated and less prone to haloing, while being only slightly less effective than Bigger Hammer in bringing out detail.

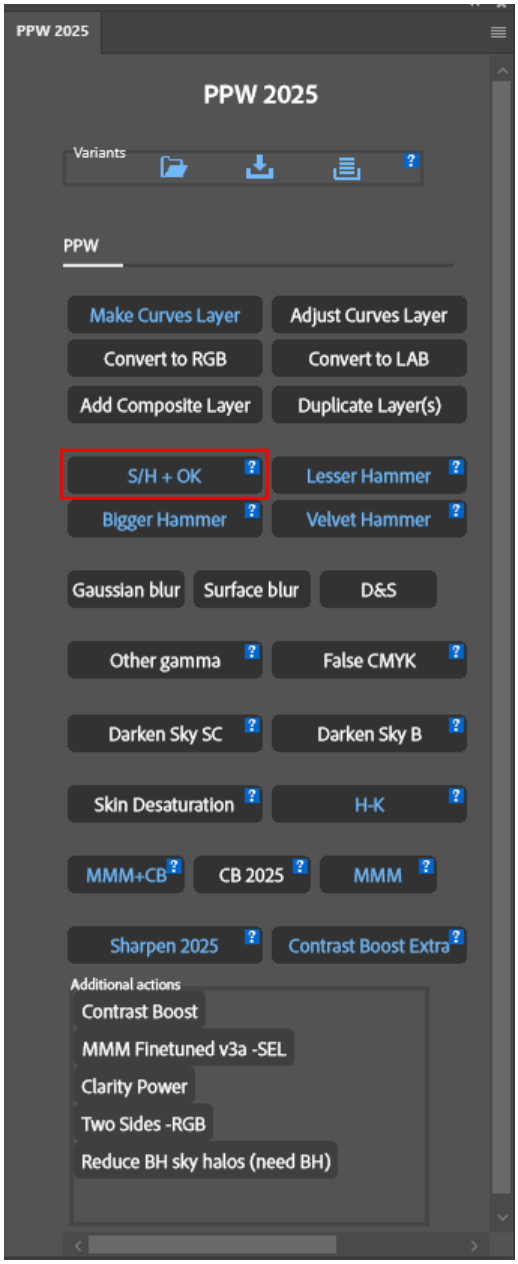
Lesser Hammer often works striking improvement in portraits. On the other hand, it sometimes damages them. Because of the importance of this image category, I then came up with a third action, Velvet Hammer, that once again traded some potency for a lower failure rate.

With three related actions it is hard to choose the right one for each category. Sometimes they are predictable. For example, the Lesser Hammer short-changes midtones, so if that range is important, the Velvet Hammer is the better option. On the other hand, both scripts do exceptionally well with flowers, so if the picture is important, it's best to give each a try before deciding on a winner.

And there are still other options: a combination of more than one of these, or Shadows/Highlights, or the false profile/multiply method of Step Five. Again, some things are predictable. Shadows/Highlights only acts when all channels are light or all are dark; the three Hammers work when *any* is light or any is dark. The translation is that the Hammers do well with flower images and Shadows/Highlights does not.

The Step Five multiplication procedure, for its part, is a pleasant way of bringing the two halves of the image closer together. It does not boost highlight and shadow contrast the way the Hammers do, but in some images you would not want it to, as doing so might divert attention from more important areas.

To summarize, much depends on how much time you are willing to allot to a conceivably crucial step. If time is of the essence Shadows/Highlights does a competent job of enhancing light and dark neutrals. For more important work the Velvet Hammer often does better and never does worse, but Shadows/Highlights may be needed afterward. And for high-value images that need highlight and/or shadow detail time should be allowed for experimentation at this point.



> ***How often is Step Three used?*** In principle, whenever we wish to enhance highlights or shadows and have more than a couple of seconds to do it.
>
> ***Differences from previous recommendations:*** None in the past ten years, other than the introduction of the Reduce sky halos action.

Step Four: Shadows/Highlights Command

The Photoshop default settings for this command are stronger than I recommend. At the more sedate settings found in the action, S/H won't harm the image, unless you're using it inappropriately by applying it to an image that has no significant detail to enhance or where it would be counterproductive to do so because it would distract attention from more important things.

Accordingly, the recommendation used to be that S/H should be used on most images, the exceptions being those in which highlights and shadows are totally unimportant, and the opposite, where they are of critical importance. In short, whenever enhancing them would be nice but not essential.

The point was that if enhancement was vital, we would use the Bigger Hammer action, which is great for such images but opens a can of worms when applied to less worthy ones. Thus, the innocuous Shadows/Highlights was the main tool.

Lesser Hammer and Velvet Hammer are more powerful than S/H, yet not as dangerous as Bigger Hammer. Unlike S/H, they enhance detail in all highlights, including the weak channels of strongly colored objects like flowers. They tend to get better results when the highlight and/or shadow enhancement is even moderately important. S/H, because of its speed and simplicity, remains the choice when the enhancement is more of an afterthought.

There is, however, another use for it. The Shadows/Highlights default, both Photoshop's and the one used in our script, establishes good endpoints by automatically blowing out a few stray pixels in the lightest and darkest parts of the image. The Hammer actions don't do that, so applying S/H afterward can make sense.

The question is, *when* to do it. If you are intending to do some multiplying (Step Five) then the time to apply S/H is now, while the file is still in RGB. If not, in a full PPW process, wait until the file enters LAB prior to Step Six, as there is a mild technical advantage to using that color-space for S/H.

How often is Step Four used? Used to be about two-thirds of the time. Today it is considerably less.

Differences from previous recommendations: The use as a supplement to the Hammer actions, and the possible move into LAB. Further changes explained in the commentary on Step Three.

Step Five, Preflight: Is Multiplying Appropriate?

When a picture is partly in sun and partly in shade, the camera does not provide a starting point that we consider natural. A human observer perceives a more balanced scene.

If you do not find that the image divides into distinct light and dark areas, forget Step Five and skip to Step Six. If you do see a light and a dark half, however, decide which of the following descriptions applies.

Case One: The light half is too light but the dark half is approximately correct, and unlikely to plug if a good mask is used.

Case Two: There is a danger of plugging the shadows by multiplying, with or without a mask.

Case Three: The image may or may not be of the correct weight. Your main goal is not just to make brighter colors generally, but to call attention to subtle distinctions.

How often is Step Five used? It's not just for sun and shade, but any image that can clearly be divided into light and dark components. However, the Lesser Hammer or Velvet Hammer scripts may substitute for the technique in certain cases. I would say that one of the three variants of Step Five is appropriate in around a quarter of all images.

Differences from previous recommendations: Originally I recommended that the multiplication be done in LAB because it boosted colors attractively. Experience, though, convinced me that an RGB multiplication is better. At the moment after the multiplication, an LAB file looks better—but the RGB multiplication leaves more room for the superior color techniques of Steps Six and Seven.

In deciding whether to emphasize this method or one of the Hammer actions, ask yourself whether you are really trying to gain detail in the lighter half of the image or just bring it more into harmony with the whole. The Hammers add more detail, but sometimes that isn't what's desired.

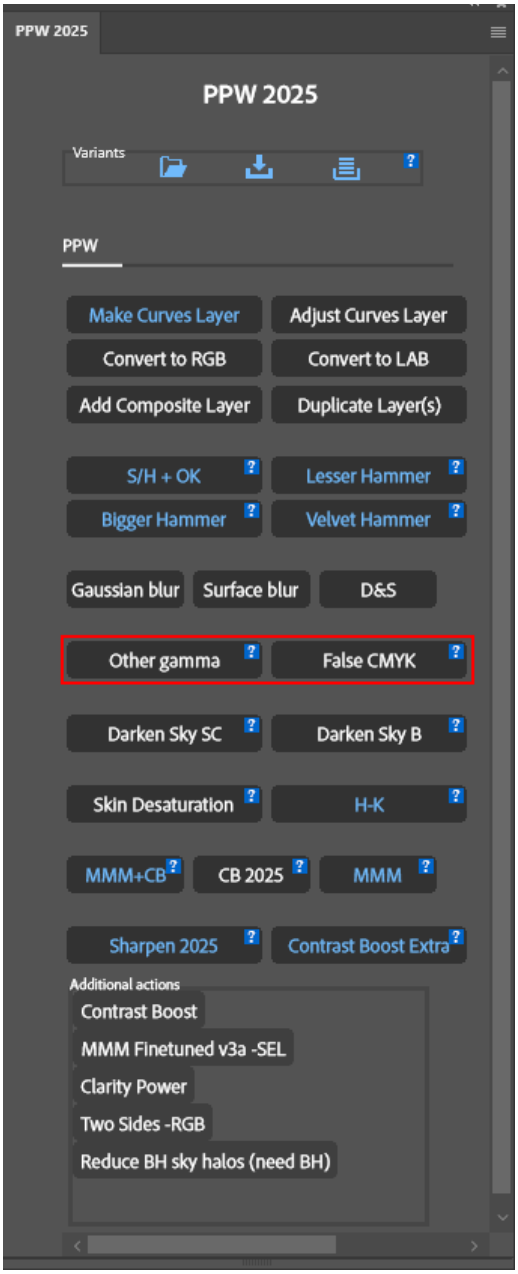
Step Five, Case One: The Straight Multiply

If you don't think that there is much danger of plugged shadows and you feel that the light parts are distinctly too light, make a duplicate layer (or blank adjustment layer) set to Multiply mode. Load one of the RGB channels as a layer mask; if you don't have a preference for any one channel, load the RGB composite as the mask.

Blur the layer mask heavily. For files in the neighborhood of 15-30 mb, a Gaussian blur Radius of about 30 pixels is appropriate.

Step Five, Case Two: Multiplication with False Profile

If the RGB image already seems to be of the correct weight, and/or you are worried about plugged shadows, you need to lighten the file before proceeding. The best way to do so is by assigning a false profile. In PPW2025, doing so requires starting with an embedded profile in one of the following six RGBs: Adobe, Image P3, ColorMatch, ProPhoto, sRGB, Wide Gamut. A file with no embedded profile, or with a profile other than those just named, causes the script to fail.



Three of the above employ a 2.2 gamma and three a 1.8. For this step, you will usually want something lower. (Note that increasing a gamma value will make an image look darker, decreasing it lighter.)

Click the Other Gamma button, and PPW2025 presents a panel with no less than nine gamma choices: 0.75, 1.0, 1.2, 1.4, 1.7, 2.0, 2.2, 2.5 and 3.0. The script senses your workspace and chooses the correct false profile to match it.

If you are not comfortable with false profiles, a reasonable alternative is to apply Image: Adjustments>Exposure>Gamma Correction at a value of around 1.50.

When a lighter gamma is chosen, multiply through a blurred layer mask as in Case One. (From the panel, this can be generated automatically by clicking the appropriate checkbox in the Preferences for assigning profiles tab.)

In the rare case where a gamma darker than 2.2 is chosen, a logical extra step is to screen through a blurred and inverted layer mask.

If you are using a false profile, remember that an eventual conversion to some other colorspace, such as LAB (or to your normal RGB workspace), is required. That conversion finalizes the lighter look. The file can then be reconverted safely to RGB.

Step Five, Case Three: The CMYK Detour

If you are looking to accentuate the difference between colors, brightening some dramatically while holding more neutral ones in check, start by flattening the RGB image if necessary. Then,

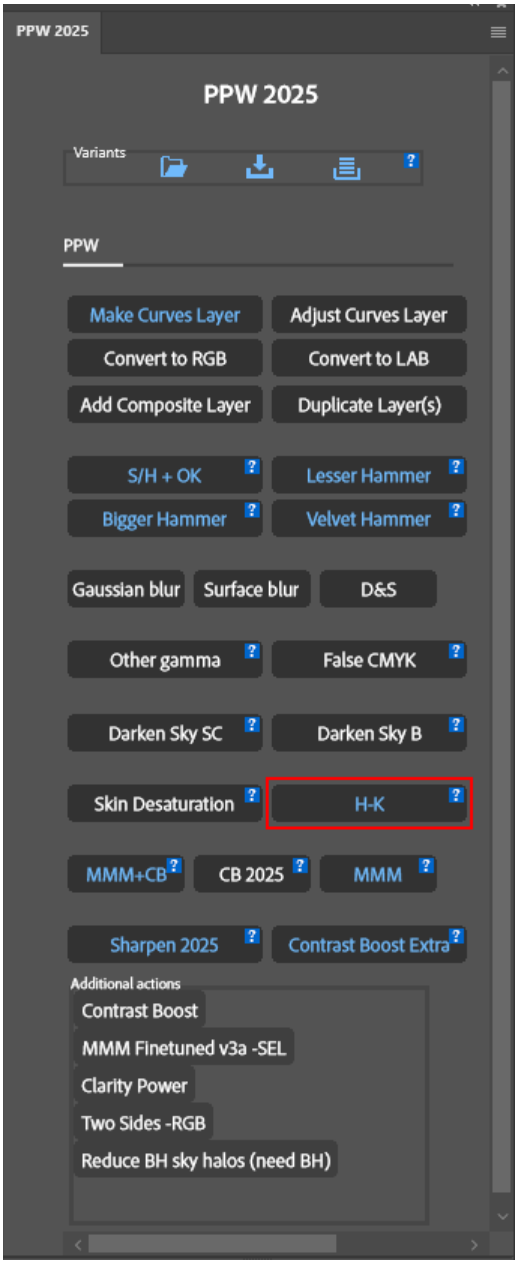
a) Apply a false profile as in Case Two. Flatten the file again.

b) Apply the False CMYK script. You now have a CMYK file that looks very light.

c) Apply a sharp curve to only the black channel to establish a full shadow. If desirable, increase the quartertone setting for a stronger impact in near-neutral colors. The image now looks very strange. It seems too light, but the weight of its shadows is correct. The image also probably looks too gray due to the addition of so much black.

d) Assuming you agree that the image still looks too light, re-convert to RGB and follow the instructions for Step Five, Case One. Otherwise, convert to LAB.

Additional option: Sharpen the black channel before converting to LAB.



Interlude: The H-K Script

Many pictures benefit if near-neutral midtones are darkened. This is suggested by an anomaly of the human visual system known as the Helmholtz-Kohlrausch Effect. Other pictures benefit if near-neutrals are pushed even more toward gray, because this protects them against color shifting during later enhancement, without restricting the ability to emphasize brighter colors.

If you'd like to give either of these concepts a try, a script called H-K does it. It leaves you with a layer that darkens near-neutrals without changing their color, and another that makes them grayer without any darkening. As customary in the PPW scripts, they are also grouped so that they can be adjusted together as well as separately.

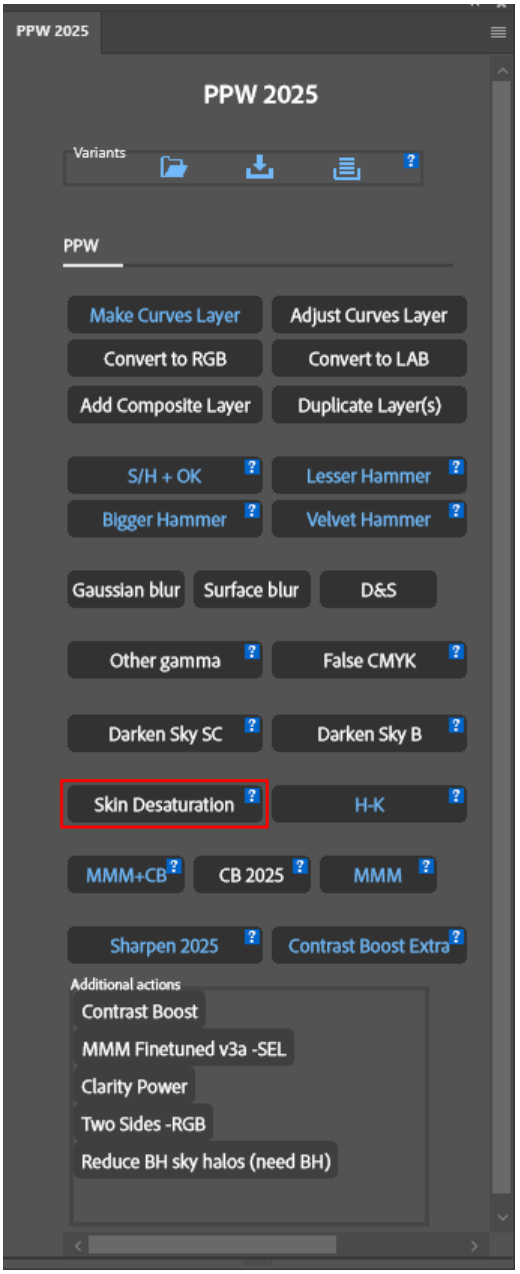
H-K leaves strongly colored areas more or less alone and tries to downplay areas with less color. It does this in two ways, each on its own layer so that they can be adjusted independently. It runs in RGB. The principle, however, derives from CMYK. What amounts to an artificial black channel is generated and used to modify the RGB channels.

The H-K Effect layer darkens quartertone and midtone in less saturated colors, without desaturating them. Often this gives a pleasing sense of overall depth that is difficult to achieve in other ways. Either you will like what this layer does, or you won't; there's little danger in using it if the effect is pleasing.

The Color Only layer poisons all color, but the more saturated the original color, the less it is affected. This is helpful in images dominated by a single color, such as landscape shots that are dominated by greens. It is also somewhat helpful in fleshtones. Generally the file will look worse, temporarily, when this layer is active. However, the idea is that it will make the subsequent color boost more effective by reducing competition to the brightest areas. Note: the default setting is rather strong; when in doubt, reduce its opacity.

How often is it used? The H-K Effect layer should be avoided in portraits and other images where fleshtone is important, because it tends to age the subject. Otherwise, it is worth a look in many cases—if you don't like what you see, turn it off. It is particularly useful when an image is full of bright colors that compete with one another.

Differences from previous recommendations: The action has some similarity to the CMYK detour of Step Five, Case Three. H-K is more controllable, but the CMYK detour will give better shadow detail, if that's desired.



Interlude: Skin Desaturation

The PPW emphasizes bright, vivid, happy colors. Most of the time, this is what viewers and clients like, with one notorious exception. We are willing to accept landscapes with greens more vivid than those found in nature, but we reject skintones that are even slightly too red.

Acknowledging the probability that fleshtones will get too red as the result of Steps Six and Seven, I now advocate desaturating them as a matter of course at this point. The simple action runs in LAB.

How often is it used? Ten years ago, on almost all images with significant fleshtone areas. Today, some phones and cameras recognize fleshtones and guard against making them too intense, reducing the need for this script.

Differences from previous recommendations: I originally recommended that fleshtones be treated like anything else: if Steps Six and Seven made them too intense, use layer masks to control the effect. I thank Stephen Marsh for suggesting that it makes more sense to routinely desaturate them first.

Step Six: The Modern Man from Mars



PPW2025, like its predecessors, offers to combine Steps Six and Seven into a single layered group, using the MMM+CB script. Since, however, they are two different animals, we will discuss them separately.

MMM is aimed at creating believable variation in color. It is complex, containing more than 50 steps, and offers many options, as can be seen in its lengthy separate documentation. However, it can also be used simply. It requires that you make a loose advisory selection indicating the most important tonal/color ranges. If you do not make a selection, the script will ask whether you meant Select All.

This selection is not actually used when the image is altered, but only for planning purposes, for guidance as to which ranges are important. The final correction is applied to the entire file.

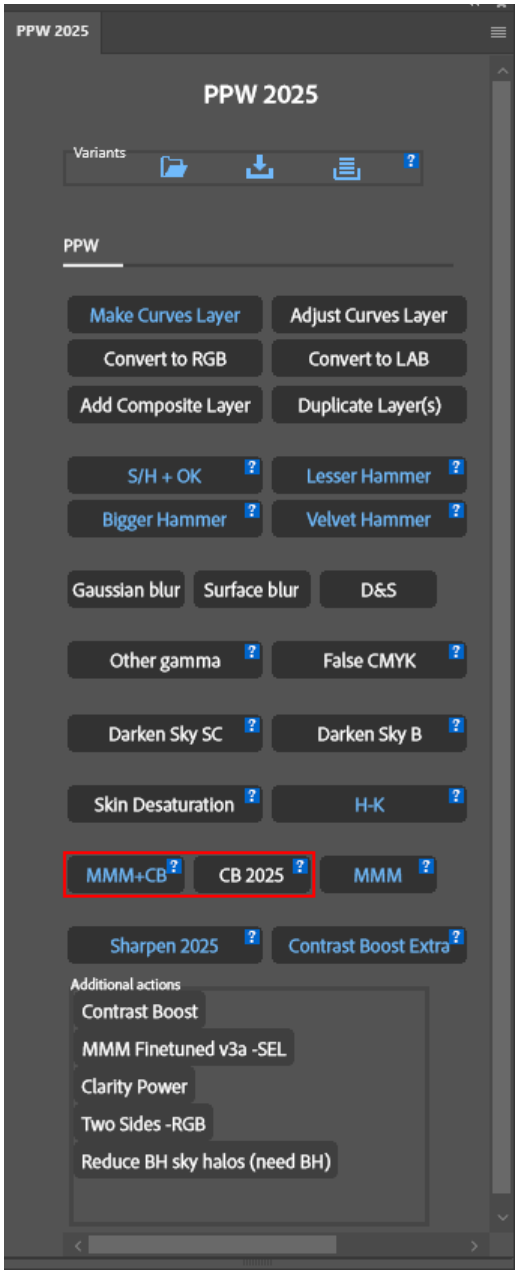
The script delivers separate layers for luminosity and color changes, plus an extra copy of the original for comparison. You can increase or decrease opacities to taste, or even discard a layer altogether. Optionally, you can add a third variable, a layer for saturation changes. By Option-clicking the MMM script (not MMM+CB) you can toggle between the results of up to four different advisory selections.

MMM is most effective when color variation is important enough that we are willing to sacrifice some fidelity to the original hue. It works in tandem with the Color Boost action of Step Seven. PPW2025 provides three different scripts: one each for MMM and Color Boost, and one that combines them. That final action yields four separate correcting layers plus a copy of the pre-action file on top for comparison. It is somewhat confusing the first time. However, it's what I recommend for folk not just beginning with PPW.

> ***How often is Step Six used?*** If the question is how often does it make a significant difference, at least half the time for color, slightly less for luminosity. However, it is hard to predict in advance what will happen. If you are familiar with the MMM+CB script, I would use it on every image. It takes only seconds to find out whether it is helpful. If it isn't, one or more of the offending layers can be toned down or disabled.
>
> ***Differences from previous recommendations:*** The original Man from Mars Method was based on curves and required an accurate choice of pivot point. It also did not separate contrast from color changes. The action was introduced in 2010 and has been improved substantially since then. I now recommend that most user should generally combine MMM and Color Boost within a single action. The panel adds important options, such as the ability to compare the results of different MMM selections while still in preview mode. Experience has shown that we have better tolerance for hue changes in warm than in cold colors. Therefore, layers were added in v.5 to cut cold-color changes in half, if desired.

Step Seven: Color Boost 2025 and Endpoint Adjustment (LAB)

The MMM+CB script still uses the "traditional" Color Boost routine in PPW2025. In previous versions of the PPW Panel, that Color Boost was also available as a standalone script. In that standalone context, however, PPW2025 has replaced it with a more sophisticated version, Color Boost 2025.



Both Color Boost procedures imply deliberately making an overly colorful image and then deciding how to back off. They run in LAB. Both also have a separate curves adjustment layer for altering the L channel if desired.

The original Color Boost has only a few steps as opposed to more than 50 for MMM—but the curves have to be exceedingly accurate. That's why a script or action is needed: it has to be tested to be sure that the curves are precise enough. You could duplicate it yourself as follows:

a) Starting with an LAB file, add a curves adjustment layer.

b) Leave the L curve alone. Switch to the A curve and bring both the top right and bottom left points in toward the center, around two-thirds of the way. Each endpoint must be brought in by precisely an equal amount, so that the resulting curve still crosses the original center point.

c) Before clicking OK, switch to the B curve. Bring the endpoints in around half the way—that is, a steep curve, but not quite as steep as the A.

d) Close the B curve. Set the opacity of this layer to 75%.

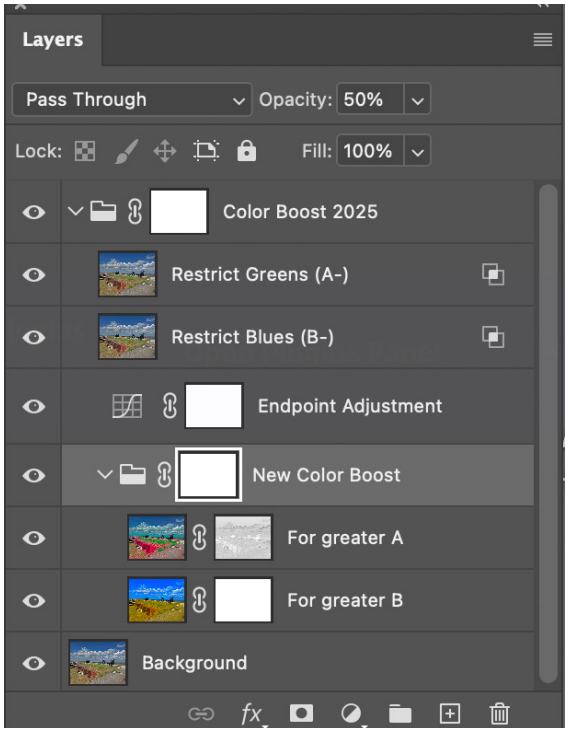
e) Add a second curves adjustment layer, but just click OK to the default curves, meaning that temporarily the adjustment layer does nothing. That closes the action.

The AB curves on the top layer must pass exactly through the center points; otherwise neutral objects will take on casts. With curves that steep, it's impossible to judge from the dialog whether they've done so. An action or script is needed for accuracy, not for speed.

Instead, prepare the action using a blank (white) file. The Info palette reports that everything is 100L0a0b. Watch what happens when you prepare the first curves adjustment layer. If the values stay at 0a0b, you're in business. If they vary even slightly, fix the curve(s).

The action intentionally makes the image *too* colorful with the idea of choosing an intelligent way of backing off. Changing the top layer is optional. It's there in case you want to make some adjustment to the L channel, such as establishing endpoints or altering the weight of the picture slightly.

The real fun is in deciding how to tone down the excessive color imparted by the middle layer. The obvious solution is to reduce the opacity, but that isn't always the *best* way. Applying the L channel as a layer mask sometimes does just about the same thing, but often enough is decidedly better. *Note:* if you use a mask, you may have to consider increasing the layer's opacity so that more of its color can show through. Alternatively, you can consider establishing the layer mask by applying the L at something less than 100% opacity, or by adjusting mask opacity in Photoshop's Properties panel.



The layer structure of the Color Boost 2025 script.

Many other masking options present themselves in special cases. Particularly, the A and B channels are mask candidates, sometimes in combination with the L or one of the RGB channels.

Make sure, though, that you have proper highlight and shadow values—having gone to all this trouble to add drama, why settle for flatness? Also, make a final decision as to whether you like the overall weight of the image and if not, correct it.

If you choose to use Color Boost 2025, all of the above principles stay the same, but you may have a better starting point. As the screen grab on this page shows, it separates the enhancement into separate A and B layers. The A carries its own limiting mask, which can be disabled if it makes things look better. And all the effects can be increased or reduced.

Whichever script you use, always compare your version not just to the original, but to the conservatively corrected image you saved at Step Three. You may decide that your new version is too loud. If you, blend part of the conservative image into it, usually in Color mode.

Enjoy your picture postcard!

How often is this step used? I use some combination of MMM and a Color Boost script on every file.

Differences from previous recommendations: The ability to use Color Boost 2025 standalone. The original Color Boost script is still the one in use in MMM+CB.

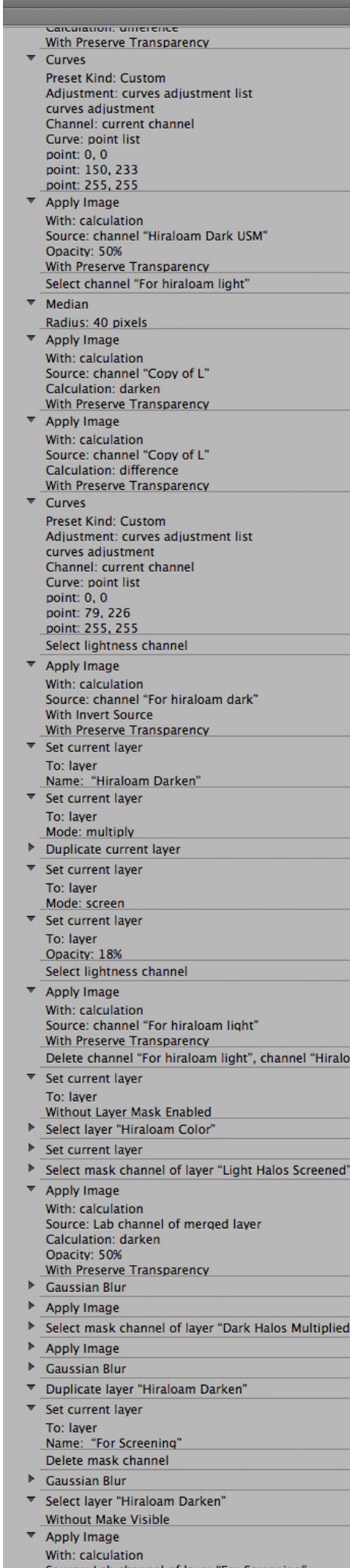
Step Eight: Sharpening

All workflows require sharpening at or near the end of the correction process. Nothing in the PPW requires the use of one method rather than another. The Sharpen 2025 script contains nearly 200 separate steps, so it isn't practical to duplicate it manually. For that matter it wouldn't have been practical anyway fifteen years ago, as it would have run too slowly on existing computers. The purpose is to offer a solution both to those who need maximum flexibility in controlling the sharpen, and to those who are intent on getting a high-quality sharpen out of the way as quickly as possible.



The Sharpen 2025 script has around 200 steps.

If speed is the priority, Sharpen 2025's defaults work well. If you feel they are too much for a certain image but do not wish to spend time experimenting, everything is combined into a single layer group, and you reduce opacity to your taste. If you have the time and inclination to fine-tune the settings, the action separates the sharpen onto eight layers: light and dark halos at a low radius, light, dark, and color halos at a high one, plus layers to prevent the sharpening of blues, to limit the sharpening of fleshtones (added in 2025), and to soften shadows. Since the layers are halo maps that do not contain image detail, they can be modified with curves, opacity reduction, layer masks, or even by erasing offending halos manually. Curving the halo maps can, for example, compensate for images that have previously been sharpened in-camera, by a cell phone, or upon acquisition in a raw module.



Five layers use masks that are specifically designed to minimize shortcomings of the particular method (the one for Hiraloam Lighten is disabled by default); two others use a Blend If. Also, the amount of light conventional (narrow halo) sharpening is much less than dark conventional sharpening.

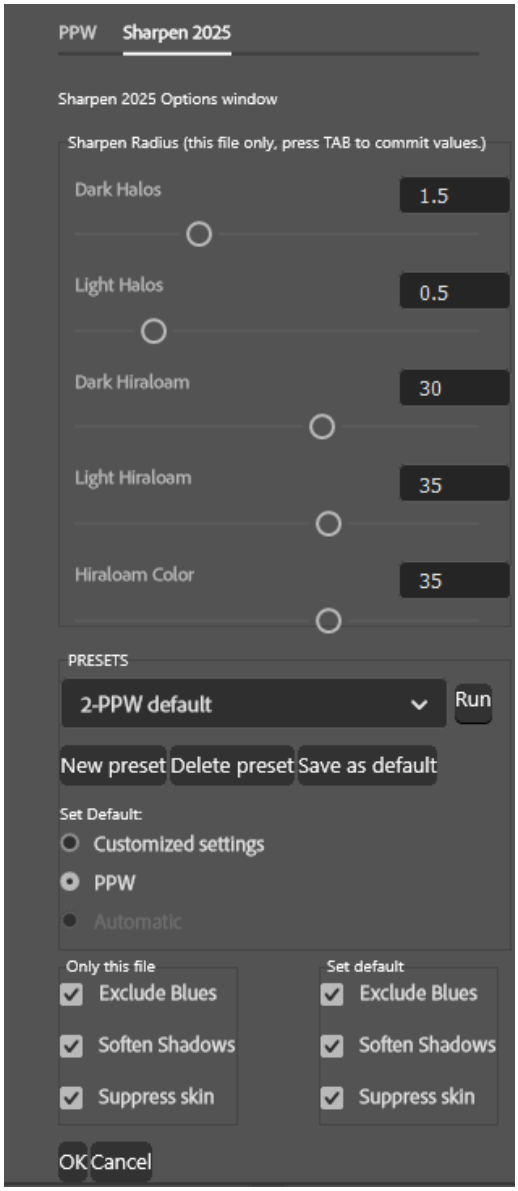
An options panel allows changing Radius in any or all of the five sharpening layers, either file-by-file or as a new default. Sharpen 2025 goes further, allowing saving of presets. Furthermore, four presets are provided, and the action can be set up to choose one automatically based on file size.

How often is it used? Images that require no sharpening at all are rare. Again, however, the workflow doesn't require this specific method of sharpening; feel free to substitute your own.

Differences from previous recommendations: As computers have become more powerful, there is a case for retaining any previous layer structure and adding the sharpening layers on top, permitting color and contrast adjustments without altering the sharpen.

The "automatic" setting that changes halo width depending upon image size is now the default. Also, the Exclude Blues, Suppress Skin, and Soften Shadows layers are now part of the defaults.

The existing presets were developed more than ten years ago. Images now are often much larger than they were back then, meaning that the presets need to be adjusted to give larger halos. Also, it is much more common now to start with images shot with a smartphone. These are usually pre-sharpened. A preset that limits the Light Halos Screened layer is likely desirable.



The complex Sharpen 2025 action offers many different preferences and options.

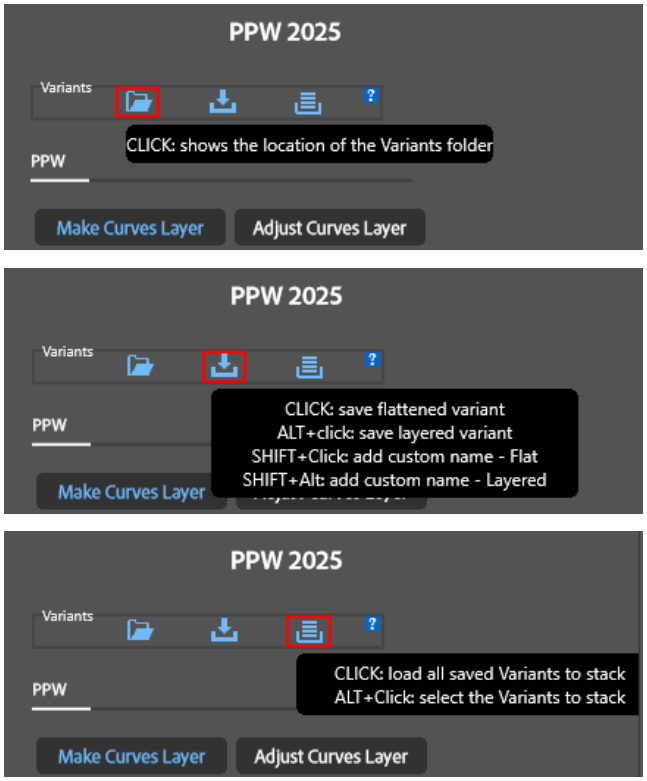
Postscript: Blending and Variants

The PPW is much faster than traditional methods. Three minutes per version is achievable. One minute per version won't get results as good, but still, it can be done if you're so inclined.

It might seem reasonable to suppose that if the image is very important, we should slow down and take more care with each step, and perhaps investigate other possibilities. It turns out not to be so. The most efficient way to improve quality is to do one or more additional versions from scratch, and then consider various blends of what you have.

I have given the matter considerable study, which has shown that blends are far more likely to be better than their parents than might be expected. In a comparison of several hundred images that were corrected by five different individuals with a sixth version generated by blending equal parts of the five, the sixth version seemed better than any of the five parents around half the time.

This finding shouldn't be surprising. The blended version represents a consensus. Areas where your own version varies from that consensus may be because you did something brilliant that others didn't think of, or that you did something silly that others avoided. Sadly, the second possibility is more likely.



The Variants structure of PPW2025.

And all that's assuming a "stupid" blend, mathematically equal parts of all parents. In real life, each parent has different strengths and weaknesses. The blend can be adjusted to emphasize the strengths. For example, you could link the color of one to the contrast of the other. Or use the lighter parts of one version in combination with the darker parts of another.

After doing a first version, if time allows, I'd suggest a quick second one that addresses any problems you perceive in the first. If you suspect that, say, the shadows don't have enough detail or that the greenery might be too blue, it's easy to create a second version that won't have those weaknesses. On the other hand, if you're satisfied with a certain aspect of the first version, do the second version in a different way—there's nothing to lose. For example, if you think that the first version's color as corrected in RGB is good, try doing the second color correction in LAB, hoping to catch lightning in a bottle.

If there are only two versions, blending is easy. But some power users occasionally produce many more versions, if the image is valuable enough. To cater to these folk, PPW2025 has a Variants functionality that organizes them in an intelligent way, as shown on this page.

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