# The Five "C's"
# Color, Contrast, Sharpness, Clean Up, Cropping

**(Yeah, I know "sharpness" doesn't start with a "c")**

## A Standard Workflow
## For Basic Image Prep & Enhancement

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Part of being a good designer is being able to evaluate an image and make necessary corrections to improve overall quality. For me, this skill did not come automatically. In fact, it wasn't until I started studying photography that I began to really look closely at the images I was using and critique them more from a photography standpoint than from a design standpoint. I have found that understanding what makes a photo good and being able to correct any shortcomings in a particular image has improved the overall quality of my work. So, let's fix some images!

Photoshop projects generally fall into one of three categories;

- Photo Manipulation

- Photo Compositing

- Drawing & Painting

The first two use one or more "source images" as the basis for the project. In these types of projects, the end result is largely dependant on the quality of the source material being used so ensuring that we have the best images possible to work with is the subject of this tutorial.

Here we will establish a basic set of steps or workflow that we can use on all images that can dramatically improve the quality of the finished project. These steps are being presented as a stand alone process but should included into your design process when working on any manipulation or composite type project.

When doing a composite project using more than one image, it may be helpful to copy all the images into your document so that you can see them together as you do your corrections. This is helpful if you are trying to match or blend the objects together.

The important thing is that you can and should try to enhance the quality of any image you are using regardless of what specific steps or methods you choose to utilize.

# The Five "C's"

## Color

## Contrast

## Sharpness

## Cleanup

## Cropping

Before we get into the five steps it is important to note that it is perfectly ok and often necessary to treat the foreground and background of an image separately when doing corrections. If you want to do this, isolate and separate your foreground and background elements first.

Also, some of the steps you will be using are destructive edits so before you begin make a duplicate layer of your image and move it to the top layer, name it, and turn the layer off for now. This give you a backup and also lets you turn the layer on or off above your work to see the results of your progress.

## Color Correction

Bad color is common in non-professionally shot photography and can be dealt with in several different ways. It is my experience that much of the color issues in an image will be corrected when we do our levels adjustment. There are a few quick fixes that you can try and use first, especially if you are uncertain about how exactly the color needs to be corrected. Often an image looks a bit off but it is hard to know exactly what needs to be done.

There are a set of auto adjust tools you might want to try under the Image menu. They are Auto Color, Auto Tone, and Auto Contrast. You can try each of these to see if they improve the quality and use these setting to give you a starting point and/or simply move on to the next steps.

## Contrast

Next we are going to adjust the contrast. You can use levels or curves, whichever you prefer. I find that Image > Adjustments > Levels… is usually sufficient and a little easier to use. Essentially all we are trying to accomplish here is to make the darks, darker and the lights lighter. Bring the left and right sliders in slightly to adjust darks and lights until the image looks good. You can then adjust the middle slider, if necessary, until you are happy with the results.

## Color Correction

In most cases your color and contrast are pretty good and don't require any further adjustment. However, in some cases you will want to adjust the color further. Sometimes to correct specific elements like making a blue sky bluer. Color Balance, Hue/Saturation and Color Filters, all under the Adjustments menu can be used to fine tune color so experiment with these until you are satisfied with your results.

## Clean Up

Now that the color and contrast are good, we need to ensure the image doesn't have any defects or blemishes. I recommend the Clone Stamp tool for most image cleanup work but you can use whatever tools you prefer. The important thing is that any major image defects are repaired.

## Sharpness

Next we will use Filter > Sharpen > Unsharp Mask… to bring out the details of our image. Remember that sharpening is a destructive edit. There are three settings under this option. Normally I leave the Threshold at 0, set my Radius at 1.5 – 5 depending on the image size (larger radiuses are used for larger images) and then slide the Amount slider until I am happy with the results. Be careful not to over sharpen, all you want is to bring the details out until it looks nice and removes any unwanted blurriness.

## Crop

The last step we are going to do is crop our image. This is an important and often neglected step. What and where to crop depends on how the image is going to be used. Since we may not know at this stage how much of the image we might want to use, the only thing we are going to crop for is to remove any part of the image we know we don't want.

If you are using this image as part of a composition or are going to do additional manipulation to the image you are ready to move on at this time.

If you are going to use the image as it is now without further editing you can do a final crop and size depending on your project. I recommend using the crop and size tool so you can set the size of the finished image and crop it at the same time. Also, if you are reducing it in size, keep a copy of your larger version and "save as" the smaller one. You may also need to re-sharpen the image if you made it smaller.

## Conclusion…

Hopefully, at this point, your image is considerably better than when you started. Not every image has problems and certainly not every image has problems in all five areas we covered. The important thing to remember is the process and to ensure each image you use has been evaluated and any improvements made. If you get into the habit of doing these steps each and every time you work with an image it will become second nature and your eye for detail and quality will improve.

You will also begin to see the value and impact of these tools have on all your work. Not only do I use tools like Levels on specific parts of an image but you will find a levels adjustment layer on top of virtually every finished project I do. The more you practice with these tools the more value you will get from them as both enhancement and design tools.