

# Contrast Masking, The Digital Way.

By Brian Clarke. Revised 2009

While it is always best to get your image right at the time of exposure, sometimes it just will not happen that way. This technique reveals one way to obtain just a little extra from the shadows and highlights.

Contrast masking digitally helps control and open up shadow areas, as well as add detail to the highlights.

The results should show the extra punch needed to add that extra bit of sparkle.

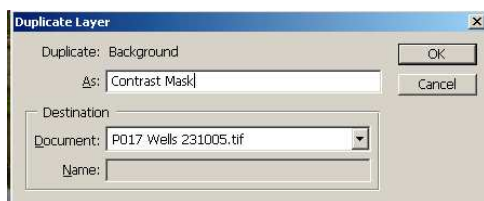
## Overcast Conditions.

The opening image taken on a wet overcast day just lacks any decent tonal dynamic range that would give it the punch it really needs. By making use of contrast masking I will be able to open up the shadow detail and improve highlight tonality.



## Duplicate Layer.

The first thing we need is a duplicate layer, go to **Layer>Duplicate Layer**. When the dialogue box appears, name the duplicate background layer as **Contrast Mask**. Click **ok** and you should see a new layer, separate from the background layer in the layers palette.



## Removing The Colour.

Now we need to remove the colour from the image. To do this go to **Image>Adjustments>Desaturate**. The entire colour is now removed from the image.

## Creating a B&W Negative.

We now have to invert the image which will create a black and white negative image on the screen, go to **Image>Adjustments>Invert**. Now access the layers palette (key **F7**), now change the contrast mask layer blend mode from **Normal to Overlay**. The image will now turn into a washed out colour image.



## Blurring & Blending.

So far our image is far from perfect, so we need to blur the original contrast mask layer in order for it to blend in better with the original image. Go to **Filter>Blur>Gaussian Blur**. Normally you would use a blur radius of about **10~30 pixels**, but to get a more pronounced result try a radius setting of **40 pixels**, then click **ok**.



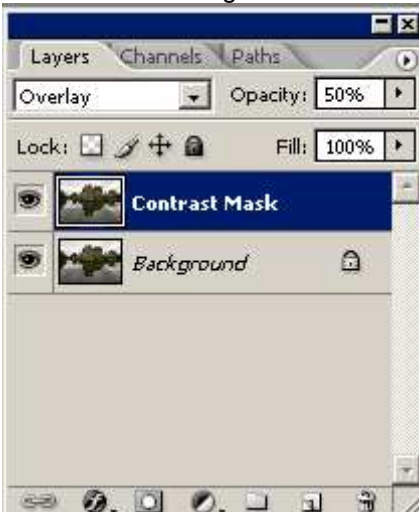
## Mixing In The Mask.

Here is the image after blurring the effects of the contrast mask. This is the crucial point where we can start to control the overall effect to get the exact tonal balance.



## Controlling The Opacity.

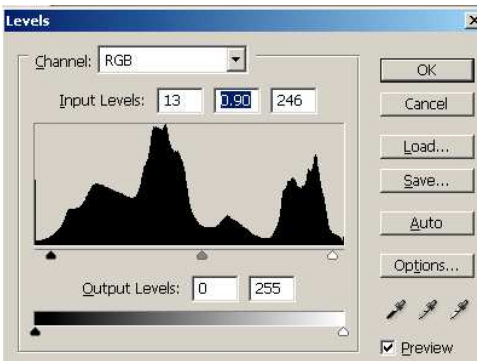
Press key **(F7)** to highlight the layers palette (if not visible). Activate the contrast mask layer, and then reduce its effect by taking the opacity down to 50%. The final step is to use levels to fine-tune the overall contrast of the image.



## Adding Detail.

You can either flatten the active layers in the image or retain them.

Next we need to set up a **levels adjustment layer**. Pull the far left hand slider in to the right, and far right hand slider into the left, thus improving the shadow and highlight detail in the image. The mid-tone slider may be tweaked to the right to add more detail to both shadow and mid tone detail. When satisfied click **ok**.

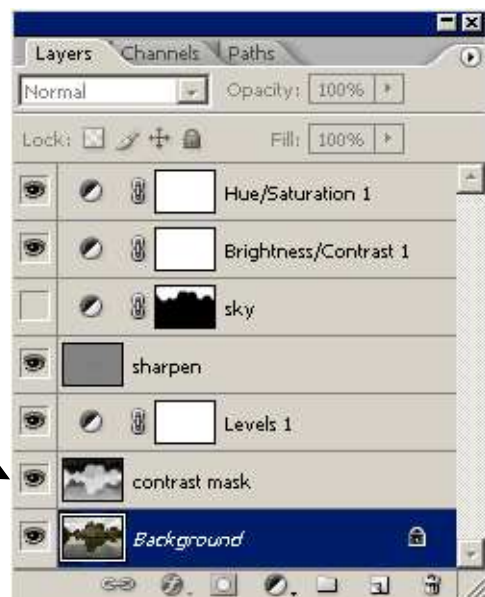


## The Final Image.



Contrast masking should bring out more shadow detail and create more saturated colour throughout the image. It works for landscapes and is good for images that have a wide dynamic range that we need to control.

Contrast masking can also be introduced into other adjustments made to an image via the layer system as shown in the layer stack below. It is a very versatile way of introducing that extra punch of contrast often needed with images taken in overcast conditions.



**This technique requires some experimenting with the Levels adjustment layer before you can get the best from the image. Take your time and remember with adjustment layers you can always go back for another try even if you save the image file.**