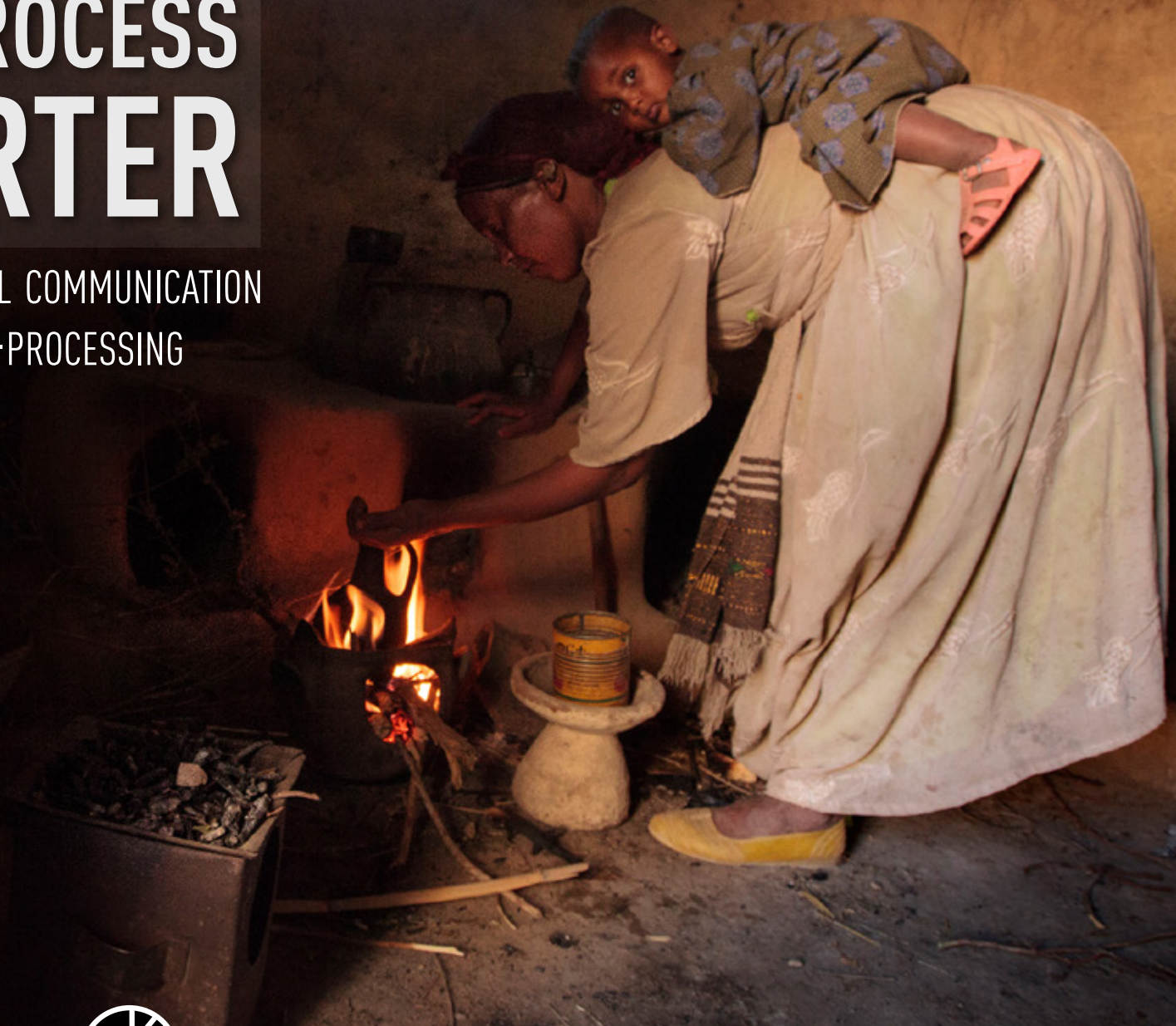


POST-PROCESS SMARTER

IMPROVE YOUR VISUAL COMMUNICATION
THROUGH POST-PROCESSING



mitchellkphotos

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



I guess this section could also be called “*Why you should listen to the author.*” I’ll quickly tell you a little about myself and explain how post-processing ties into it all. Then you can decide.

For over a decade photography has been my career, but beyond that, it’s been my obsession. Post-processing is a big part of what I do. I believe it played an important role in getting my work into such publications as *National Geographic Traveler*, *Geographical UK*, *Vanity Fair* and being one of the winners in 2016 Travel Photographer Of The Year competition.

Of course, it would be silly to decide to learn from me or from anyone based purely on some achievements. Do it if you like my work and you feel that my approach is in line with your own philosophy.

SOME WORDS TO THE READER

I've created this ebook because there is *still* so much misunderstanding on the subject of post-processing. It's free because I think it's incredibly important to shed light on the topic.

People are *still* arguing about whether or not we should post-process when they should really be at the stage of learning how to post-process more effectively, so that their photos can actually communicate what they want.

No photographer's advice is the law. Ultimately, through this ebook, I'm just sharing ideas. Ideas that I've developed over a decade of countless experiments with my own post-processing. If these ideas can save you a few years of trial and error I'll consider this ebook a success.

INTRODUCTION

Most educational material on post-processing looks at the *How*, and very, very rarely at the *Why*. We're bombarded with tutorials on how to make our images pop, how to make them more vivid, or how to make them look like film; but, *why* do we need to do that?

Many of us don't think of post-processing logically. We go with trends, instincts or automatically accept what's offered by popular educational websites. As a result, the visual communication suffers. The final images don't reflect what the photographer saw or felt at the time of the shoot.

Post-process Smarter aims to help you be more effective at visually communicating your stories and feelings through your photographs. It fills the gaps in post-processing education by looking at the logical side of post-processing and dealing with the *Why's*. It asks the crucial questions that each photographer should ask before post-processing a photograph.

IT'S SUBJECTIVE

Photography is highly subjective. Subjectivity permeates all aspects of it. The way you see the world is not necessarily the way others see it. Whatever you frame within the viewfinder is not the way the person next to you might do it.

This subjectivity certainly extends to post-processing. What you deem necessary to do to a photograph—how to adjust it—is unique to you. Below is an example of how a single image can be *interpreted* in different ways. The left image is pretty neutral, the middle has increased contrast and the right is contrasty *and* has a bit of a warm tint to it.



WHY SHOULD WE POST-PROCESS?

There are two key reasons why we should post-process our photographs.

The first and most-obvious reason is that our cameras still have shortcomings as far as the dynamic range—the tones and the colours that they can capture. We often need and should post-process to make up for those shortcomings. You'll see an example of what I'm talking about soon.



The second reason should come
from our desire to communicate a
particular story, a feel, an
atmosphere with a photograph.

In reality, only the first reason is obvious to many of us. Because of the gap in knowledge that I mentioned in the introduction, so many are post-processing images pretty blindly. We see a technique somewhere, it seems *cool* and we apply it to a thousand photos from our last trip without thinking whether or not what we're doing is relevant to those particular photographs.

POST-PROCESSING WITH THOUGHT AND INTENT

Whether or not you are aware of it, our post-processing decisions have impact on what the photo communicates to the viewer.

A few over-the-top adjustments you made because a tutorial online made them seem *awesome* can communicate that your post-processing technique is in poor taste and that your photography shouldn't be taken seriously. In this case, the viewer's reaction will generally range from unease to completely disengaging from your images.



On the other hand, when you're post-processing with thought and intent, your decisions can help your photograph to tell a story and to communicate a certain atmosphere effectively. This leads to more engaged viewers, and potentially more interest in your work.

Good post-processing is not about making it obvious that you've worked on an image and that you're amazing at *Lightroom* or *Photoshop*. In this photo, there's nothing that screams to the viewer, "This has been manipulated!" However, I *have* adjusted parts of this frame. I had to draw attention to elements that are important to what the image is about—the man's face, the smoke. I also took away attention from what isn't important—the background.

My slight tweaking of contrast and color is what's responsible for the overall feel of the image—the atmosphere.

Both types of communication—the “good” and the “bad” take place regardless of whether or not you are aware of it. As soon as the viewer sees the photo, it communicates something.

For this reason it’s imperative to be aware, to be thoughtful and intentional about what effect your post-processing will have on the photograph and, in turn, what the photograph will communicate to those who view it.

QUESTIONS TO ASK OURSELVES BEFORE POST-PROCESSING A PHOTOGRAPH

I firmly believe that thoughtful and intentional post-processing decisions come from asking certain questions regarding the image you're about to work on. We should really begin to ask these questions before we even touch a photograph. The answers will provide *rhyme and reason* to your post-processing decisions. As a result, you won't make adjustments just because they look cool. You'll make them because they make sense for the photograph in front of you.

**The next few pages will help you gain a practical
understanding of what I'm talking about.**

Before anything creative, I usually ask: Is the image technically ok? Is it evenly exposed? Is anything obviously odd?

A quick look at the top photo immediately reveals that it's over-exposed around the clouds and the sky. It's under-exposed towards the bottom half of the frame. This was done intentionally to save as much detail as possible in a high-contrast scenario, but it means that the first issue I addressed in the bottom image is this uneven exposure.

There might be other technical issues with your photograph, this is simply an example. The main point is—It's generally wise to deal with the technical issues before all else.



What's the story? What's the image about?

After the technical stuff, these are the most fundamental questions we should ask in relation to every photograph. They always lead to more questions that are important. I'll get to those shortly.

For now, let me answer the questions above in relation to this example. Here the story is about a mother making coffee over a fire inside a traditional kitchen. While she's busy with the coffee, her children's eyes are on the guest/the photographer.



IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

And so, we continue to ask. The answers to the following couple of questions are what will start to directly shape the more creative post-processing decisions. Over the next couple of pages are the answers and the decisions that followed.

**What's distracting from the story,
from what I want to communicate?**

**What's important and needs to
stand out more?**

UNPROCESSED IMAGE

The yellow tub is too bright and it doesn't add to the story.

Would be better if the smoke stood out a little more. The smoke definitely adds to the story of coffee-making over a fire.

The faces of the mother and her child could pop out a little bit more, since they are key "characters" of the photograph.

Some of the details here could stand out more—they're part of the coffee ceremony.

The face is a bit dark and doesn't stand out enough from the background.

The mother's dress is a little too bright and draws the eye more than it should.

The floor is too bright and it's drawing a little too much attention.



POST-PROCESSED IMAGE

The tub has been darkened to a point where it almost blends in with the background.

The smoke has been very slightly enhanced and now it's more noticeable.

The mother's dress has been slightly darkened and now it doesn't draw the eye as much.

The faces of the mother and child pop out a little bit more now.

These smaller details of the coffee ceremony have been made to stand out a little more.

The face has been brightened and the outline of the face has been made to stand out more.

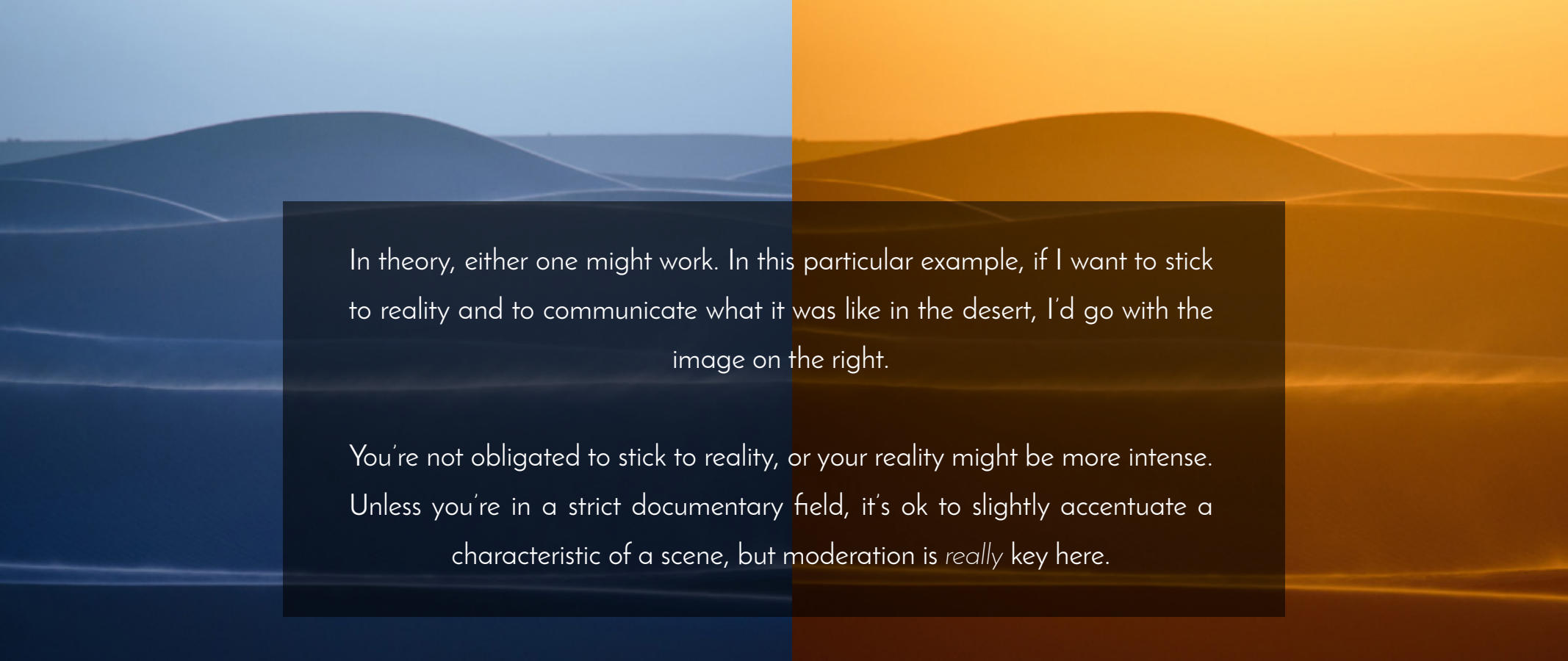
The floor has been darkened and now the eye doesn't wander off to this part of the frame as much.

QUESTIONS THAT GO BEYOND THE STORY

Photographs aren't necessarily limited to communicating stories. They can convey an atmosphere and make the viewer feel a certain way. This leads to another group of questions you should be asking yourself.

How did I feel at the scene?
How do I want the viewer of the image to feel?

More specifically, we might ask questions like: Should the photo have a cool or a warm tint?



In theory, either one might work. In this particular example, if I want to stick to reality and to communicate what it was like in the desert, I'd go with the image on the right.

You're not obligated to stick to reality, or your reality might be more intense. Unless you're in a strict documentary field, it's ok to slightly accentuate a characteristic of a scene, but moderation is *really* key here.

Should it be contrasty/punchy?

I believe that most often this shouldn't simply be a stylistic decision with no practical reasoning behind it.

Here we have a portrait of a wrestler. His battered face with a scar above the eyebrow reflects the grit, the raw energy, the pain involved in his vocation.


The close-up framing screams out about who he is. The post-processing choice to make the image contrasty and punchy punctuates the story and helps you really get a feel for his presence—that grit, the wrestler's energy.

Should the contrast be soft?

It doesn't make much sense for a photograph like this to be contrasty/punchy. Again, this is due to a stylistic decision with a deliberate and practical reason

Here, I wanted to accentuate the fog and its effect on the scene, to convey the atmosphere that it created. The elements in this frame don't need to pop out. They're getting lost in the fog and that's the point—that's what helps the fog's effect stand out. If I *were* to make everything pop by bumping up the contrast, I'd kill the atmosphere.



An aerial photograph of a rugged coastline. In the foreground, a dark, pebbly beach curves along the water's edge. Several small boats are anchored in the deep blue water. The background features steep, forested mountains rising from the water. The sky is a soft, hazy blue.

**You can't post-process all the photographs
in the same way. Different types of images
require different approaches.**

**It's really important to ask the aforementioned
questions and to think of answers to them. This
way you will identify the relevant post-processing
needs of each photograph.**

EXPOSING WITH POST-PROCESSING IN MIND

I want to interject with something that's *very* important to understand. I mentioned in the beginning that our cameras are limited in the range of tones and the colours they can capture. High contrast scenarios are particularly hard to capture in their full glory, but we can often make images of such situations work thanks to post-processing. To do this most effectively, we should *expose with post-processing in mind*.

How do you do that? One way is to decide on what element is most important to the image. You then try your best not to lose detail in that element, while at the same time preserving as much detail as possible in the areas of the frame that carry lesser importance. The image on the next couple of pages will demonstrate what I mean.

UNPROCESSED IMAGE



The faces are what is most important here. However, I had to slightly underexpose them to save at least some detail in the much brighter sky. The sky is still overexposed/ too bright, but because I *did* underexpose the faces (making the overall image darker) there is still enough data in the RAW file to bring back some detail.

The process is a balancing act. You try to not under or over-expose to a point where detail will be lost, but the most important elements (faces) are given preference. If any detail is going to be completely lost anywhere, it shouldn't be in the most important element.

POST-PROCESSED IMAGE



The sky is still very close to being over-exposed in places in this image, but it has been darkened and because there was just enough data in the image, I could in fact bring out some detail. You can even make out the puffy cloud outlines.

The faces have now been adjusted to make them brighter and to bring out more of the facial features. Overall the image is now more or less evenly exposed, thanks in large part to exposing with post-processing in mind.

Another way to shoot with post-processing in mind in a high contrast situation is to create two separate images of the same scene.

In the case of the images on this page, I wanted to capture the starry sky and some of the detail in the texture on the ground and the house walls. These areas were very dark. At the same time, I wanted to capture the fire-lit interior of the house, which in relation to those darker areas was much too bright.

I exposed the top image for the darker areas and the bottom image for the bright, fire-lit interior. If you look at them separately, one is over-exposed and the other is under-exposed, but, together, they *can* make a single, properly exposed image.



EXPOSED FOR THE DARKER AREAS



EXPOSED FOR THE INTERIOR

Layer-blending

You can use an HDR program (or function) to automatically create a single image from two or more, but I prefer the precision of bringing the images into Photoshop, creating layers and working to make specific parts of the frame darker or brighter by revealing more or less of a particular layer. This technique is called *layer-blending*.

This image is made mostly of the frame exposed for the darker areas (top image on previous page). The doorway with the properly exposed interior is the only element taken from the other frame (bottom image).

Note: HDR software/function will align your images automatically, as long as they're shot from more or less the same angle. If you're going to do layer-blending though, you're best off using a tripod to keep your framing consistent.

SHOULD I USE PRESETS?

Presets can be fantastic. However, you should definitely use the same rhyme and reason—there should be some logic when applying them.

Quality presets like *VSCO* or *Alien Skin* have been created to achieve some very specific and atmospheric looks and there are literally hundreds of them. I'm not against experimenting and just going with what feels right, but I would still ask the same kinds of questions that I've been talking about.

Am I applying the right preset for what I want to communicate?

Again, we must ask ourselves that question about communication. Both examples below work, but I'd say that each definitely evokes a different feel. The left one is more vibrant and saturated. It feels more cheerful. The right image is much less saturated and gives off a more sombre feel. My personal preference would be to go with what it was actually like to be there and I definitely remember a more sombre, autumn atmosphere. I'd go with the right image. It reflects my reality much more accurately.



When using presets it's easy to fall into the trap of just going with something that looks *awesome*. What's awesome may be shaped by a current trend, or it might feel right at the time.

One thing that I've found from my own experience is that more often than not, something that seems really great at first can feel really cheesy and tasteless just a couple of months later.

My suggestion is to apply whatever preset you choose and then tweak it to turn down the effect. Don't apply the really strong, distinct presets unless you're doing something that really calls for it. Moderation is key.

WHAT SOFTWARE?



This question might come as a surprise to some. *Adobe Lightroom* has been adopted as the de facto post-processing software by the vast majority of photographers and with good reason. Many don't even know that other software exists.

Realistically, I only see *Capture One Pro* as a challenger to Lightroom. While Lightroom is definitely more flexible, Capture One sometimes sees colours that Lightroom doesn't, particularly in skin tones. There are also slightly more advanced options to adjust the colour balance.

The type of camera you use also plays a big role in what package is most suitable. Some cameras have built-in colour profiles in their RAW files. You can only change them in Lightroom and this can lead to dramatic differences. I've provided a few examples over the next few pages to show rather than tell.

Here's an image taken with a Panasonic GX7. For equal comparison, neither version has been post-processed, nor have any other images in these comparisons. The colours in the right image are definitely richer and deeper. This is what I mean when I say that sometimes Capture One sees the colours that Lightroom doesn't.



This is a shot with the Fuji X100S. I'm using one of the built-in profiles that you can choose in Lightroom. As a result, the Lightroom processed image appears quite rich now. Still, the Capture One version holds appears a bit more lively.



This is an image from a Canon EOS 400D camera. The colour rendition is more or less the same in both images. Capture One has a very slight edge for keeping a little more detail in the highlights.

Lightroom



Capture One



At the end of the day, I can't exclusively recommend one over the other. I still use both. So instead, I've listed what I see as the main benefits of each. I do highly recommend that you experiment with both packages since they are both available as free trials.

Main benefits of Lightroom

- Local Adjustments are more powerful, especially the *Radial Filter*.
- The interface is slightly faster to get around since there aren't any tabs to click to get to different tool sets.
- Far more preset packages are available for Lightroom.

Main benefits of Capture One

- Superior colour rendition in some cases.
- Advanced skin colour correction options.

10 KEY TAKE-AWAY POINTS



1. Good post-processing is not about making it obvious that you're great at Lightroom or Photoshop.



2. It's imperative to be aware, thoughtful and intentional with your post-processing. Everything you do has a consequence for those who view your photos.



3. Before all else—see if the photo is technically ok. If it's not, work to make it ok.

10 KEY TAKE-AWAY POINTS



4. Ask yourself—What is the story am I trying to communicate?



5. Ask yourself—What feel/mood am I going for?



6. Only make adjustments when there is a practical, logical reason behind them, not just because they look cool.



7. You can't post-process all photographs in the same way. Different images require different types of post-processing.

10 KEY TAKE-AWAY POINTS



8. Expose with post-processing in mind and you'll have more of a chance to capture even the most challenging, high-contrast scenarios.



9. When using presets, ask yourself the same kinds of questions that I've mentioned throughout this ebook.



10. There are various benefits to using Lightroom and Capture One. The best way to see which one is for you is to experiment with both packages.

CONCLUSION

Good post-processing is *not* about showing off your Lightroom or Photoshop skills. It's *not* about making your images vibrant, or making them pop.

Good post-processing starts with asking questions. We need to assess what each photograph requires in order to fulfill its purpose, whether that's to tell a story or to make the viewer feel a certain way.

The aim of this ebook was to set you on the right path to creating images that aren't just pretty or dramatic looking because *that's the thing to do*. I hope that the points raised here will provide you with a foundation for making sound decisions that'll help you effectively communicate your intentions.

I realise that this ebook does not deal with the **How-to** of post-processing. I have already created an entire video course called [UNDERSTANDING POST-PROCESSING](#) that deals with that. More about the course on the next page.

For plenty more photography and educational material check out:

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