

Converting Images To B&W And Toning For Effect And Greater Tonal Range

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Black-and-white photography holds a special place in the hearts of many photographers. The introduction of digital cameras that can capture great color, but have limited B&W capabilities turned many photographers to software tools like Photoshop. I would like to mention a couple of lesser-known ones and add a toning method that will do much more than just toning when the situation calls for it. Photoshop evangelist Russell Preston Brown first explained the process below. I am presenting it with my examples and my words, but the credit for the process belongs to him.

I took the photograph on the right at the Roger Williams Park Butterfly House a couple of years ago. I chose it to demonstrate the techniques that I will talk about today because it does not lend itself well for the conversion with the other tools, like the Channel Mixer adjustment layer. When you inspect the photograph, you will notice that it has primarily green, red, and black. If you try to convert this to B&W using the channel mixer, you will see why it becomes quite frustrating. As you try to darken the green, the yellow flower gets too dark and other related problems start popping up.



Filtered conversion to B&W

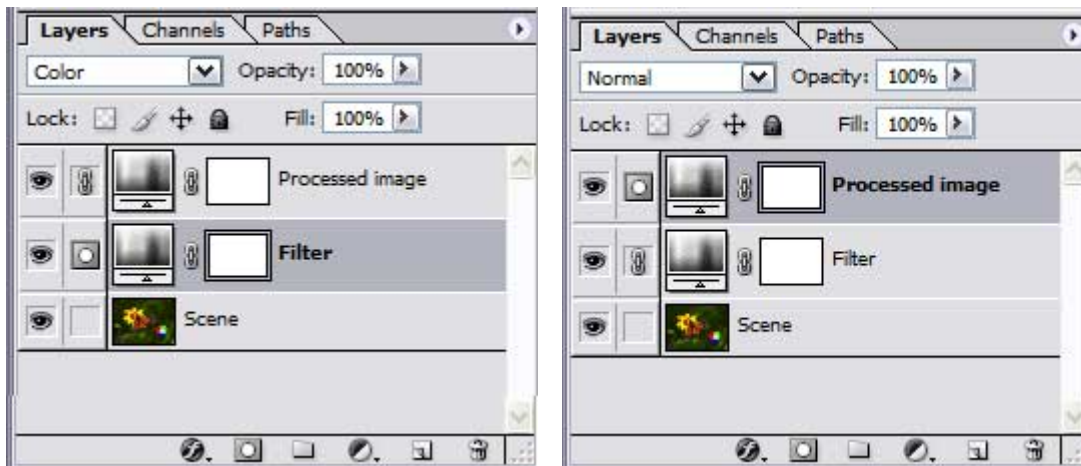
Just as we use filters to record a slightly altered version of the scene on B&W film, we



can develop a process that relies on a similar approach. The method treats the image as the “scene,” and creates a “filter” layer, and a “developed image” layer just as in B&W photography. For this purpose, I have created the version on the left with the color disks superimposed on it. This will allow us to see the full effect of using this technique. As the process moves along, you will be able to monitor how each color behaves to fully understand the effect of each adjustment.

The filter and the processed image layers

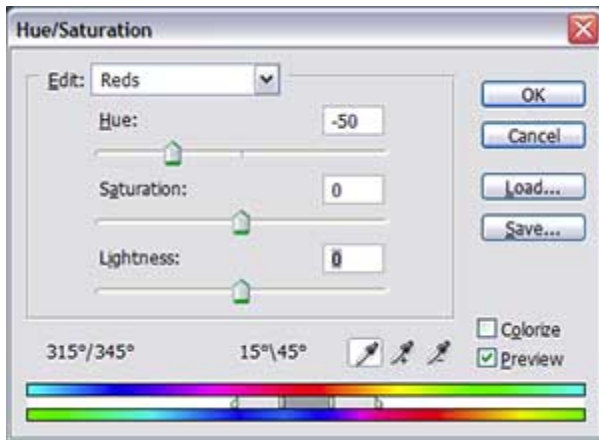
Now, to keep things easy to follow, I will name the background as “Scene” and on top of this layer, we will add two additional layers. First, we will add a Hue and Saturation layer by using the Yin Yang icon and selecting the Hue and Saturation. As the layer adjustment window pops up, do not make any adjustments, and click on OK, yes no adjustments. Now, name this layer as “Filter.” Then change its Blending Mode to “Color” from the drop-down menu on the top left corner of the layers palette. Following the same process, add another Hue and Saturation layer, and when the adjustment window pops up, bring the “Saturation” slider all the way to the left. This will result in your image turning B&W, but we are just beginning. After adding these layers, your layers palette should look like the following when each adjustment layer is targeted.



If you look at the image now, you will notice several things. First, and the obvious, is that it is in B&W, but does not necessarily look as good as you may like. Second, the color disks all look the same, because the conversion uses only the luminosity values. Since they all have their maximum values, they all have the same luminance, thus, the same shade of gray. This is one of the realities of converting to B&W, or even photographing in B&W. What looks vibrant with great separation among various elements owe much to the color contrast, which mercilessly disappears as we record the scene in B&W. Precisely because of this, we resort to using filters to enhance the “recorded contrast” in B&W.

Let there be filters

Now the fun begins! Double click on the “Filter” layer’s icon (not its name or the layer mask) to bring the adjustment controls up. While in the “Master” channel, move the Hue slider down to -80 and watch how the yellow, red, and green parts of the color disks are nicely separated and the flower and the butterfly have better tonality. Next, from the drop-down menu, select the Red channel. As you bring the Hue slider down to -50, you will see the reds in the photograph are assuming even better tonality yet. Below is the Hue and Saturation control panel with the red channel targeted and the Hue slider pulled back to -50.



The converted photograph after these adjustments is also shown below.



By using the other channels, it is possible to tune the processed image even further. Since this particular photograph does not have many colors, like blue, cyan, or white, further tweaking will not likely produce much different results. But, by all means, try the process on some of your more colorful images and see how well you can control the tonality of your B&W conversion.