When To Use Levels or Curves in Photoshop

Many Photoshop users learn to use the Levels dialog and then never progress to learning how to use the Curves. Let me give you several reasons why learning to use the Curves will make you more of an expert with Adobe Photoshop.

"Hatcher Pass" captured by Cecil Sanders and edited using levels and curves.

In digital photography editing, both the Levels and the Curves are used for one of the single most important editing tasks: image tone control. Whenever you have a photograph that has less than perfect contrast, i.e. the contrast is either too low or, conversely, too high, you need to use some form of tone control. Both the Levels and the Curves allow you to alter the black and white end points of the tonal range in the image. Adjusting the end points allows you to change the global or overall contrast of a photograph; the method and affect is the same whichever of the two commands you choose to use.

"Before & After" captured by Mark Jenkins – Editing comparison, image on right adjusted using levels and curves.

Both commands also allow you to change the appearance of the intermediate–or grey–tones in-between the black and white end points. However, the important difference between the two commands is that a Levels adjustment proportionally changes all of the tones in the tonal range; whereas the Curves allow you to choose which portion of the tone scale you wish to adjust. The Levels is a linear adjustment but the Curves are a geometric adjustment (in fact, this difference is in the names: levels and linear, curves and geometric). This is a massive difference, and using Curves rather than Levels will elevate your editing skill to a professional level.

The big question is which should you use?
This is quite straightforward if you consider the following points:
You only want to adjust the black or white end points to adjust global contrast
You want to lighten or darken the entire tonal range. This is normal to adjust exposure errors.
You want to maintain the visual relationship of the values of the intermediate tones.
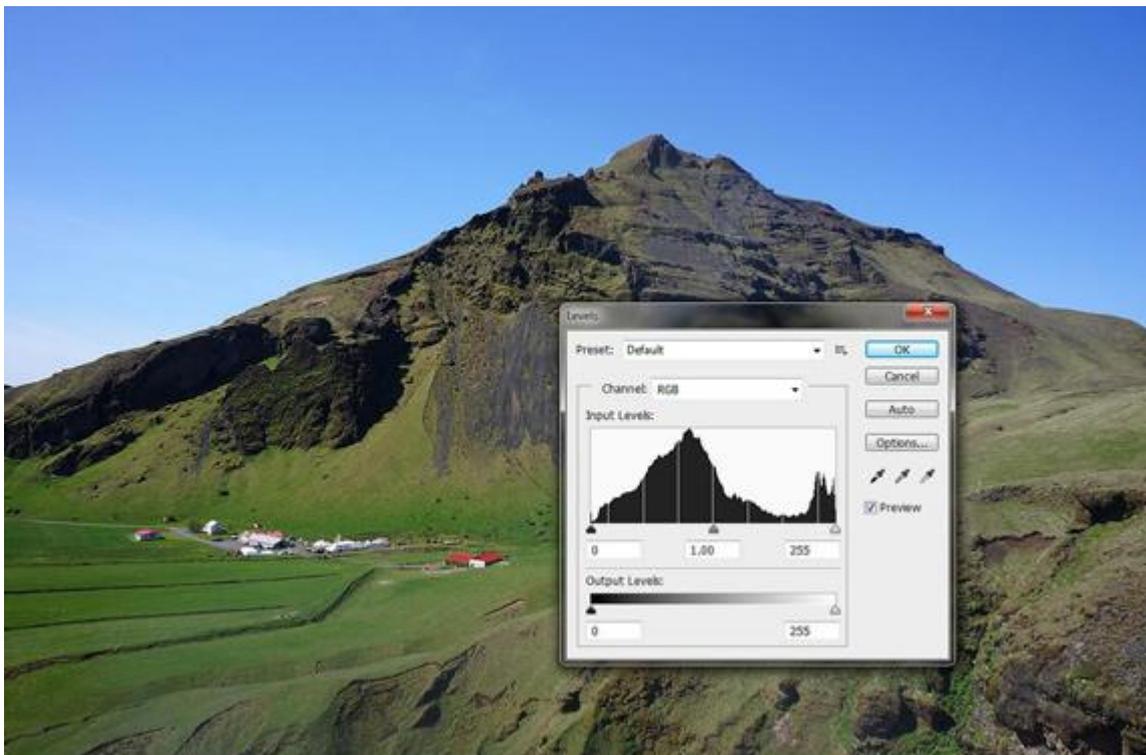
"Levels" captured by Damien du Toit.

You want to subtly adjust the visual relationship of the tone values. For example lighten the lights and darken the shadows. This usually requires an 'S' shaped curve adjustment.
You want to adjust only the light tones or only the dark tones.
You want to adjust the tones in only a small section of the overall tonal range.
You want complete control of your tonal editing.

"Louise II" captured by Tony Taffinder and edited using curves. (Click image to see more from Taffinder.)

Although learning to use Curves takes a little more practice than Levels–and the fact that anything which looks remotely like math and geometry scares many people half to death–they are not actually difficult to master. If you play with the Curves dialog for 10-15 minutes you will feel much more comfortable with the process. And don't forget that if you use the Curves as an adjustment layer you can always change the effect without damaging your original photograph.

About the Author:
Les Meehan has authored seven Photoshop books and, as a qualified teacher, have run workshops for over 20 years.

In general, curves are a bit more user friendly, and will allow you to make more dramatic changes than levels. With the ability to change things drastically comes the ability to either really mess an image up, or make it great. Levels are perfect for large global adjustments such as making the lights of an entire image a little less bright. They are a bit more subtle than curves.

The Secret Behind Levels Vs Curves In Photoshop - A Phlearn Video Tutorial

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