



Digital cameras and image editors can make a muddy mess with grayscale conversions (left), but you can get more dramatic results by channel surfing (right).

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KRIS FONG

Get Better Black and Whites

by Kris Fong

WHAT YOU NEED



- Digital color photo
- Image editor that supports color channels and curves, such as Photoshop CS (\$649, www.adobe.com) or Canvas 9 (\$349.99, www.acdsystems.com)

Ansel Adams created strikingly bold black-and-white photos. Unfortunately, he's no longer around to help when our digital camera muddies our ambitious attempts. In black-and-white mode, a digital camera simply transforms color into 256 shades of gray. So does an image editor's grayscale conversion. Depending on your composition,

your subject may suddenly be vying for attention from background elements if their tones are similar—for example, green grass, red brick, and a blue ocean may appear as similar shades of gray. You can do better.

Instead, snap your pic in color and then manipulate the image's color channels on your Mac (with camera images, these channels are red, green, and blue—aka RGB). Your goal is to find the color channel that best affects your chosen element, whether you want to play something up or conceal it. OK, let's go channel surfing. (We're using Photoshop, but you can apply our instructions with your tool of choice.)



1 Change the Channel Open your photo in Photoshop. From the Window menu, select Channels to display the red, green, and blue color channels individually, along with the composited RGB one. Click any channel to view a grayscale representation of that color's presence in your image. The darker the gray, the less there is of that color in the photo. The lighter the gray, the greater that color's presence.

White is full-intensity red, green, and blue, while black lacks all of these colors. Click through each channel to see how it affects your image (see "Recipes for Success," p76). If your image editor displays channel information in the selected color, set it to display grayscale.

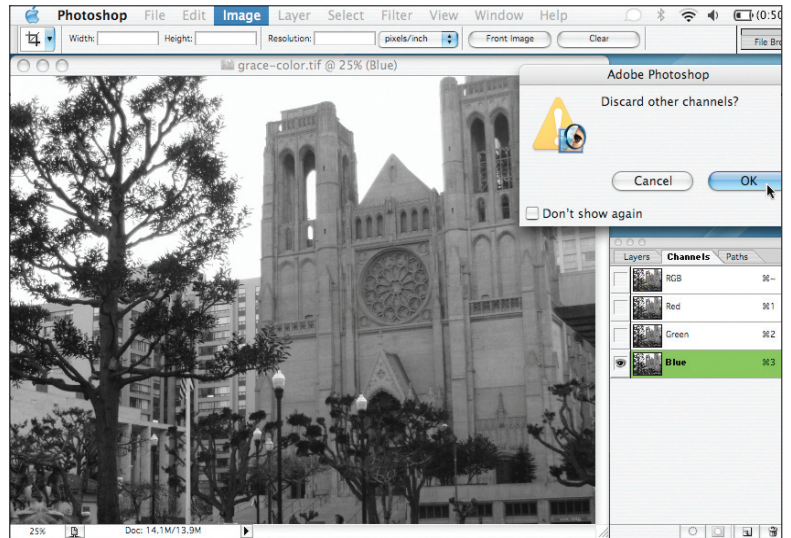
Because purple halos marred our original photo (upper left), we decided to convert it to black and white. Here's how it fared in each color channel.



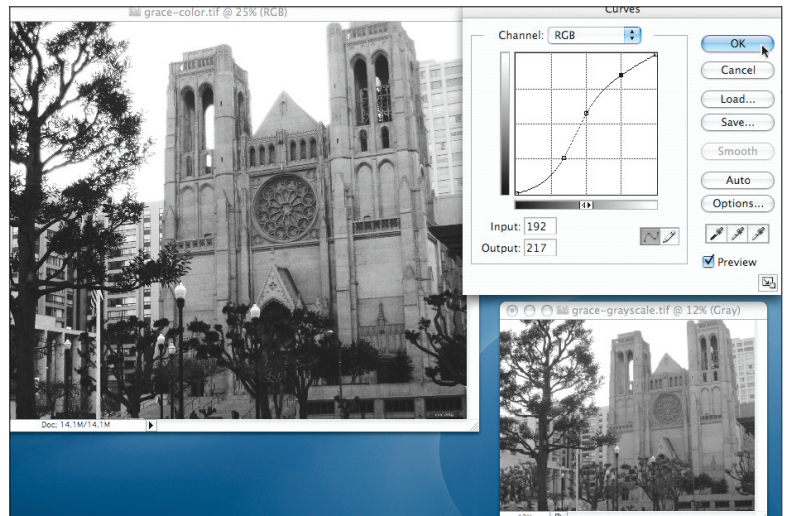
2 Decide, Then Dump Decide which channel works best for your subject and select it in the Channels palette.

Then dump the other color channels by selecting Image > Mode > Grayscale. A dialog pops up, asking if you're sure you want to do this; click OK. Then turn your grayscale image back to RGB by selecting Image > Mode > RGB Color. Voilà—a better-looking black-and-white photo. If you're happy with the way your photo looks, stop here and save the file (be sure to choose Save As if you want to preserve the original). But if you *really* want to play up the drama, use Photoshop's Curves to further tweak what you started.

To create greater distinction between the building architecture and the manicured trees, we chose the Blue channel.



3 Get Some Curves Select Image > Adjustments > Curves; the resulting dialog displays a square with a diagonal line cutting across it. To alter the brightness or darkness of a tonal region, click anywhere on the line to create a point; clicking toward the left affects the darker tones, while clicking toward the right affects lighter shades. Then click and drag the point upward to lighten or downward to darken; the line curves in response. You can slide the point anywhere on the line to affect a different region of grays, and add more points to fine-tune several regions. If you want an Ansel Adams–like effect of strong contrast, click one point in the darker region and one point in the lighter region. Then drag the dark point down and the light point up to form a slight S shape. Play around with the shape until you're satisfied. Then click OK and save.



We placed three points in Curves to bring out the architectural detail and darken the trees (note the pallid grayscale version in the lower right).

CHEAP TRICKS

Don't have Photoshop, Canvas, or another high-ticket graphics app? You can still get better black-and-white results by performing these tricks in any affordable image editor, such as GraphicConverter (\$35, www.lemkesoft.com).

Desaturate Details You might achieve more favorable monochromatic results by desaturating an image instead of doing a grayscale conversion. Open your image editor's saturation control, and move the slider all the way to the left to remove color.

Control Contrast If your grayscale conversion looks OK, add more intensity via contrast and brightness. To make blacks blacker and whites whiter, move the Contrast slider to the right. Add drama by decreasing brightness—move the Brightness slider a little to the left.

Desaturate Channels You can manipulate color channels in GraphicConverter, but the process is different. From the Picture menu, select Brightness/Contrast. To view, say, the Red channel, check the Full Screen Preview box, move the Brightness Red and Saturation sliders all the way to the left. Click Reset to view the image in color again. Repeat with the Blue and Green channels. Decide which one looks best and click OK.

RECIPES FOR SUCCESS

You can use color channels to put more focus on a subject or play down an element. To help you choose which color channel to keep, here's a closer look at how each one affects various color elements when you're viewing an image in shades of gray. Be sure to keep an eye on the big picture instead of focusing on that one aspect in your image.

The Red Channel This channel lightens red and yellow tones, darkens blues, and has little effect on greens. This is a good channel to use if you want to make bad complexions look flawless—it lightens blemishes, flushing, and other red-tinged oddities. Use it to add drama to a cloud-filled blue sky or tumultuous ocean (it'll deepen blue tones while keeping white white), separate sand from sea, demarcate trails from foliage, or lighten the texture of rocky landscapes.

To play up the ironwork and wood grain on this door, we chose the Red channel, which lightened the reddish tones.

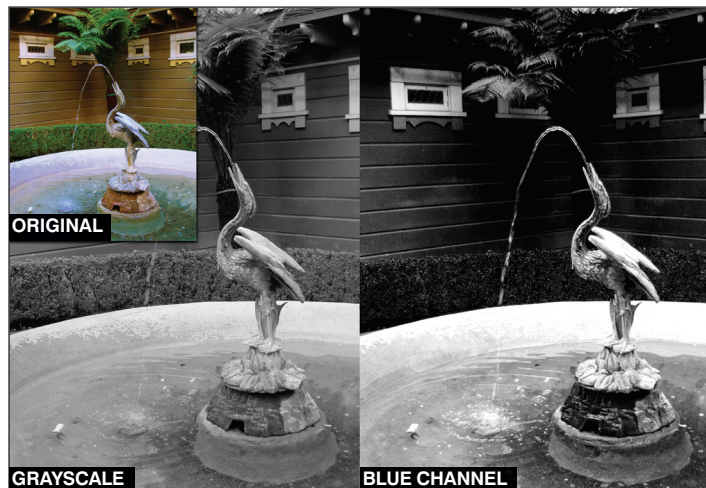



The Green Channel This channel lightens greens and yellows, darkens reds, and has little effect on blues. If your image contains foliage with varying shades of green, this channel will bring out more of the tonal variations among the plants. Use it to highlight leaves against tree trunks, make skin appear tan, accentuate red lips, or deemphasize ugly dirt patches in grassy fields.

The grayscale image looks OK, but selecting the Green channel toned down the reds and brightened the gold tones, creating drama.

The Blue Channel This channel lightens blues, darkens greens and yellows, and slightly darkens reds. It can highlight subjects against an ocean or blue sky. Use it to call more attention to architectural subjects, introduce film grain if you want your pictures to look old (if your image has digital noise), make rocky landscapes darker and moodier, or balance images filled with green and red plants. This isn't a flattering channel for people—unless you want their faces to look dirty.

In the grayscale image, the fountain competes with the foliage and paneling. Choosing the Blue channel darkened these elements to highlight the sculpture.



 Kris Fong notes that some muddy things are great (Muddy Waters, the Muddy River, Kahlua Mudslides), but muddy black and whites are not.