

Elements Tips – Lightness Sharpening

By Rick Cloran

One place Elements seems to lag behind the full version of Photoshop is in the options available for sharpening. You may have heard some of our judges recommending that you sharpen in LAB Color. Unfortunately, the LAB space is not available in Elements. Let's consider what the process entails and see what Elements allows us to do. The LAB color space breaks the color information into an A and B channel and places the luminance (lightness) information into a separate Lightness channel. LAB sharpening involves applying the sharpening function to only that Lightness channel. As a result, the color information is not impacted by the sharpening process.

The Lightness channel is not easily accessible unless you use LAB color. However, in Elements by changing the Blend Mode of a layer to Luminosity we effectively confine any change on that layer to the lightness values. Adding or duplicating a layer is always an option in Elements. We can also change the blend mode of any layer, other than the background. This then gives us the option to sharpen on a layer and change the blend mode of the entire layer to achieve the same lightness sharpening that they have in the full blown Photoshop.

To take advantage of this we need to make a small change to our final work flow. First complete all adjustments and modifications on your image. Next flatten and size the image for the intended use. Now drag the resulting Background layer to the new layer icon or go to Layer > Duplicate Layer. Apply your sharpening to the duplicate (background copy) layer and change the Blend Mode of the layer to Luminosity. It is best to do this at 100% viewing magnification to see the effect of the sharpening and to check the actual image closely after sharpening to make sure there are no halos showing along the darker edges. Finally flatten the image one more time and save it in the form needed for the use you intend.

The work around takes a little longer than the Photoshop alternatives, but provides all of the benefits of LAB sharpening. In fact, using a separate layer can provide added benefits because there is no limit to how many layers you can add. If you need to sharpen different areas of the image differently, i.e. apply stronger sharpening to landscape details and weaker sharpening in the sky area (or anywhere there is no detail), select the area for stronger sharpening on the first background copy layer, apply the desired sharpening and change the blend Mode to Luminosity. The selection will confine the sharpening to the selected area. Make a second background copy layer from the original background layer and select the area that requires a lower amount of sharpening, apply that sharpening and change the Blend Mode of that layer to Luminosity. Check for halos and fix any as required. If you need to, you can scale back the opacity of a layer to reduce the extent of the sharpening. You can even delete the layer, create a new background copy layer and reapply the sharpening at a different strength if you want to start from the beginning to eliminate halos. Don't forget to flatten the image to finalize it before saving.