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The unsung modifier: Hidden Lightroom features available with the Option/Alt key **UNDER THE HOOD**

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UNDER THE HOOD
The Unsung Modifier

▼Brian Matiash

Building photo-editing software is often like choreographing a dance: you want it to have wide appeal without being too basic or too advanced. With photography software, this translates into walking a tightrope of building the right amount of tools that are impactful without throwing so much into the user interface (UI) that it looks daunting or detracts from the user experience.

To help wrangle all of the great tools and features available to the user, developers will often relegate the more advanced ones to the menu bar or submenus. For even more abstract tools, users can invoke them only with a modifier key (more on that in a moment). The quickness and obvious nature of how all of these tools are found by the user is often referred to as their "discoverability." Often, tools that are tied to modifier keys have low discoverability, which can be a shame because some of the program's most useful features may never get discovered. This article's aim is to assist in discovering some of the most useful tools tied to a single modifier key.

In its basic sense, a modifier key will modify an action or tool when it's pressed in conjunction with another key or when interacting with a click or slider. On the Mac, the most common modifier keys are the Shift, Option, and Command keys. On Windows, they are the Shift, Alt, and Ctrl keys, respectively. In this article, we'll focus on the Option (PC: Alt) key. As a Mac user, I'll use Option as reference, so for the Windows users out there, just replace Option with Alt and you'll be able to follow along in harmony. Now let's dive into some of the most useful Lightroom features available with the Option key.

THE ZEROED-OUT BASELINE

Have you ever made slider adjustments in one of the Develop module's panels only to want to start from scratch? It happens to me all the time. I could drag each slider to its default position or double-click on the slider's name to do the same, but what if I'm working in the Basic or HSL panel?

All of that time resetting each slider adds up and eats into my creativity atten-tion span. With the Option key, I can reset every slider in a panel just by clicking on the Reset buttons that appear in the panels. It can be a huge timesaver when all you want to do is start over.
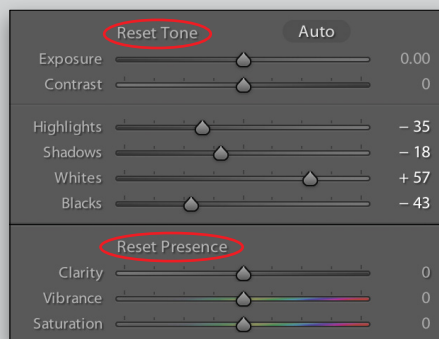
TONING WITH POWER

The histogram should be one of your closest friends in Lightroom. If you're a stranger to it, invite it over for some tea and get better acquainted, stat. Within this lovely graph of peaks and valleys lies a visual representation of the highlights, shadows, and midtones that your image is made up of and, more importantly, what areas are blown out or clipped. To correct for this, you'll likely use a combination of the Exposure, Highlights, Shadows, Whites, and Blacks sliders. But wouldn't it be cool if you could see the offending areas in your image? With the Option key, you can.

The original histogram of this image (next page) taken at Zabriskie Point is very telling. I see that I've blown out my highlights a bit (as indicated by the illuminated triangle on the top right of the histogram), and I also have a lot of open space in the Blacks and Shadows areas of the tonal scale (see that huge gap to the left of the histogram where the tonal data begins?).
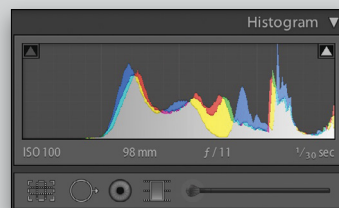
To get a graphical representation of the threshold of my image's tonal range, I can press the Option key while clicking-and-holding on any of the sliders in the Basic panel. For the sliders affecting the brighter parts of the image (Exposure, Highlights, and Whites), the image will turn black and anything blown out will appear. For the sliders affecting the darker parts of the image (Shadows and Blacks), the image will turn white and any clipped areas will be shown.
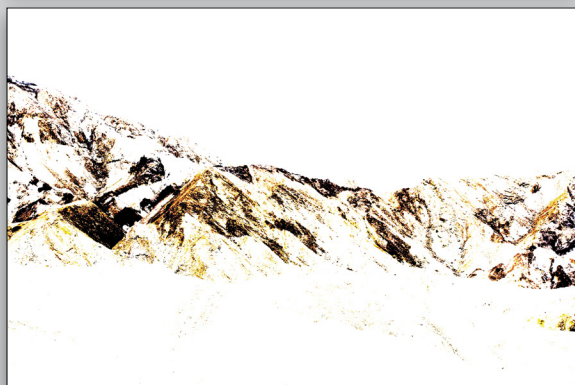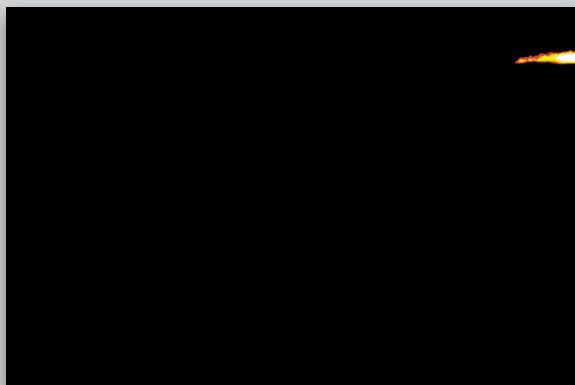
With this information, it makes applying fine tonal corrections very easy because I can see exactly where I've exceeded the threshold of my image's tonal range. All I need to do is adjust the respective sliders to the left or right until the threshold preview is either just about all black or all white. Correcting the image's tone takes no time at all and I'm left with a truer representation of the scene.

TARGETED SHARPENING

When I'm out photographing landscapes, I'm focused on getting a good composition and capturing all of the natural beauty in front of me. I'm not really concerned with how sharp my image is (not to be confused with ensuring proper focus). That's because I know Lightroom has really effective sharpening tools that make it quick and easy to sculpt out the details and remove any haze.

Here's an image of Matt Kloskowski that I took on a recent trip to Death Valley National Park. We were getting ready to photograph a beautiful sunset at the Badwater Basin salt flats when I asked Matt to turn to me so that I could nab a quick portrait. When I reviewed the image at a 1:1 zoom, I noticed that there was a slight haze on Matt's face. I knew that I could get a much better result with a few quick slides of the Sharpening tools in the Detail panel. However, if you're like me, you want to know exactly how much sharpening you're applying (to prevent oversharpening), and you want to control where the sharpening effect is applied (to prevent sharpening any naturally smooth regions like skies, water, etc.).

To start, I always prefer zooming in at a 1:1 or 2:1 factor when sharpening. I feel that this gives me the best preview of the changes being made. I begin by holding the Option key while dragging the Amount slider to the right. You'll notice your image turns grayscale because it's much easier to concentrate on the effects of sharpening when you remove

color from the equation. I find this to be immensely helpful and begin to see detail being restored almost immediately. The Amount slider controls the overall effect of sharpening, so be careful not to overdo it.

Next, I want to make sure that the sharpening is applied to the right areas, specifically around Matt's stubble. To add sharpening to areas with fine detail, I will use the Radius slider while pressing the Option key. You can see the impact that the Radius slider has in bringing out fine details. You may also see a slightly dark halo appear around the edge of Matt's face. To help prevent any halo artifacts, we'll use the Detail slider.

By pressing the Option key while dragging to the left on the Detail slider, I'm able to suppress the halos that were introduced when I cranked up the Radius slider. Finally, I want to ensure that the sharpening is applied to the areas that actually need it. I usually prefer to keep naturally smooth areas, like skies and soft backgrounds, free of sharpening. The Masking slider takes a unique approach here by analyzing the image content and applying sharpening to high-contrast areas and masking, or removing, it from flatter areas. By pressing the Option key while dragging the Masking slider, you'll see a mask gradually build up. The areas in white are your targeted areas where sharpening is applied. As you drag the slider more, you'll notice more areas turn black. These areas will have sharpening suppressed. I prefer to have a full zoomed-out preview of the image while using the Masking slider. As you can see, because the bokeh area of the
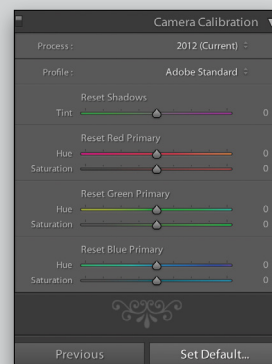

background is already soft, the Masking slider facilitates in suppressing the sharpening from that area, leaving it active on Matt and the foreground.

With the sharpening edits done, I'm left with an image of Matt that is crisp and clean.

DEFAULTS YOUR WAY

Let's say you're the type of photographer who likes a lot of contrast automatically applied to your images. Or you enjoy running the Temperature slider a little cooler than normal. Or maybe you want to have Lens Corrections profiles applied to every image. You can quickly set what the default state of the Develop module is for your RAW and DNG images with the Option key. First, get the Develop module to a state that you would be happy with as a starting point for each new image. When you press the Option key, the Reset button at the lower-right corner will now read as Set Default.

By clicking this button, you'll be presented with a dialog asking you to confirm that you want to set these Develop settings as the defaults for the RAW/DNG images created by your camera model. It's an easy way to save time by not having to repeat the same steps over and over.

So there you have it! These are just a few ways that putting the unsung modifier key to use in Lightroom can open up a new level of precision with your image-editing process. ■