

High-Key & Low Key Portraits

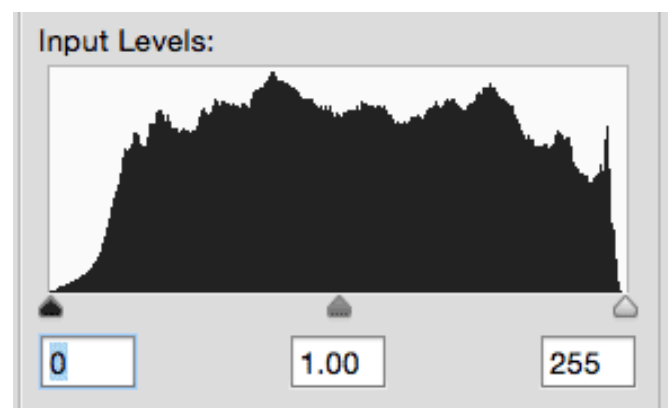
HIGH-KEY Is a style of lighting for photography that focuses on reducing the lighting ratio present in the scene. High-key images often have white or washed out backgrounds, and often time the images lose detail in the highlights. One way to achieve this effect is with multiple light sources (mainly from the sides and back of the image). Back-lit images can also be high-key.



LOW-KEY Is a style of lighting for photography where the overall image is dark and typically the light source is only one key light. Low-key images have dark backgrounds or they are darker overall. Sometimes photographers use a reflector to fill in some of the shadows, if anything is used at all. Please note that you do not need to only use unnatural sources of light to achieve a low-key image.



HISTOGRAM In photography, the histogram is the graphical representation of pixels distributed in any given photo based on its brightness.



How To High Key:

HIGH-KEY LIGHTING

High key lighting is a lighting style that results in low contrast and soft shadow transition through the use of a lot of soft, diffused light. Sometimes photographers slightly overexpose an image as an artistic choice with this type of lighting, but do not confuse high-key lighting and a just plain ole' blown out image. A light, bright and airy image of a subject containing a true black point (such as the pupil of an eye or a subject's eyebrows or eyelashes) or some form of contrast is often a good mark for the image to be high-key whereas an overexposed image will not show a true black at all. Fashion and beauty photographers often use high key lighting since the extreme amount of soft light and lack of shadows flatter a subject's features. Pores and wrinkles are eliminated by this form of beauty lighting.

Capturing a High-Key Image

High-key lighting is generally achieved by having a key light and a fill light, opposite each other, with the key light set twice as bright as the fill light. In addition, you will want to have two lights set at 45 degree angles illuminating the background. The subject of the image would typically be wearing lighter colors – in most instances, white – to lend to the portrayal of a pure, happy, upbeat, light and airy image, such as in the image below.



How To Low Key:

LOW-KEY LIGHTING

“Low key” lighting is a more dramatic form of lighting that focuses on form and shadow. It is typically a darker image where the focus can be on part of your subject whether it’s their face, a body part or a certain amount of their whole body. It can be much more interesting when adding a little bit of rim lighting behind your subject. You’ll find low key lighting used a lot in television and movies to relate the feeling of mystery and darkness of characters.

Capturing a Low-Key Image

Use a softbox for the frontal lighting at a 45 degree angle pointed at your subject. Use a reflector or rim light from the back to fill in the shadows. The subject of the image would typically be wearing darker colors – in most instances, black– to lend to the portrayal of a dark and dramatic image.



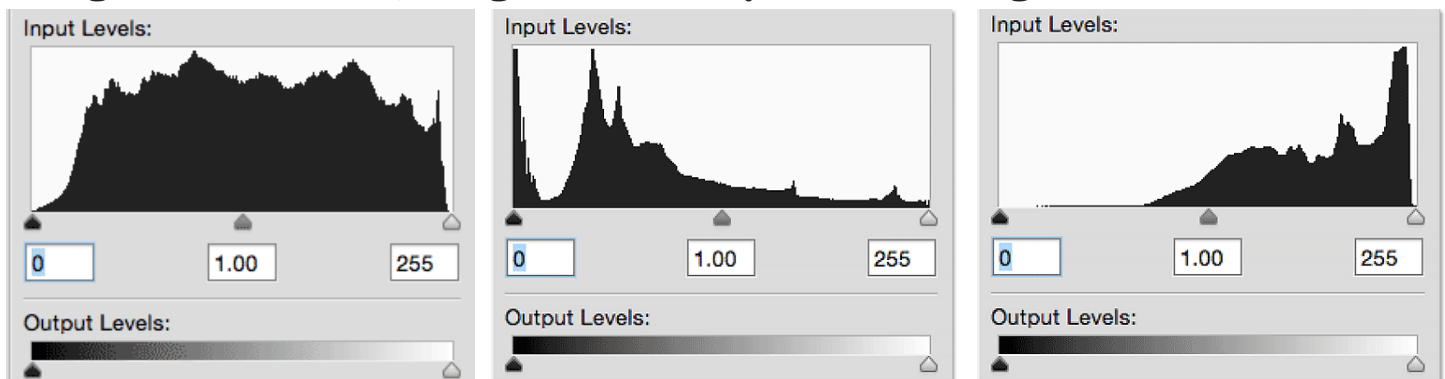
HISTOGRAMS

start with black on the left and end with white on the right, with a gradual transition from shadows to midtones to highlights in between. They show us where our image information falls along this tonal range, and they help us recognize potential problems, like when a photo contains too much detail in the midtones and not enough in the shadows and highlights, resulting in poor contrast. Or when shadow areas are clipped to pure black and highlights are blown out to pure white, resulting in a loss of detail.

The histogram for a well-exposed image will show a complete range of brightness values from black to white, but that's not always the case. Knowing how to read a histogram is important, but knowing how to recognize when a problem isn't really a problem at all is equally important. One of the most common questions that photographers and Photoshop users ask is, "Is there such a thing as an ideal histogram shape?" and the answer is "No". Depending on the subject matter and the mood you're trying to convey, the tonal range of an image may naturally lean towards one side of the histogram or the other. A low-key image, for example, is an image where most of the tonal range falls within the darker tones (the shadows), often to create a sense of drama, tension or mystery. The opposite is a high-key image where most of the tonal range is pushed up into the lighter tones (the highlights), creating a sense of happiness, peacefulness or optimism.

Use Photoshop's Levels dialog box to read and evaluate the histogram. To open Levels, go up to the Image menu in the Menu Bar along the top of the screen, then choose Adjustments, then Levels. You can also open Levels using the faster keyboard shortcut, Command+L (Mac).

Going to Image > Adjustments > Levels. This opens the Levels dialog box with the histogram in the center, along with the handy black-to-white gradient bar below it:



A histogram for a "typical" image showing plenty of detail throughout the tonal range.

The histogram for a low-key image showing the majority of detail in the shadows.

The histogram for the high-key images shows the tonal range mostly in the highlights.