

LEBANON CAMERA CLUB

High Key and Low Key Photography

Keith Kotay

2/4/2025

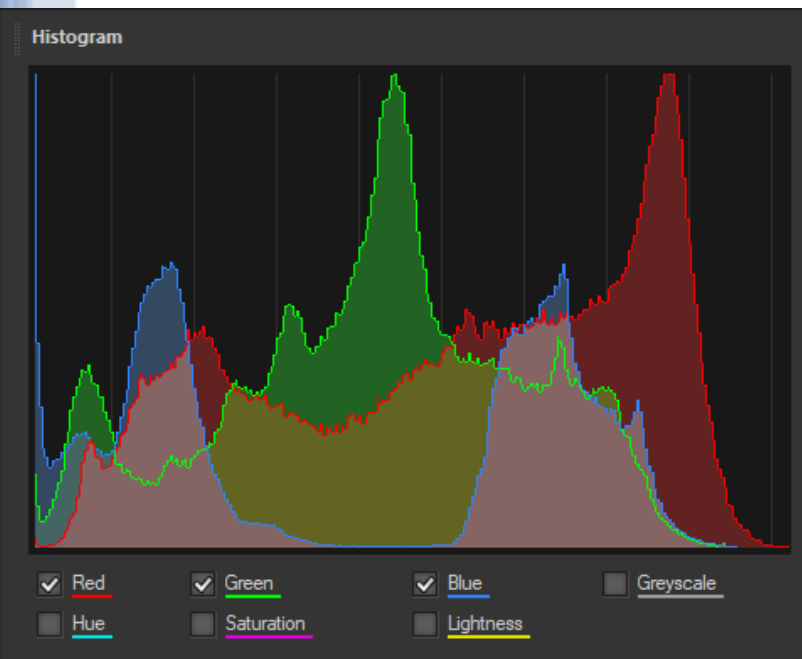
See last slide for Fair
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High Key and Low Key Photography

Note: Ansel Adams is famous for the wide tonal range of his photographs → from darkest black to whitest white.

Introduction

- Normal photography
 - ◆ Wide range of tones
 - Usually from black (or close to it) to white (or close to it)
 - Histogram → graph of pixel counts at each brightness value



RGB histogram

© Keith Kotay

High Key and Low Key Photography

Introduction

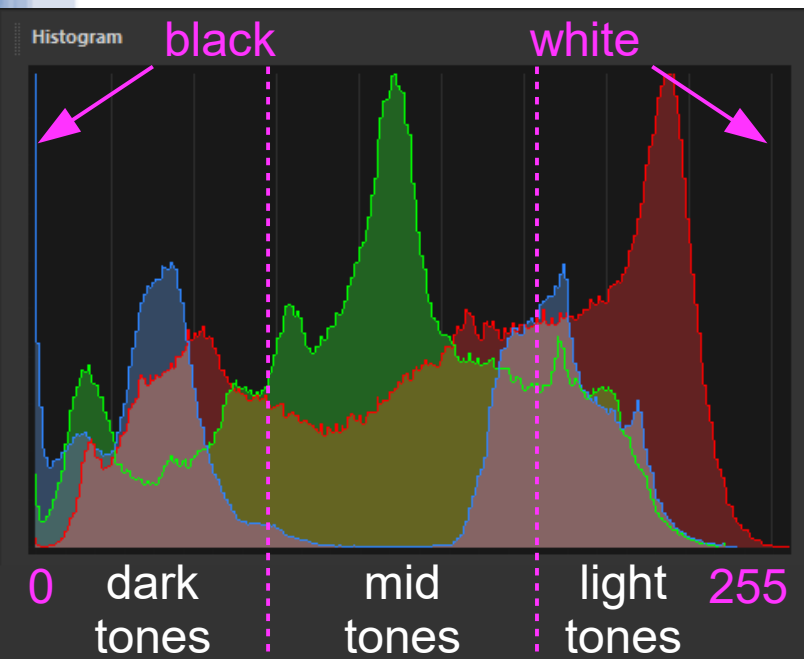
- Normal photography

- ♦ Wide range of tones

- Usually from black (or close to it) to white (or close to it)

- Histogram → graph of pixel counts at each brightness value

Note: Clipping occurs when the sensor cannot record the actual brightness values in the scene, and pixel values are 'clipped' to 0 or 255 → highlight clipping should be avoided in normal photography.



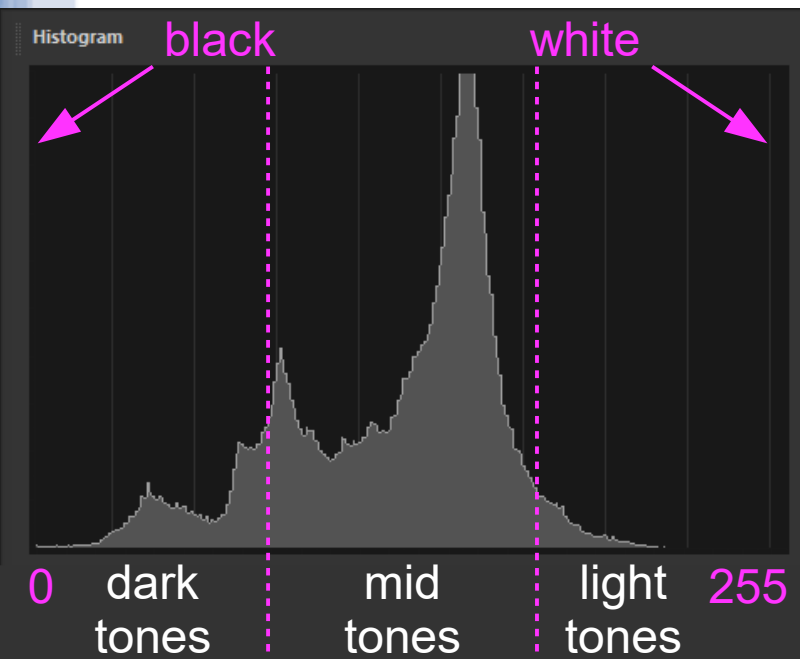
RGB histogram

High Key and Low Key Photography

Note: Luminance = $0.2126 \times R + 0.7152 \times G + 0.0722 \times B$

Introduction

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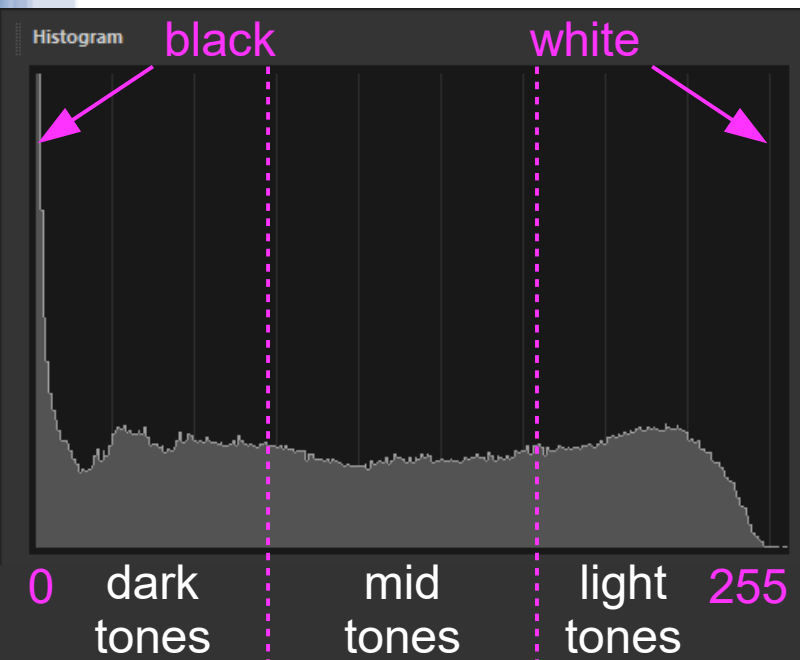


luminance histogram

High Key and Low Key Photography

Introduction

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luminance histogram



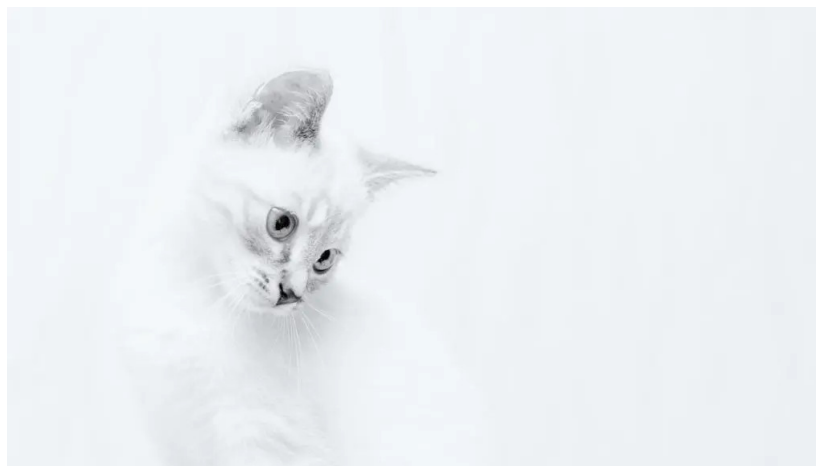
High Key and Low Key Photography

High key

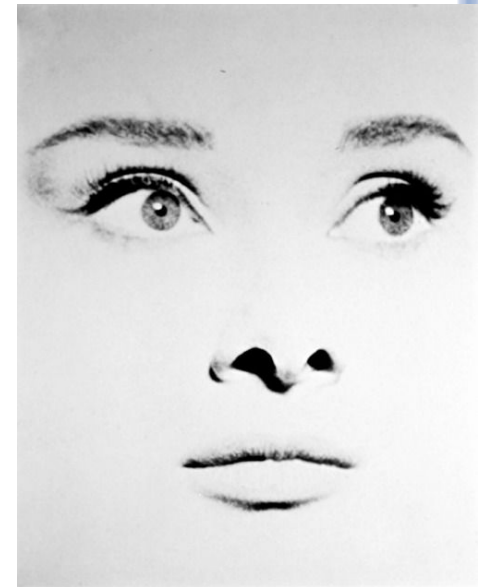
- Examples



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© Lukasz Szmigiel



© Richard Avedon



© Anthony Baines



© Tetiana Kostylieva



© Tetiana Kostylieva

High Key and Low Key Photography

High key

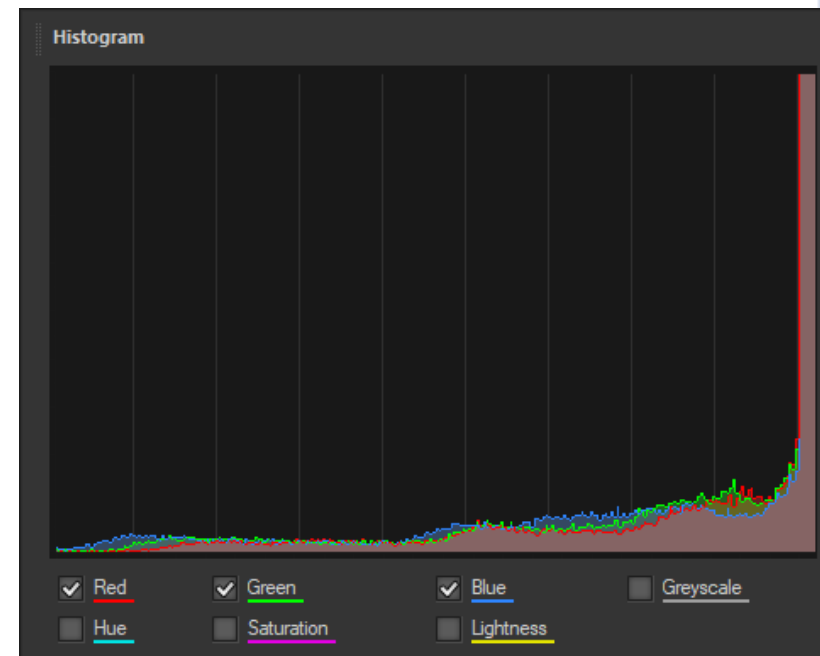
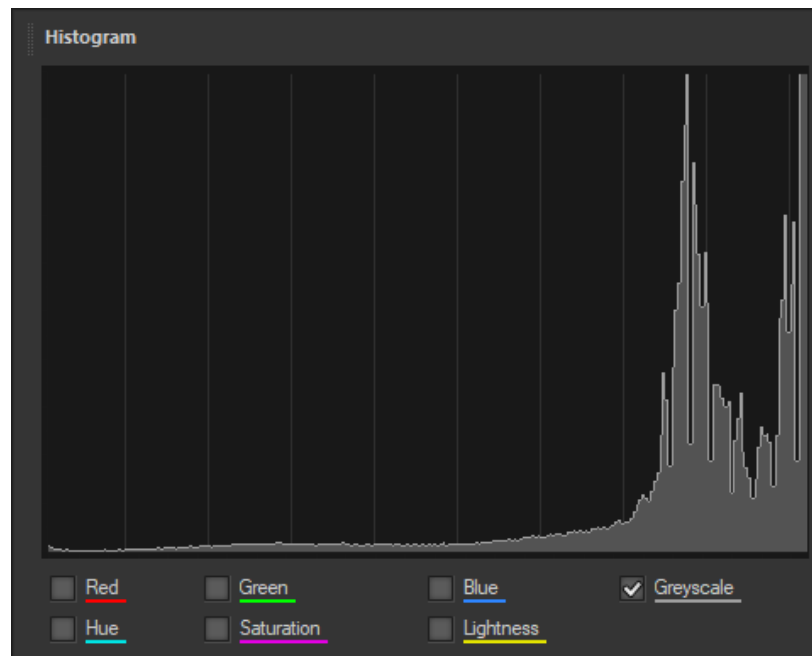
- Examples



© Engin Akyurt



© Anthony Baines

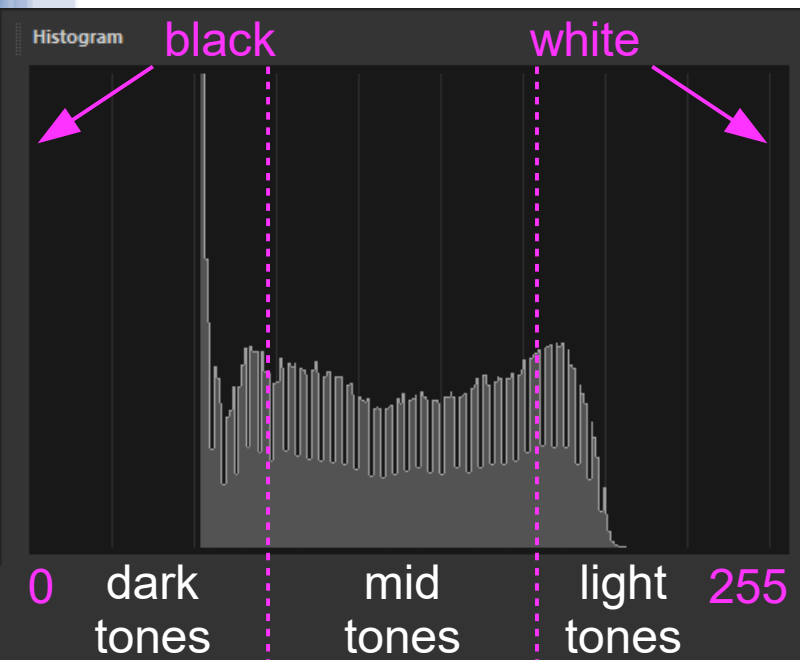


High Key and Low Key Photography

High key

Note: High-key lighting is a lighting technique that reduces the contrast in an image by reducing shadows. It is related to high key photography, but not identical.

- Primarily lighter tones, with minimal shadows
 - ◆ Used for bright, airy, ethereal images
 - Usually a white or pastel background (often pure white due to overexposure)
 - ◆ Qualities → lightness, positivity, clean aesthetic



luminance histogram



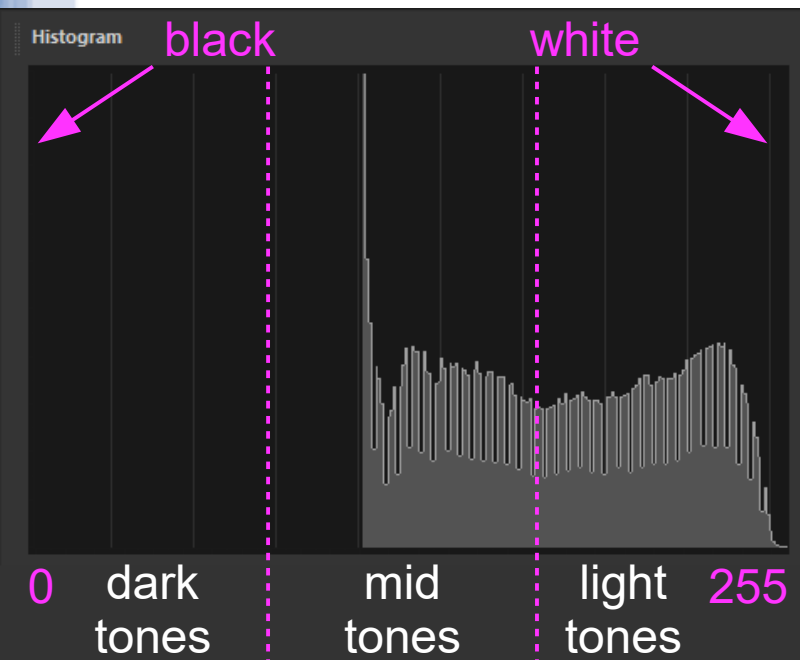
← contrast reduced in image editor

High Key and Low Key Photography

Note: Contrast reduction and brightness increase can result in a washed out image.

High key

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luminance histogram



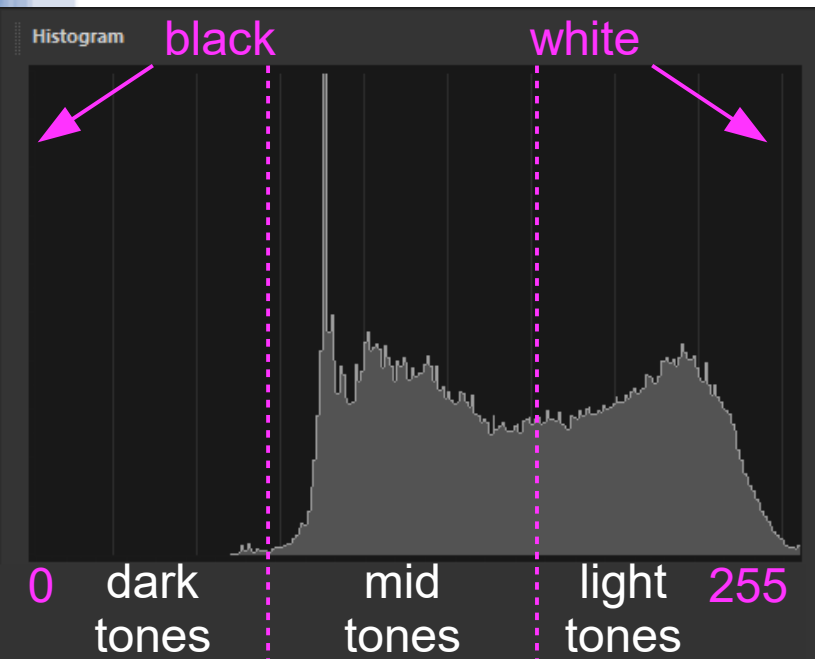
← contrast reduced and brightness increased in image editor

High Key and Low Key Photography

High key

Note: The clarity tool increases contrast in the midtones of an image, which can enhance the sharpness, detail, and texture. It can also be used to add depth and structure to a photo.

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luminance histogram



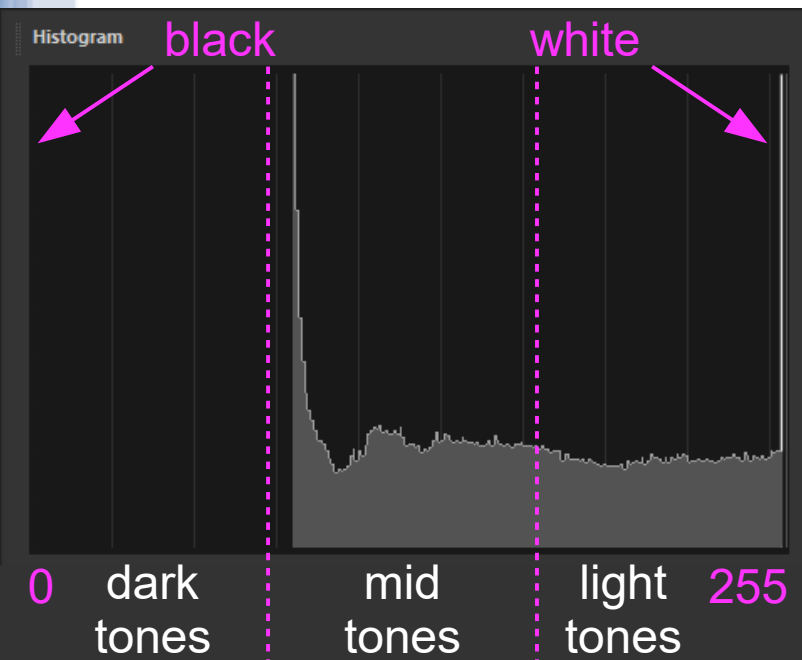
← contrast reduced, brightness increased, and clarity increased in image editor

High Key and Low Key Photography

Note: Normally highlight clipping is to be avoided, but it is acceptable in high key images. Increasing brightness beyond clipping is the same as overexposing in the camera.

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luminance histogram



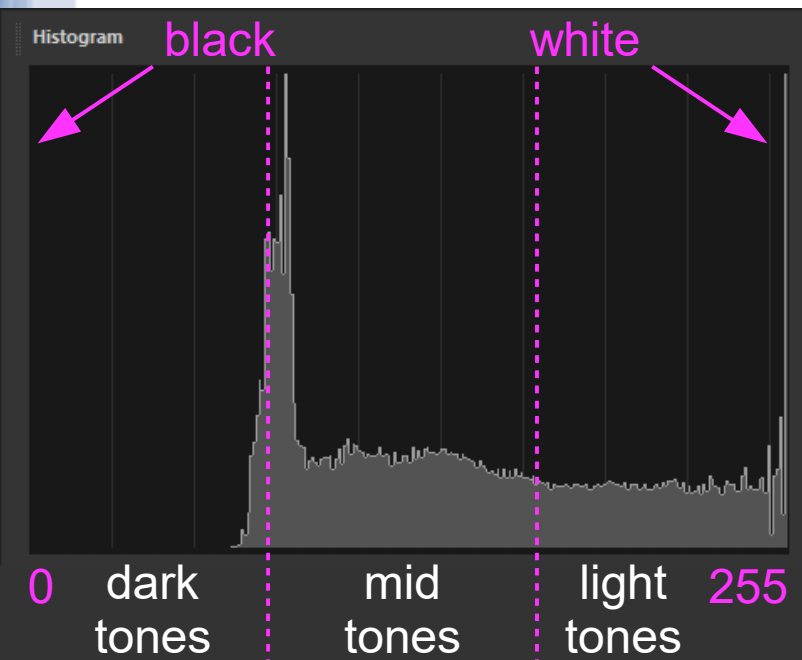
← brightness increased beyond highlight clipping in image editor

High Key and Low Key Photography

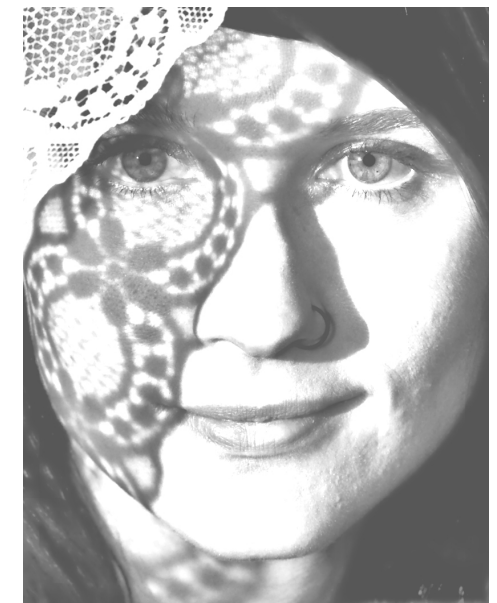
High key

Note: Local tone mapping is an image editing technique that utilizes an algorithm to scale the dynamic range of an image while maintaining the appearance of the original image.

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luminance histogram



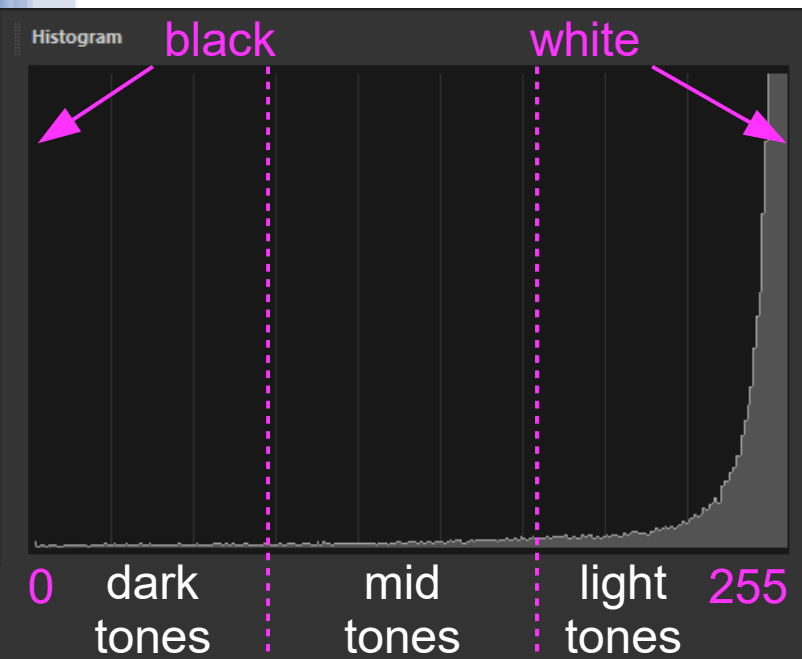
← brightness increased beyond clipping plus local tone mapping in image editor

High Key and Low Key Photography

High key

Note: This image may have been edited so that the eyes were not affected by the high key image adjustments → the eye tones seem too dark.

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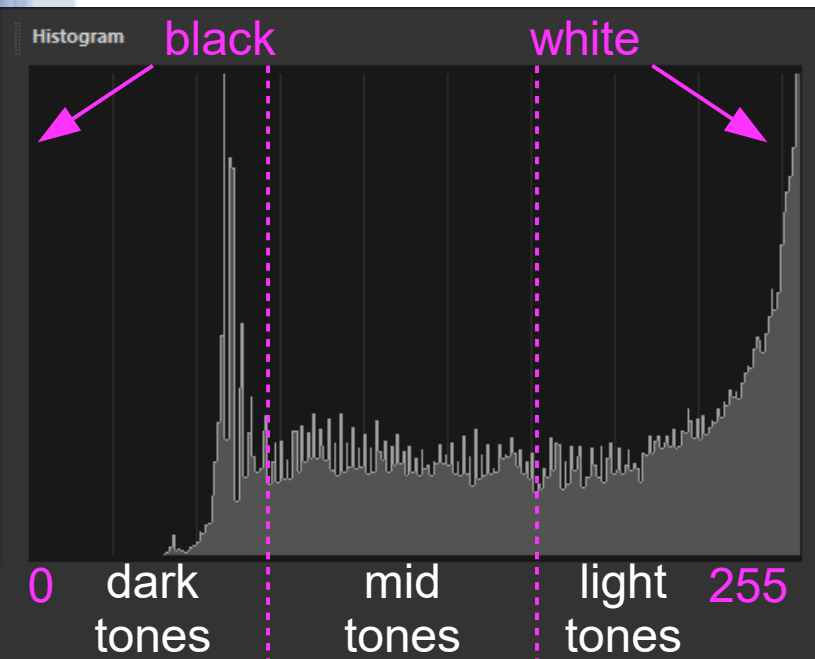
luminance histogram

High Key and Low Key Photography

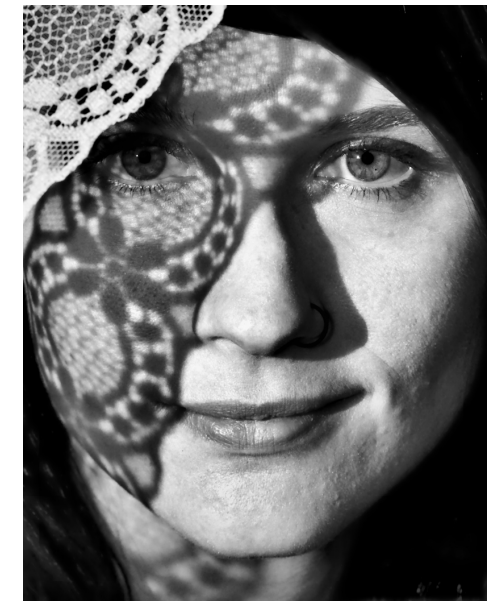
High key

Note: The curves tool is a powerful way to edit the tonal range, contrast, and color balance of an image by manipulating a graphical curve → the most common high key editing method.

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luminance histogram



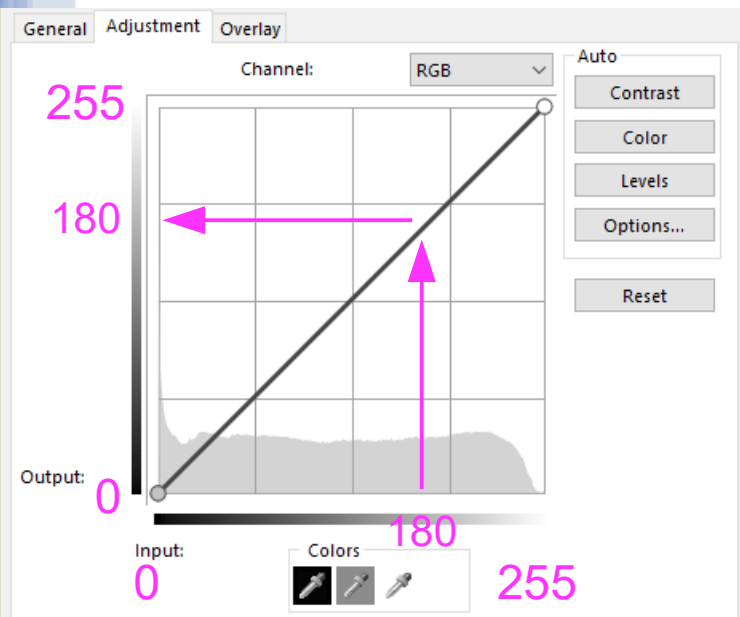
← curves adjustment in image editor

High Key and Low Key Photography

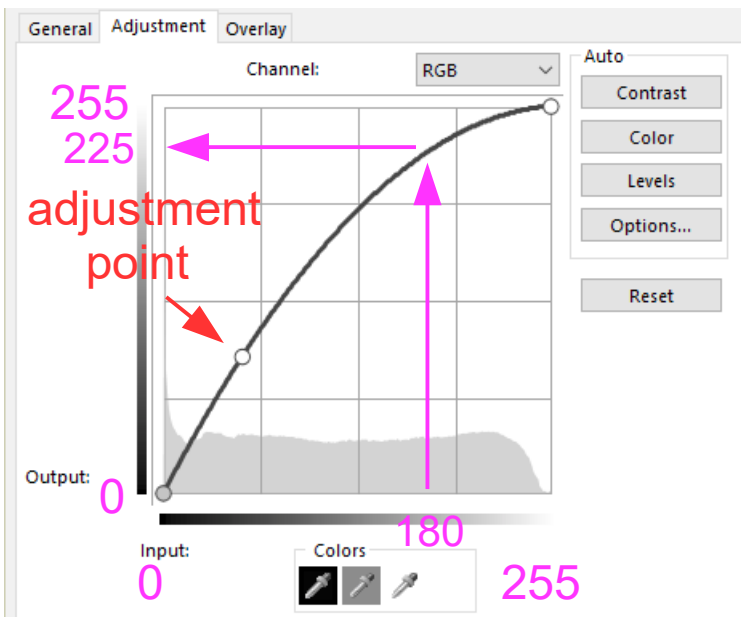
High key

Note: The curves tool maps input brightness values to output brightness values. The default diagonal line maps inputs to the same outputs → no image change.

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curves tool as it opens, no change to image



clicking on line creates adjustment point which can be dragged to curve the line → changes mapping



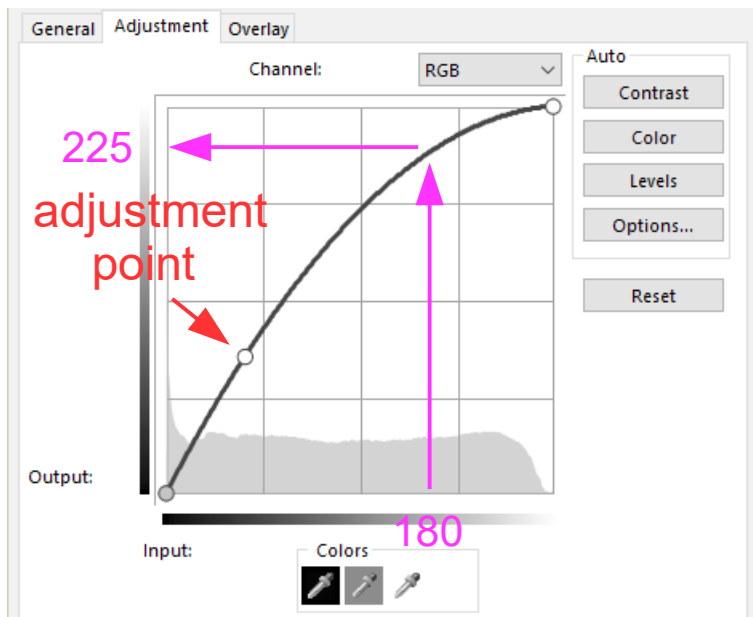
curve applied to original image

High Key and Low Key Photography

Note: High key images are often the result of multiple curves tool applications instead of a single instance, sometimes with masking to preserve contrast in eyes, mouth, etc.

High key

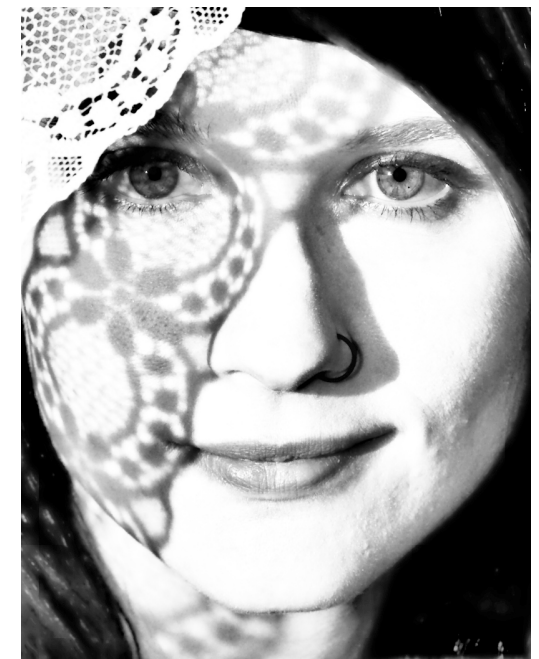
- Primarily lighter tones, with minimal shadows
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clicking on line creates adjustment point which can be dragged to curve the line → changes mapping



curve applied to original image



curve applied twice with masking on eyes and lips for second instance

High Key and Low Key Photography

Note: Smart Photo Editor (\$29.95) has hundreds of effects presets contributed by users → can be customized and combined.

High key

- Primarily lighter tones, with minimal shadows
 - ◆ Used for bright, airy, ethereal images
 - Usually a white or pastel background (often pure white due to overexposure)
 - ◆ Qualities → lightness, positivity, clean aesthetic
 - ◆ Methods
 - In camera → overexposure or art filter (special processing option in camera)
 - In camera → use a white background (possibly with some overexposure)
 - Editor → contrast and brightness adjustment
 - Editor → **Curves Tool** (possibly in addition to contrast and brightness)
 - Editor → high key plugin (special processing tool in image editor, may cost \$)
 - Editor → **Smart Photo Editor** (many high key and low key presets)
<https://www.anthropics.com/smartphotoeditor/>

High Key and Low Key Photography

Low key

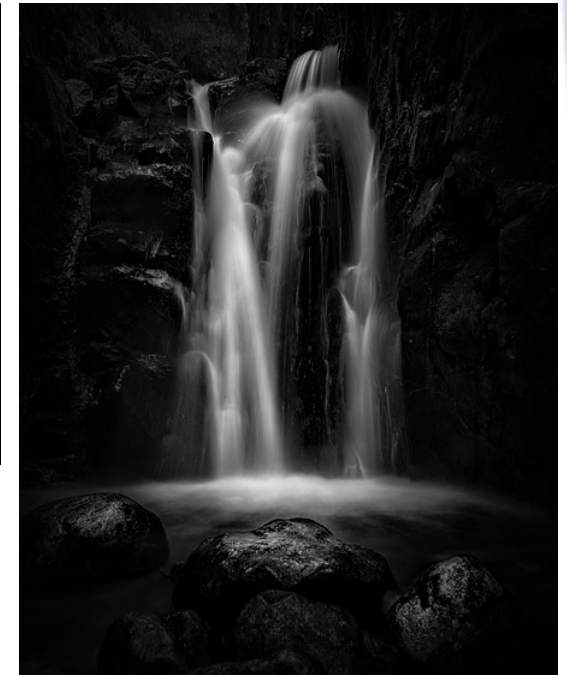
- Examples



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High Key and Low Key Photography

Low key

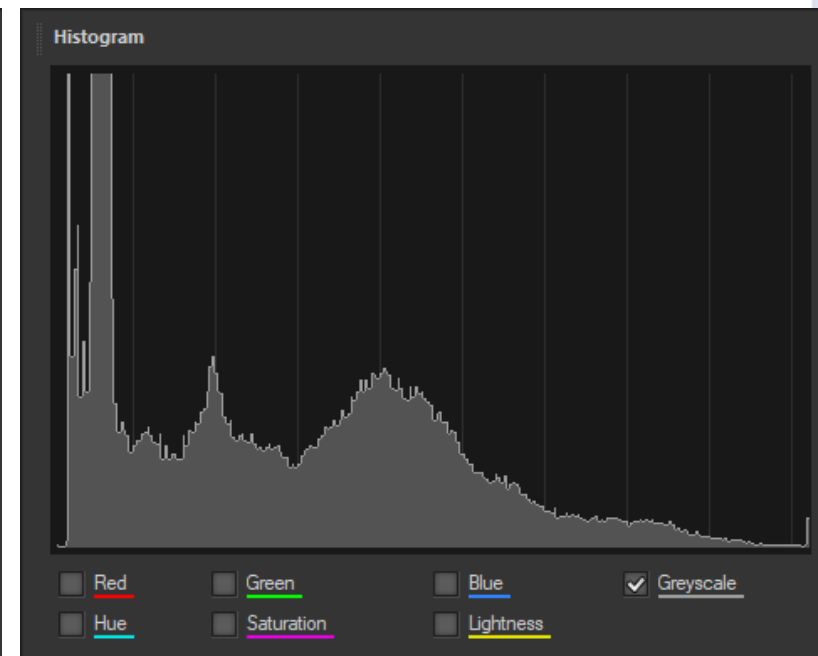
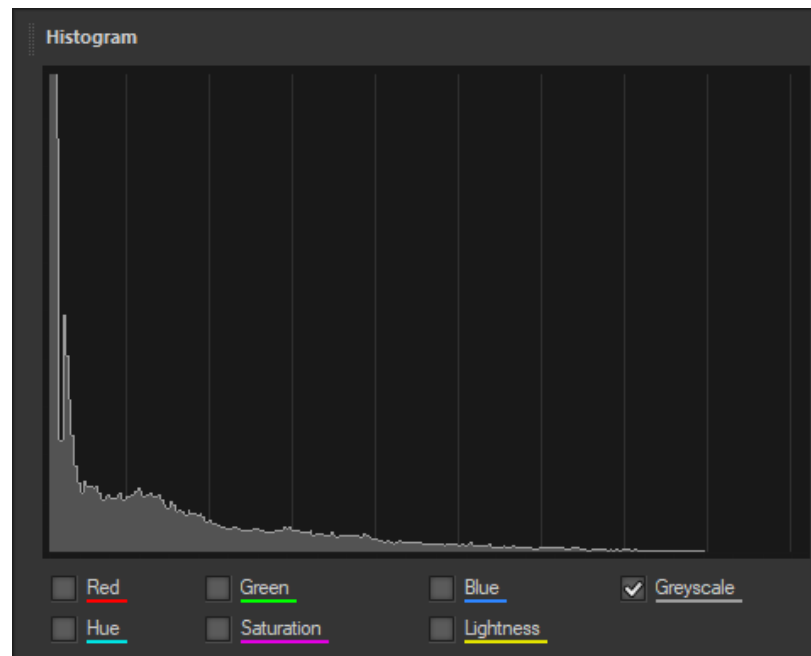
- Examples



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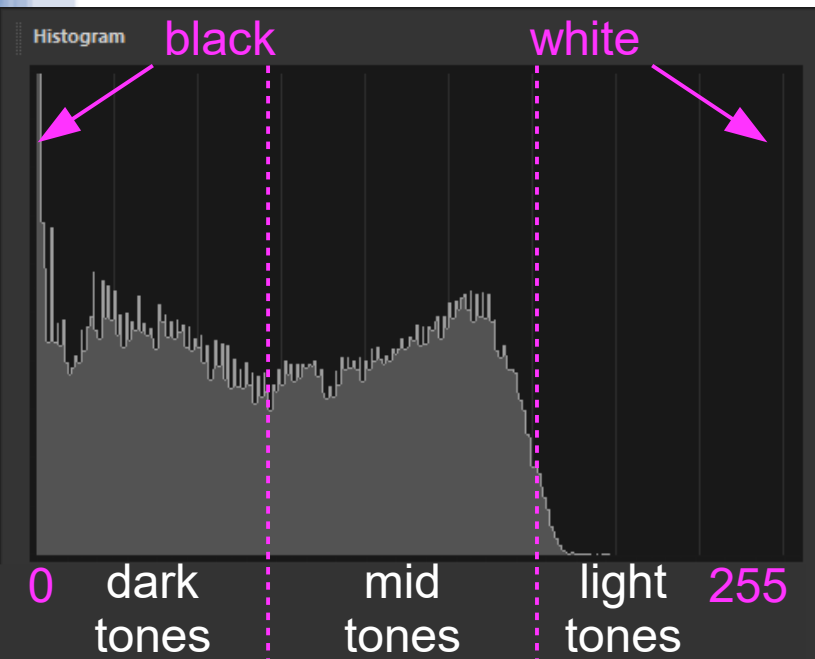


High Key and Low Key Photography

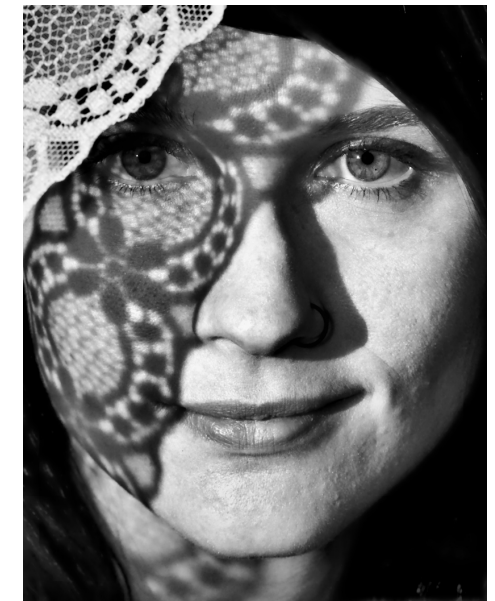
Low key

Note: Low key can also be created in camera with underexposure. A black background is often used to emphasize the subject.

- Primarily dark tones, with minimal highlights
 - ◆ Used for mysterious and moody atmospheres
 - Usually a black background (often pure black due to underexposure)
 - ◆ Qualities → melancholy, powerful, dramatic



luminance histogram



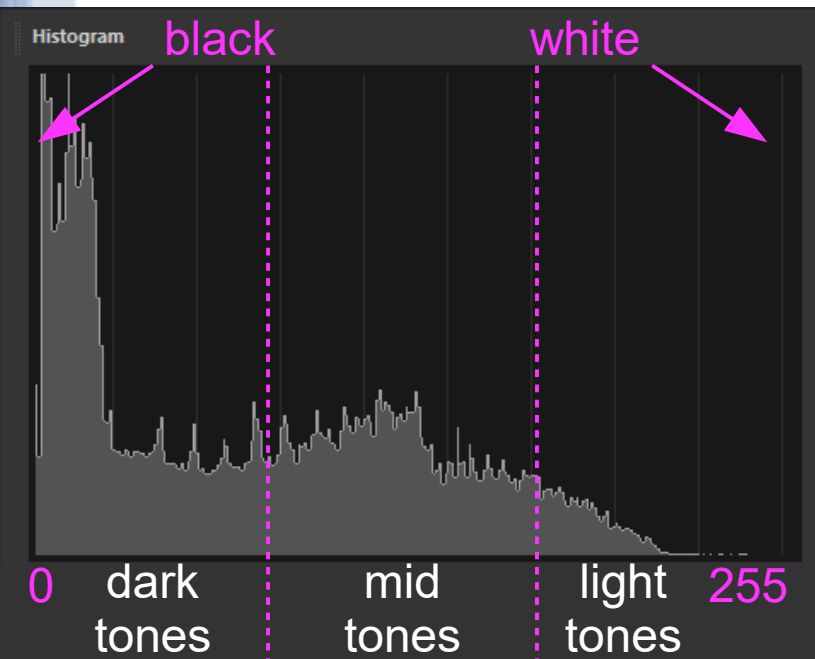
← brightness decreased, slight clarity increase in image editor

High Key and Low Key Photography

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luminance histogram



← Smart Photo Editor
'Low key' preset and
highlight reduction in
image editor

High Key and Low Key Photography

Note: Smart Photo Editor (\$29.95) has hundreds of effects presets contributed by users → can be customized and combined.

Low key

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 - ◆ Methods
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 - In camera → use a black background (possibly with some underexposure)
 - Editor → contrast and brightness adjustment
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 - Editor → low key plugin (special processing tool in image editor, may cost \$)
 - Editor → **Smart Photo Editor** (many high key and low key presets)
<https://www.anthropics.com/smartphotoeditor/>

High Key and Low Key Photography

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