



How to Fix Overexposed Photos: A Comprehensive Guide

A Post By: [Ana Mireles](#)



Are your files looking washed out? Do they have white areas that lack detail? Do they seem unpleasantly bright? If you answered "Yes!" to any of the above questions, your images might be overexposed.

And it's true: Exposure is a significant, image-ruining problem. An overexposed photo doesn't look as nice as a properly exposed file, plus it'll fail to show detail in areas where the details are important.

Fortunately, while overexposure *is* bad, it's not unfixable. With the right techniques, you can correct overexposure – ideally in the field, but also while post-processing your photos. In this article, I explain how to fix overexposed photos on the spot, and I also show you several techniques to fix overexposure in Lightroom, Photoshop, and more.

Sound useful? Then keep on reading!

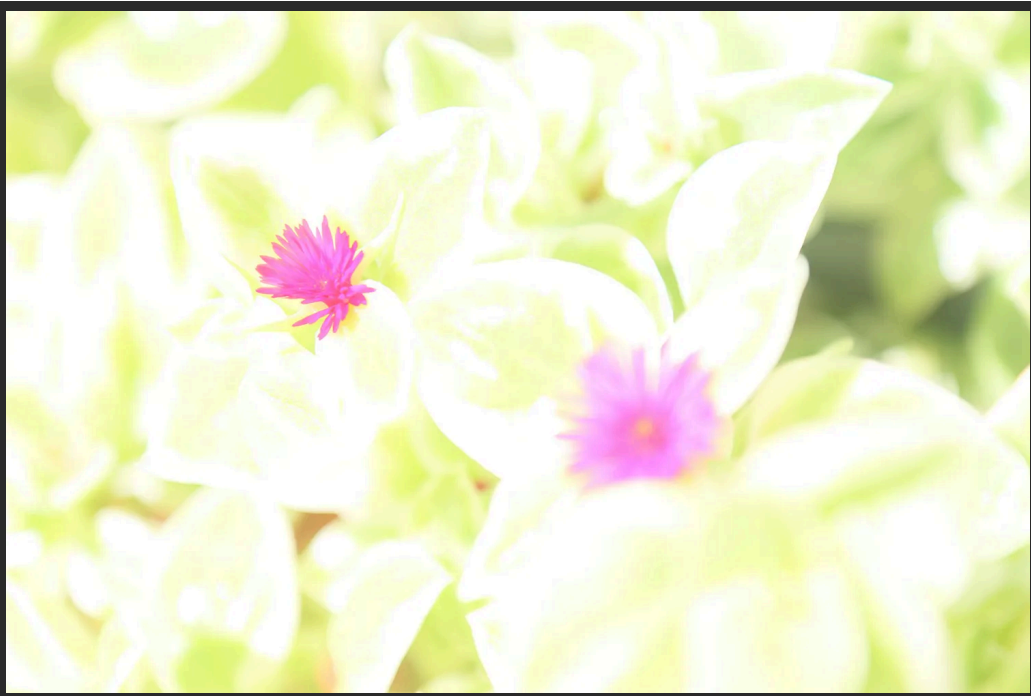
What is an overexposed photo?

In simple terms, an overexposed photo is too bright.

Overexposed images usually look very washed out due to the lack of contrast in the mid-tones and shadows. Additionally, overexposed images often feature limited details in the highlights (i.e., the lightest portions of the scene).

Here's an example of a (very!) overexposed photo:





This close-up shot of some flowers and leaves is extremely overexposed. Note the lack of detail in the highlights, the lack of shadows, and the all-around sense of overwhelming brightness!

This is in contrast to *underexposure* (where the image is too dark) and a *neutral* exposure (where the image is nicely exposed).

It's often easy to identify heavily overexposed images thanks to the characteristics I mentioned above. However, when thinking about overexposure versus neutral exposure, *there isn't a single "correct" exposure* that all photographers agree on. What looks too bright to one photographer might look perfect to another – and even an image that's missing details can be considered "correctly" exposed if it achieves a specific effect the photographer was after (e.g., a pure white background). Therefore, if you like a brighter look, don't feel like you always have to "fix" the "problem."

What causes overexposed

images?

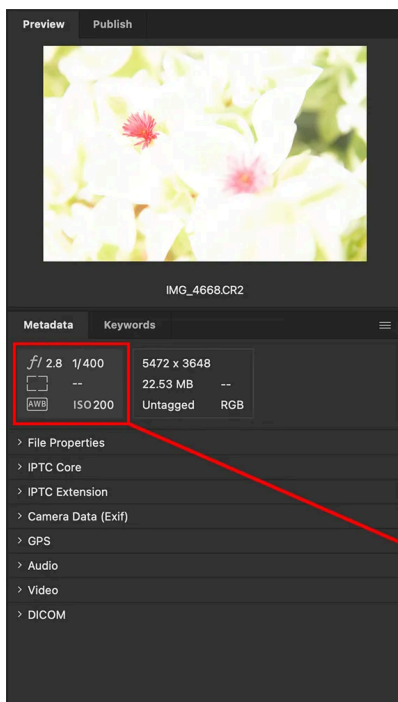
Overexposure is caused by too much light reaching the camera sensor. (As you may know, the *exposure* of a photograph refers to the amount of light that creates an image.)

You can control the amount of light (and, consequently, the exposure) using the three corners of the *exposure triangle*: *ISO*, *aperture*, and *shutter speed*. For instance, you can modify the sensitivity of the camera sensor by adjusting the ISO. You can let in more or less light by changing the aperture size. And you can decide how long the sensor is exposed to the light by tweaking the shutter speed.

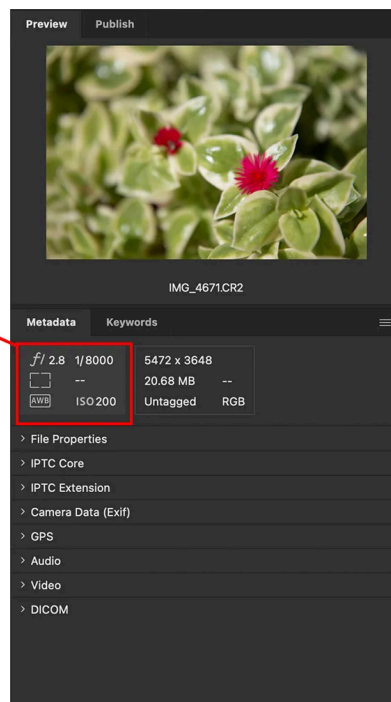
When you find the perfect balance of exposure variables – and hence a good amount of light – then you’ll produce a well-exposed image. But if too little light hits the sensor, the photo will be underexposed, and if too much light hits the sensor, the photo will be overexposed. Make sense?

Keep in mind that an overexposed photo is different from a *high-key photo*. High-key photos feature mostly bright tones, but the few dark tones that are present look deep and intense. Plus, even high-key files feature detail in the highlights (at least on the subject).

5 basic ways to fix overexposure when photographing



CORRECT EXPOSURE



OVEREXPOSED

Overexposure is caused by too much light, so if your images are consistently overexposed, you can fix this by adjusting your camera settings. Make sure your camera is set to shoot in **Manual mode** – which will let you modify your different settings independently – and then try these solutions:

1. Lower the ISO

ISO determines the sensitivity of the camera sensor. (Yes, this is an oversimplification, but it's useful to think in these terms.)

In film photography, you can choose the sensitivity of your film, which remains consistent across the entire roll; in digital photography, you can adjust the ISO from one photo to the next.

High ISO values cause the sensor to be very sensitive. Therefore, these values are meant for low-light conditions. As a general rule of thumb, you should keep your ISO as low as possible; otherwise, you'll start to see noise/grain in your files.

So if your image is overexposed, start by lowering the ISO. Most cameras can drop down to ISO 100, although some can reach ISO 50.

2. Narrow the aperture

The aperture is the hole in your lens that lets in light. It's an essential part of each and every lens design, and different aperture options can be a key factor in the value (and price) of the lens.

A wide aperture allows you to shoot with faster shutter speeds, even in low light. But depending on the light levels, a too-wide aperture can lead to overexposure (if you're not compensating for the increased light via other camera settings, that is).

A wide aperture will also create a narrow **depth of field** in your images, but if you don't need a **shallow depth of field effect** and your images are turning out overexposed, you can narrow the aperture to let in less light and fix the issue.

On the other hand, if you *do* want a shallow depth of field effect, then you'd do better to prevent overexposure using the following option:

3. Use a faster shutter speed

Your shutter speed determines how long the sensor is exposed to light.

A fast shutter speed can help freeze in-motion subjects and allow *less* light to reach the sensor, while a slow shutter speed will capture motion as a blur but will allow *more* light to hit your sensor. If your images are overexposed, simply speed up that shutter to produce a better result.

Boosting the shutter speed will rarely have adverse effects on your images. (To the contrary, if you speed up the shutter speed, your images may turn out even sharper!) The exception is when you want to blur moving subjects deliberately, in which case you'll want to keep a slow shutter speed and use the next option instead:

4. Use a neutral density filter

A neutral density filter is basically just a dark piece of glass that goes over your lens. It'll reduce the amount of light that hits the camera sensor and keep your images well-exposed.

Neutral density filters can be on the expensive side, plus they'll increase the amount of gear you'll need to work with. Therefore, if possible, I'd recommend fixing overexposure by adjusting the camera settings discussed above.

But if your ISO is at its base value, and you can't or don't want to adjust your aperture or your shutter speed, you can always add that ND filter over the lens for a better result! Just bear in mind that different ND filters offer different light-blocking capabilities, so you'll want to **choose a model that works for your purposes.**

5. Try other metering modes



How does your camera know how much light you need for a photo? It's all thanks to the built-in light meter. By default, the camera analyzes the scene and calculates a lighting average; it then indicates whether your current settings will give you a neutral exposure.

Unfortunately, when you're photographing a scene with lots of contrast or a large volume of dark areas, your camera's **metering mode** may fail; it might tell you the exposure is correct, while in reality, the picture is overexposed.

To prevent this from becoming a regular issue, you can change the metering mode. **Spot metering**, for instance, lets you carefully determine the light levels on *just* your subject. It gives you a better chance of getting the exposure right and

can be especially helpful if you're noticing consistent overexposure issues.

Additional ways to fix overexposed photos (in camera)

While the aforementioned options are highly effective methods for handling overexposure, you do have other options, such as:

Use exposure compensation

If you're shooting in a semi-automatic mode (e.g., Aperture Priority), then you can use **exposure compensation** to (subtly) adjust the settings chosen by your camera. If your camera is capturing too-bright photos, you can dial in a stop or two of negative exposure compensation, thus telling the camera processor to deliberately darken the exposure.

Some cameras have a dedicated button for this feature, which features the +/- icon. If you can't find an exposure compensation button, you might need to search through your camera's menu. (It can vary from camera to camera, so you may want to check your manual for this one!)



Use bracketing

Bracketing is a shooting technique where you capture the same scene with different exposure settings. The idea is to capture a handful of extra shots as insurance; that way, if you get the settings wrong and accidentally overexpose (or underexpose) the scene, you'll have a bracketed shot that got it right.

So how do you do bracketing?

Some cameras have an automated bracketing option, called AEB (**Automatic Exposure Bracketing**); with this feature active, you can press the shutter button just once and your camera will take a handful of photos at different exposures.

If your camera doesn't have AEB, you can still do manual bracketing. Start by setting your camera to Manual mode, then find the "correct" exposure (as indicated by the camera's

light meter) and take a shot. Then adjust the shutter speed by a step or two and take another shot. Repeat this a couple more times. (You can also bracket by adjusting the aperture, but you'll end up with a variety of background blur effects.)

Use an external light meter



The exposure meter in your camera always reads the light that bounces off the objects in each scene. This method works, but it's prone to error – and it can lead to overexposure or underexposure depending on the tones of the objects.

For a more accurate light reading, you can use an **external light meter**, held in front of the subject. It will measure the light levels directly, and you can use the reading to determine the right exposure settings (regardless of the color and material of the scene objects).

External light meters are highly effective in portrait, product, and still-life scenarios, where you can easily place the meter in front of your subject. However, they tend to be impractical when doing nature and street photography; after all, standing in front of your subject with a light meter is liable to scare them off!

How to fix overexposure with a post-processing program

While it's always best to handle overexposure while out shooting, you can still salvage overexposed shots with a bit of editing magic. My examples below use Adobe Camera Raw (which is essentially identical to Lightroom Classic) and Photoshop, but you can get similar results using any high-quality post-processing program.

1. Reduce the exposure in Adobe Camera Raw



If you've overexposed a **RAW file**, you may be able to recover some (or all) the missing detail. Start by opening your RAW file in a photo editor that supports it. I like to fix overexposure in Adobe Camera Raw, but the steps are very similar in most programs.

Activate the clipping alert by clicking on the top right of the **histogram**. This will highlight areas of exposure in the image (i.e., areas that are missing detail and need correction). As you make adjustments, keep a careful eye on the clipped areas.

You can start by dropping the Exposure slider. It'll darken the overall photo, just as if you shot the image with a faster shutter speed, lower ISO, or narrower aperture.

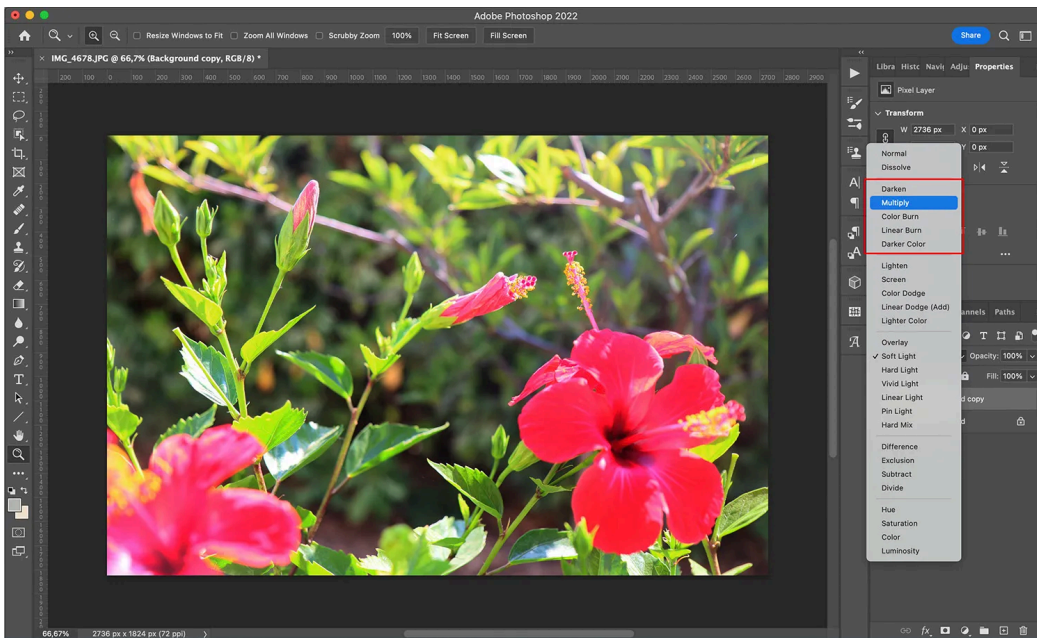
Then reduce the Whites slider, which controls brightness in the whitest parts of the image. Finally, drop the Highlights slider until you've eliminated all clipping. (You might have to go back and forth between the Whites and the Highlights slider until you find the right balance.)

Once you've regained all your missing detail, I'd recommend recovering contrast by lowering the darker areas of the image. You can do this with the Black and the Shadow sliders. It can be helpful to enable the shadow clipping alert (on the top left of the histogram). That way, you can instantly see if you accidentally make the image too dark.



If your image is *still* looking washed out, you can try using the Dehaze slider, which will darken the shot while adding plenty of contrast.

2. Apply a darkening blend mode in Photoshop



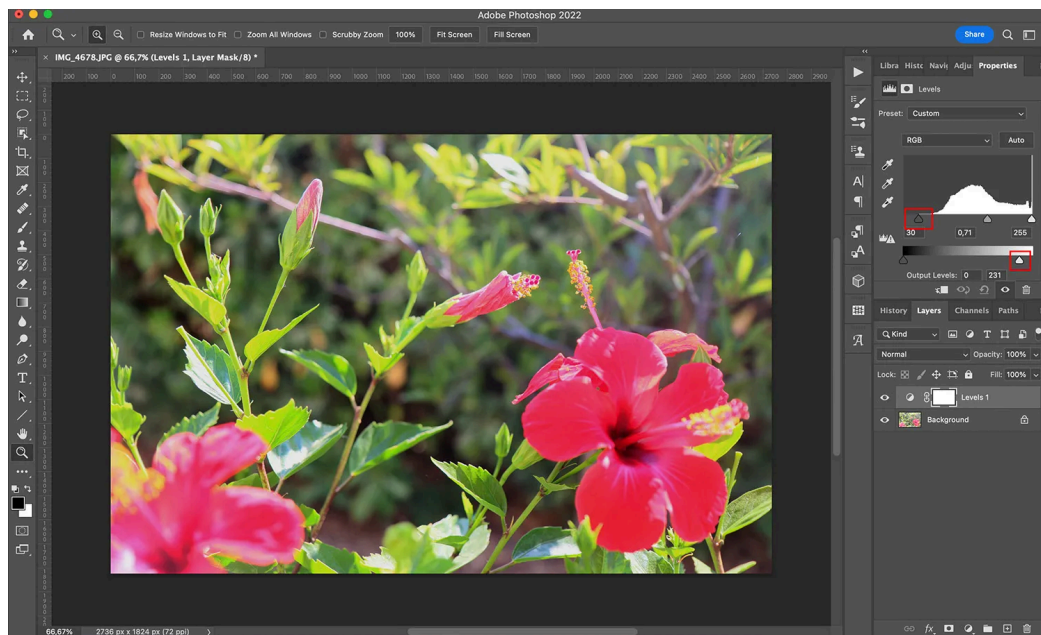
Open your file in Photoshop (or another layer-based editing program). Duplicate the background layer. Then change the **blend mode** to any of the darkening modes found on the menu: Darken, Multiply, Color Burn, Linear Burn, or Darker Color.

Different photos benefit from different blend modes, so make sure you try them all. If you're using Photoshop CC, you'll see a live preview as you hover over each mode, which is highly useful. And if you get a result that feels too intense, you can always lower the opacity.

3. Try a Levels adjustment in Photoshop

Photoshop offers a handy adjustment, called **Levels**, that allows you to subtly and effectively adjust image tones.

Start by creating a Levels adjustment layer, which will let you modify the tones in your photo non-destructively. You'll see a histogram; grab the dark slider on the left and pull it to the right until you reach the first peaks of the graph. You can also try moving the middle slider to the right (thereby darkening the image midtones).



Then, on the gradient stripe below the histogram, grab the rightmost slider. Drag it to the left, and watch as the brightest parts of your image are subtly darkened.

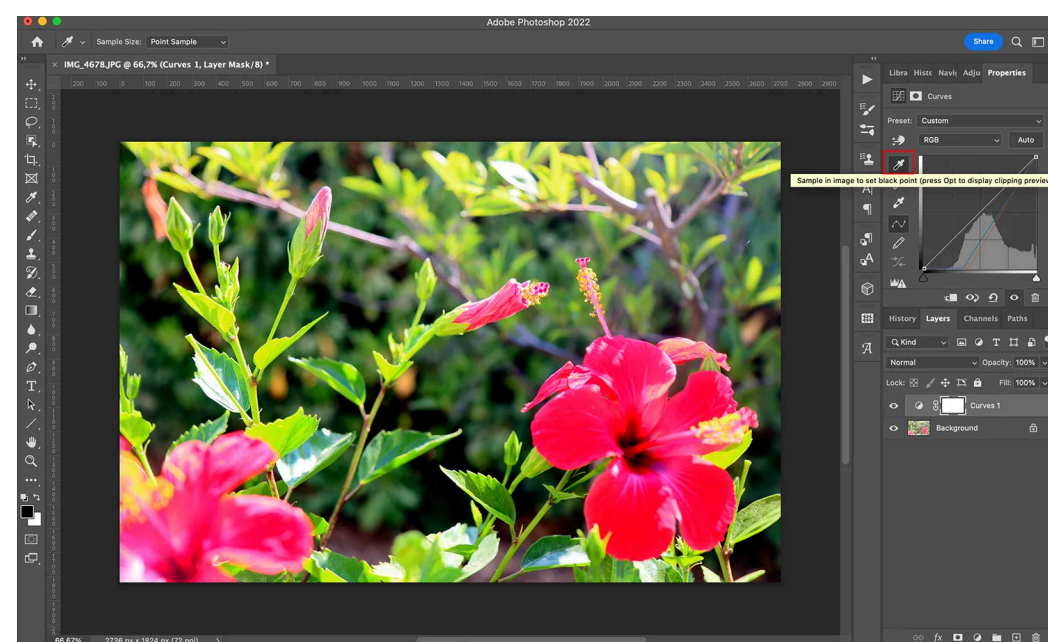
(If you want an even quicker approach, simply hit the **Auto** button, and let the Levels adjustment layer handle the changes on its own. You can always fine-tune the results afterward.)

4. Try a Curves adjustment in

Photoshop

Curves is another Photoshop tool designed to adjust image tones – in fact, it offers even more precise control than Levels, though it's also harder to use effectively.

To fix overexposure with the Curves tool, create a Curves adjustment layer, then grab the black eye dropper and click on the darkest tones in your image:



It'll instantly darken the shot!

If you prefer, you can add handles to the Curves graph and drag them to manually adjust the curve. Or you can click on **Auto** and let the editing program make its own decisions!

How to fix an overexposed photo: final words

As you can see, there are many ways to fix an overexposed photo! It's always better to identify the problem while you're

in the field; that way, you can correct the exposure from the beginning.

However, as you should now be aware, it's possible to adjust the exposure and recover missing detail in post-processing. Of course, this method has its limits, and a RAW file will give you far more flexibility than a JPEG.

So remember the techniques I've shared. And take some powerful steps to prevent (or fix) future exposure issues!

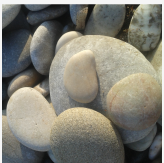
Which of these approaches do you plan to take? Do you have any other strategies for handling overexposure? Share your thoughts in the comments below!

 43.3K



 7

Read more from our **Post Production** category



Ana Mireles

is a photographer and artistic researcher. She has been awarded and exhibited in Mexico, Italy, and the Netherlands. Through theory and practice, she explores the cultural aspect of photography, how it helps us relate to each other, the world, and ourselves. She has also a passion for teaching,