Lightroom Bitesize: Digital Graduated Neutral Density (ND Grad) Filter

A graduated neutral density filter (often referred to as a ND Grad) is half neutral grey and half clear. The purpose of this filter is to balance out the exposure in an image by darkening one half.

For example, often the sky is much brighter than the foreground making it impossible to obtain a balanced exposure- but by positioning the grey section of the filter over the sky it brings the overall exposure within the dynamic range of the camera's sensor.

Until recently this effect could only be achieved by using optical filters placed in front of the lens. These can be either a screw-in type or a square / oblong type in a modular filter holder. Several strengths are required depending on the situation - adding to the weight of the camera bag and providing something else to clean.

Now, however, we can replicate the effect of an ND Grad in Lightroom. Here's how to do it.

My example image was taken at Poppit Sands in Cardiganshire, Wales one September evening.

In order to get the dark foreground rocks exposed correctly the much lighter sky is now slightly bland and the clouds are nowhere near as pronounced as I saw when I took the shot. What I need to do is reduce the exposure of the sky without affecting the exposure of the foreground.

This is where a graduated neutral density filter comes into use.

Lightroom Bitesize

by
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With the image open in the develop module, click on the Graduated Filter icon (or just press the letter 'M' key on the keyboard)

A new panel will now open beneath with various sliders contained within.
By default all of them will be set to zero - and so any graduation you produce will be unseen.
Since, with a graduated neutral density filter, we want to reduce the exposure we should move the exposure slider slightly to the left. You don't want to be too heavy-handed about this, -0.3 is fine to start with (we can always adjust it afterwards).
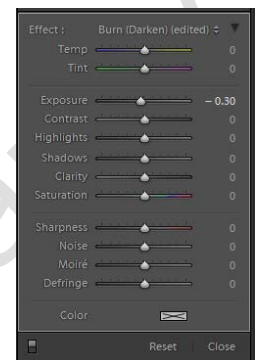
Note: If you prefer, at the top of the panel is a custom button. Click on this and a drop-down box appears. Choose 'Burn (Darken)' and it will automatically input an exposure of -0.32

Now move the cursor to the top of the image and left-click & hold.

Drag the cursor down the image. You will see three lines appear:

One shows the start of the graduation, one shows the end and one shows the mid-point.

Keep dragging until the 'end-point' line reaches the land.

As you drag down you will see the graduation become effective as the clouds towards the top of the image start to darken. Note that you can angle the graduation slightly if the horizon isn't flat.

You can release the mouse button now but the graduation will remain active and you can now adjust the exposure again if you want it lighter or darker. There are also a range of other options you can adjust such as clarity, contrast and saturation.

If you click on the little 'color' button at the bottom of the panel a palette of colour will appear and you can even choose a colour graduation just like the old Cokin filters from the 1980's. Here I have chosen a slight pink colour to complement the natural pinkness in the sky.
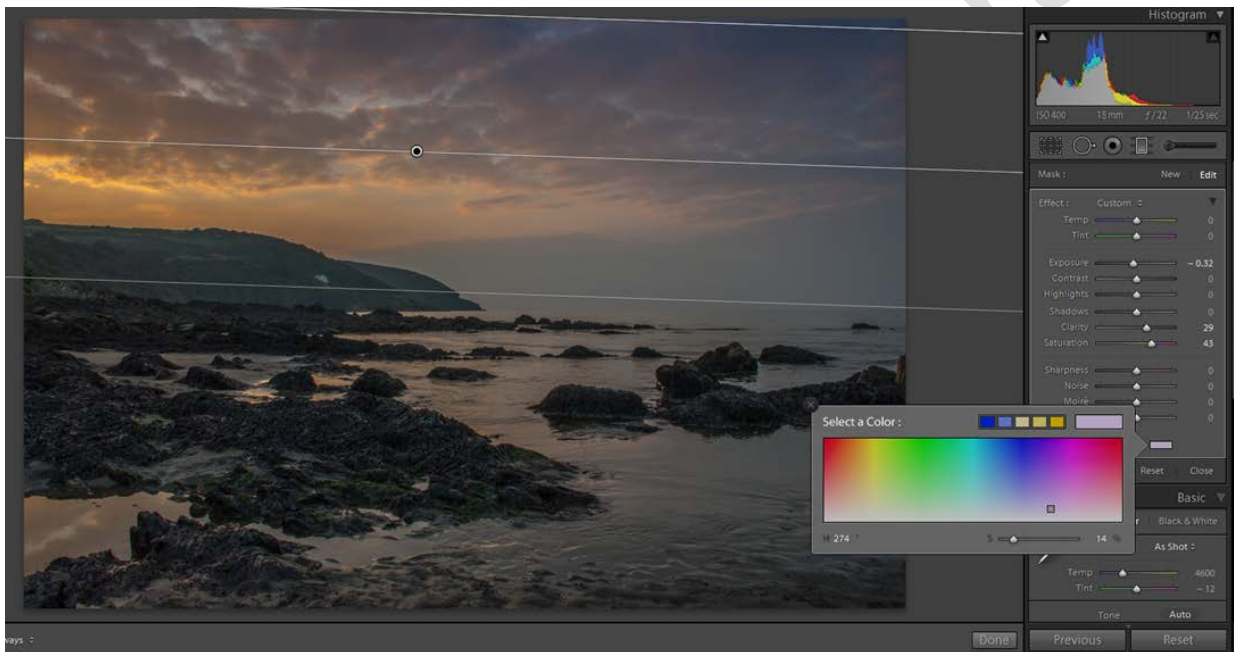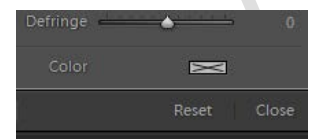
When the position, size and strength of the graduation is correct press the 'Done' button on the lower-right of the screen.

You don't just have to use the graduated filter from the top, either. On this image the lower part of the beach is a little light and draws the eye. This time, click on the Graduated Filter icon again and now click-and-drag from the bottom upwards. This darkens the foreground and makes the eye concentrate on the centre portion of the image.

You will also see that a pin appears at the centre point of the original graduation. At any time you can click on it and it will make that graduation active again so that you can make further adjustments.

So there we have a quick and easy method of replicating the effect of an optical ND Grad. Less to carry and less to clean. But is this the death knell for the optical filter?

Well, no. If the highlights are blown in the sky then there is no data left to save in post-processing. Therefore, in extreme cases it is always better to balance the exposure 'in the field' by using an optical filter rather than taking a chance that you will be able to rescue the image later.

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(or just 'Like' it) at https://www.facebook.com/johnhallettphotographs/ . Thanks