## Lightroom Bitesize: The Tone Curve

We've had a bit of snow recently and I noticed that virtually the only flower showing through the deep, white blanket was this bright red tulip:

I took the shot with +2 EV exposure compensation to overcome the effect that snow always has - making every shot under-exposed as the whiteness fools the cameras light meter. However, even though this looks OK it could do with a little more contrast.

You have probably used the contrast slider in the Basics panel up to now. But this tutorial is about the panel immediately below it - the Tone Curve - which gives you much more control over contrast adjustment - so leave that contrast slider alone.

Lightroom Bitesize

by
John Hallett Photography
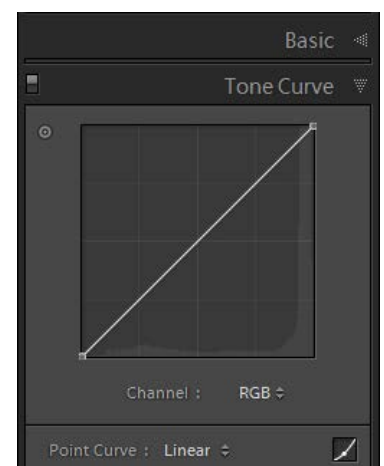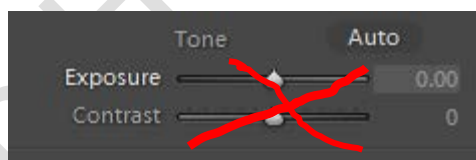
First, let's look at the tone curve in more detail.

To start, notice that the histogram is represented in light grey in the tone curve panel - which can give you an indication of the tones that will be affected. Obviously because my image includes a lot of snow the histogram is heavily biased to the right.

You will see that by default the tone curve is a straight line - or linear. This is indicated in the presets dialog at the bottom of the panel.

The easiest way of using the tone curve is just to use one of the presets. Just click on the up/down arrows and choose either medium Contrast or Strong Contrast.
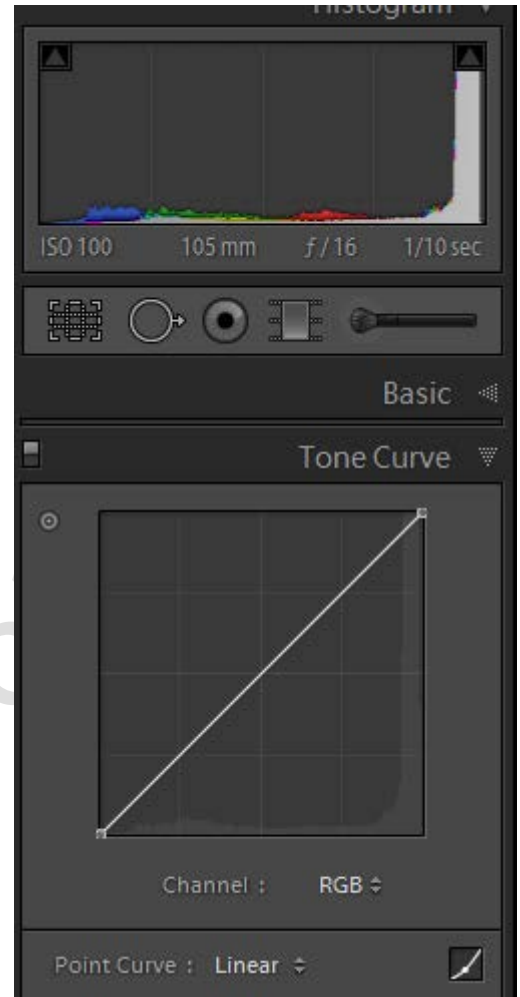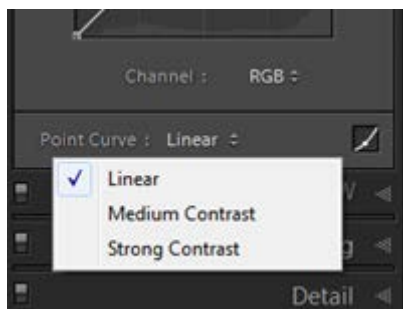
Medium Contrast applies a very subtle 'S' shape to the tone curve - by pulling the curve down at the left, in the darker tones, it has made the darker tones even darker, and likewise, by pushing the curve upwards at the right it has made the lighter tones lighter still. Overall, this has increased the contrast slightly.
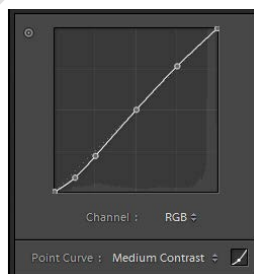
Strong Contrast applies a more pronounced curve and so increases the contrast more.
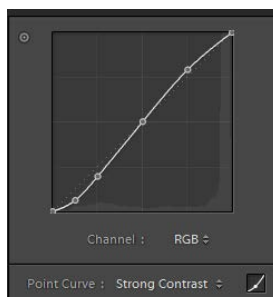
Hopefully you can see from the detailed image selections that the tulip looks less washed-out and there is more 'punch' to its colour.
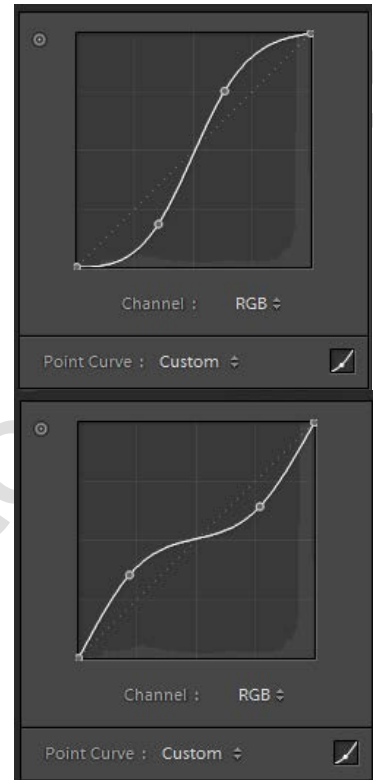
Of course you don't need to be restricted to two presets, you can just click your mouse on any point on the curve and drag it into a new shape. Just be careful that you don't overdo it.

Too much contrast....

Too little contrast....

If you want to reset the curve at any time you can either use the presets arrows and choose 'linear' or right-click anywhere on the tone curve and choose 'Flatten Curve'.

If you want to take your tone curve to the next level you need to click that strange little button on the lower-right of the panel.

You will see that this opens up a new set of sliders and there is a slight change to the lower axis of the curve.
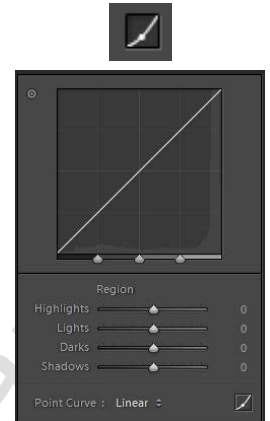
Each of the sliders adjust one-quarter of the tone curve: Highlights, Lights, Darks & Shadows.

Hopefully you can now see why I suggested ditching the contrast slider altogether. Why use one slider that adjusts everything together when you can use four detailed ones?
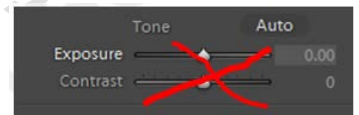
You may have noticed how difficult it is to adjust the tone curve in a subtle manner using a mouse - it is preferential to use a tablet if you have one. But it's even better if you use the sliders - the amount of control is immense.

Now on my image I am happy with the Highlights and the Lights - there is a trace of the slight undulations of the snow in the background which I quite like.

However, the tulip itself still a bit washed out and needs more contrast in the Darks & Shadows.

As you hover the mouse over the slider, and when you use the slider itself, you will see a light grey section appears either side of the tone curve. This shows the extent of adjustment achievable and the area of the curve that will be affected.

Here I have hovered over the Darks slider and you can see that the majority of the adjustment is in second quarter of the tone curve. If you hover over the Shadow slider the adjustment available will be a lot less and towards the first quarter of the tone curve.

If you want further detailed adjustment you can also move the range sliders at the bottom of the curve. These move the demarcation point between Highlights, Lights, Darks & Shadows so they don't all have to control exactly 25% of the curve.
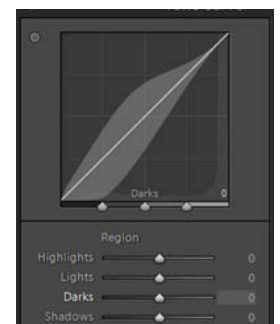
Now with my image I ideally want to leave the red as it is without darkening it too much but I want to darken the green foliage. The Darks slider will adjust too much of the curve but the Shadows slider gives a very small adjustment window right at the bottom left of the curve. Ideal.
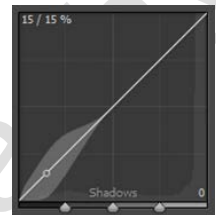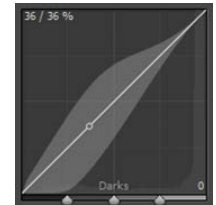
However, if you look at the histogram superimposed on the tone curve, the majority of the darker tones are actually at the higher end of the adjustment range of the Shadows slider.
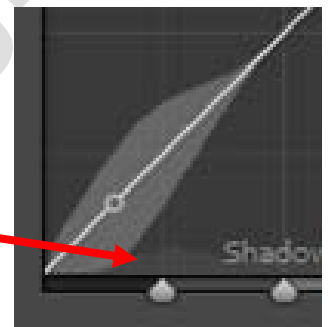
But if I move the range slider to the right so that is at the centre of the histograms peak the adjustment window covers more of the area I want to change.
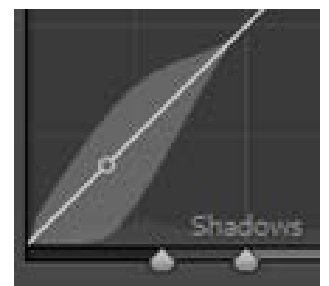
Now all I need to do is adjust the Shadows slider and the greens will darken but the reds will remain as they were.

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Finally I suppose I must mention the Targeted Adjustment Tool (or TAT). This is activated by clicking on the little round target at the top-left of the tone curve panel.

When clicked the cursor will change to a cross-hair with an adjacent double-headed arrow. Just click-and-hold on any part of the image and drag upwards or downwards to make a corresponding change to the tone in that area.

Personally I find this method a bit too heavy-handed and it often affects other areas of the image that you would prefer were left alone. On my image it has a darkening effect on the red petals as well as the green foliage which is not what I want.

So here's the final image corrected by using the Shadows slider alone with a slightly greater adjustment achieved by moving the range slider to the right.

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