We’ve seen how to fix and make changes to photos using a variety of different tools. So far these have all been applied directly to the image pixels. This is known as destructive editing; once altered, we can only restore the original using the Undo command or, if we’ve used a duplicate layer (of course we have!), we can delete it and start again. This is time-consuming and it can be frustrating when we’re trying to perfect a particular effect.

There is a much better method: adjustment layers. They behave much the same as regular layers but instead of containing image pixels, they apply adjustments and effects to the layer below; so the image data is never directly affected.

In this lesson, we’ll use two types of adjustment layer to create a summery ‘light leak’ style effect. Once created we can go back and change the settings of the effect without the need to start from scratch.

### Downloads

- Happy Girl.jpg

### What You’ll Learn

- Creating adjustment layers
- Using Levels to flatten the tones of a photo
- Adding a light-leak effect with a gradient
- Returning to an adjustment to make alterations

### Instructions

1. Click on the split black and white circle icon in the Layers panel. To begin with we want to select Levels. The adjustments panel opens containing the familiar Levels dialog. A new layer has also appeared above the background layer.

2. Begin by dragging the midtone slider over to the left a little. This decreases the contrast, giving us a flatter overall tone. Now drag the left slider of the Output Levels toward the right. This increases the overall brightness.

3. Now for the light-leak effect. Go back to the Layers panel. Click the Adjustment layer icon. Choose Gradient. Open the gradient picker by clicking the arrow to the right of the gradient preview. Select Violet, Orange. Click OK to apply.

4. Because we’re using adjustment layers, we can use blend modes and opacities in the same way as regular layers. For this effect, Screen mode works perfectly; the orange gives us a warm glow at the top with a slight color shift at the bottom.

5. What if we want to change the effect? No problem! First, set the foreground color to bright red. Double-click the gradient layer’s thumbnail. This reopens the gradient dialog. This time select the Foreground to Transparent gradient.

6. We need to change the direction of the gradient. Change the angle to point to around the 8 o’clock position. We now have the red fading across from the top-right corner. This looks more like a traditional light leak.