

How to Get Great Black & White Prints

By: Brandon Hedgpeth

This article is to provide all photographers with information about converting images to black & white. I'll try and provide you with the necessary tools to expect great quality from a professional color lab.

****Any reference to the way a lab handles files is based on the procedures at Candid 2000. While many labs may operate in a similar fashion, we do not speak for other lab's policies and they may vary to some degree. Please consult them for more accurate information.****

Q. Is it best to convert the images to Black & White prior to submitting?

A. Yes. Most labs can convert images properly to get a colorless print. However, since nearly all color image files that are stripped of their color take on a "flat" appearance, we feel some contrast adjustments should be done to help them. These contrast adjustments are usually very minimal and may not reflect the artistic intent that the artist envisioned. That is why we recommend you use a proven conversion method prior to submitting your files for black & white prints.

Q. Is there a simple conversion that is easy and will get me by?

A. Yes. Like I referenced above, you can always desaturate an image by going into Photoshop and selecting Image > Adjustments > Desaturate or use the keyboard shortcut SHFT+CTRL+U. This works because it takes away the color but preserves the file in RGB (the necessary 3-channel file mode for using our lab). However, you may find this will leave your images very flat and have little snap to them. They will definitely need some further contrast adjusting to make them more pleasing.

Q. Is there a preferred method of conversion to enhance the quality?

A. This is a topic you can read all sorts of information about and never come up with a “best way”. I have personally used and tested 15 different methods of converting images to black & white in Photoshop. I’ll explain my two personal favorites to help you achieve much better results:

1.) L.A.B. Method

First convert the image into the LAB color space by clicking on Image > Mode > Lab Color in Photoshop. (LAB does not associate with a printing lab.)

View the "Lightness" channel by clicking on it in the channel window. If you cannot see your channel window, it can be accessed by clicking on Window > Channels.

Delete both the "a" and "b" channels to leave only the lightness channel ("a" and "b" refer the red-green and blue-yellow shift, or "chrominance").

Temporarily convert the image to grayscale, going to Image > Mode > Grayscale. Then convert it to an RGB file, going to Image > Mode > RGB Color.

Your image is now ready to send to the lab. You may feel it’s necessary to heighten the contrast first, either using Image > Adjustments > Levels or Image > Adjustments > Curves.

2.) Channel Mixer Method

Open this tool by clicking on Image > Adjustments > Channel Mixer. Be sure to first click on the lower left tick box entitled "Monochrome" for black and white conversion.

It is often best to get a feel for the distribution of each color channel by first setting each of the color channels to 100% individually.

Then adjust each of the red, green and blue sliders to produce an image to your liking. For an even more pronounced effect, some colors can even have negative percentages.

The sum of the red, green, and blue percentages should equal 100% in order to maintain constant brightness. Overall brightness can also be adjusted by using the "Constant" slider at the bottom. If the aim is to mimic the luminosity perceived by the human eye, set: red=30%, green=59% and blue=11%.

Q. Could I just convert my images to grayscale?

A. This answer is commonly not recommended when using a professional photo lab. The reason grayscale is not an acceptable method when using most photo labs is because it changes the file mode into one channel of gray tones. Our printers require the 3-channel RGB mode. Grayscale is designed to be used in combination with press-printing or newspaper printing devices. While some grayscale images come and go through our lab unnoticed, many of them look distorted when printed. They appear “washed out”.

Q. Could I capture the files in-camera with the Black & White setting?

A. Absolutely. This often produces a very nice result but it limits that print to being black & white all the time unless you have one of the newer cameras that keeps the color information separately. Most photographers prefer to post-edit the desired black & whites so they have the choice of color, also.

Q. Why do I occasionally get black & white prints that appear to have a color-cast?

A. That is one of the occasional drawbacks to using color paper for printing black & white images. There are certain paper/chemistry reactions that are beyond the lab's control. One suggestion that provides a solution for many photographers is to add a warm cast to your black & white images that is pleasing to both you and your clients. If the prints are coming out cooler than normal, the added warm will offset it and appear more neutral. If the prints are printing neutral, the warm cast will be noticed but will be pleasing.

If there are any questions regarding the contents of this article, we encourage you to jump into the forum and share those with us. That way the entire neighborhood can join in the learning process.