BLEND MODES IN PHOTO EDITING

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16 essential blend modes, grouped by what they change

CATEGORY	ACTIVITY / ERROR	EXAMPLES	WHY IT MATTERS / HOW TO DO IT
THE BASICS	01 Normal		• Shows the upper layer without a blend calculation. • Reduce opacity to reveal the photograph below.
DARKEN	02 Darken		• Keeps the darker channel value from either layer. • Can replace pale details with darker ones.
	03 Multiply		• Produces an overall darker result; white has no effect. • Useful for adding restrained shadow depth.
	04 Color Burn		• Darkens while increasing colour contrast. • Reduce strength before shadows become blocked.
LIGHTEN	05 Lighten		• Keeps the lighter channel value from either layer. • Can combine bright details from separate layers.
	06 Screen		• Produces a lighter result; black has no effect. • Useful for soft glow and bright composites.
	07 Color Dodge		• Brightens strongly by reducing contrast. • Watch for clipped highlights and harsh colour.
CONTRAST	08 Overlay		• Strengthens contrast using the base image tones. • Use a mask to protect sensitive areas.
	09 Soft Light		• Gently brightens or darkens using upper-layer tones. • A useful starting point for subtle shaping.
	10 Hard Light		• Makes a stronger, source-driven contrast change. • Use selectively for more dramatic lighting.
COMPARE	11 Difference		• Shows the absolute channel differences between layers. • Useful for alignment checks and special effects.
	12 Exclusion		• Creates a softer, lower-contrast difference effect. • Often gives muted or inverted-looking colours.
COLOUR & TONE	13 Hue		• Uses the upper layer hue; retains base saturation. • Change colour families without replacing base lightness.
	14 Saturation		• Uses upper-layer saturation; retains base hue. • Target colour intensity while preserving underlying tone.
	15 Color		• Transfers upper-layer hue and saturation. • Tint photographs while retaining base luminosity.
	16 Luminosity		• Transfers upper-layer luminosity; retains base colour. • Adjust tone without directly replacing base hues.

PRINCIPAL TAKEAWAY

Choose a blend mode for the change you need, then control its strength with opacity and a mask.

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Supporting educational document

Blend modes determine how the pixels of an upper layer combine with those of the photograph beneath it. Their results depend on the colours, brightness, order and opacity of both layers. In a layered, non-destructive editing workflow, the original image remains available beneath the adjustments. Start with Normal mode, confirm which layer is above, and then test one mode at a time. Lower the opacity to judge a more realistic strength, and use a mask when an effect should influence only part of the frame.

The darkening family includes Darken, Multiply and Color Burn. Darken keeps the lower value in each colour channel, whereas Multiply combines channel values to produce an overall darker result. White in the upper layer has no effect in Multiply. This makes Multiply helpful for deepening shadows or combining a darker exposure. Color Burn produces a more forceful, contrast-rich change that can quickly obscure texture. The lightening family reverses the broad aim: Lighten selects the lighter values, Screen brightens and ignores black in the upper layer, while Color Dodge gives a much stronger lift. Watch clipping and uneven colour when working with bright skies or reflections.

Contrast modes reshape both ends of the tonal range. Overlay responds to the tones of the base image and tends to make highlights brighter and shadows darker. Soft Light produces a gentler result and often suits restrained landscape and portrait finishing. Hard Light responds more strongly to the upper-layer colours, so the same painted stroke can look much bolder. Difference and Exclusion are comparison modes rather than everyday exposure controls. Difference can reveal mismatches between two otherwise similar layers; Exclusion gives a related but usually lower-contrast appearance. Both can produce unusual colours that may be useful creatively but rarely resemble natural lighting.

The final four modes separate colour from tone. Hue takes the upper layer's hue while retaining the base saturation and luminosity. Saturation borrows the upper layer's saturation instead. Color transfers hue and saturation while keeping the underlying luminosity, making it useful for careful tinting or colourisation. Luminosity does the opposite: it uses the upper layer's luminosity while retaining the base hue and saturation. These distinctions are especially valuable when a tonal correction changes colour more than intended.

For practical editing, use the same sequence whatever mode you choose. Decide whether the image needs to become darker, lighter, more contrasty, differently coloured or simply compared with another layer. Select the appropriate family, set a modest opacity, and examine highlights, shadows and skin or foliage colours at normal viewing size. Refine the result with a mask and recheck the whole photograph. The guiding principle is to control where and how strongly the blend acts.

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