

FUN AND CREATIVITY WITH STYLISTIC PROCESSING

By Kent DuFault

As a group, landscape photographers tend to be purists. In general, I follow that philosophy, as well. I think the beauty of our natural world is exciting and provides so much opportunity for photography.

However, I am also in the business of trying to sell photos, books, and my services as a photographer.

In that light, you need to give the audience what they want.

In my mind, that fact is one of the most significant advantages for the digital

landscape photographer. You're not stuck with what was there at your location when shooting, with no recourse.

Image 001 is the posterchild of images that was improved with stylistic processing.

If you've been around Photzy, you've probably seen this shot before. It's one of my more famous and recognizable landscape photographs.

I took this many years ago in Alaska on a black and white film camera.



Image 001 - Photograph by Kent DuFault



Image 002 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

Image 002 is the original photo as taken and printed in a darkroom.



Key Point:

The original photo never garnered the attention that my second-generation version (with the blue overlay) did. The only difference between the two is that Image 001 had a blue overlay placed in post-production. That simple step of stylistic post-processing took this photo from relative obscurity to becoming one of my most recognized landscape images worldwide.

Here's another example:



Image 003 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

Image 003 is a landscape view of the North Shore of Lake Superior with winter icicles.

This landscape picture also began life from an old film camera and a roll of Kodak B&W film.



Image 004 – Photographs by Kent DuFault

This shot also garnered a much larger accepting audience after applying a cyan overlay to the original black and white picture.

I love the black and white version, but sometimes we have to look outside ourselves to see what works for a broader audience, especially if you're looking to sell your photos.

Why did these two landscape pictures improve with the addition of color overlay?

I believe the cool tones added to the story of 'winter.' Blue and cyan hues are cold spectrum colors. They can imply that something is 'cold.' The overlays added to these two pictures' story elements!



Key Point:

Stylistic post-processing doesn't require hours of work sitting at a beefed-up workstation with the latest Photoshop gizmos. It can be as simple as a color overlay/tint.



Assignment:

Go through your collection of landscape photographs and select a dozen or so pictures that you think might reach a wider audience with a color overlay. It doesn't have to be a black and white shot. You can put an overlay on top of color photography as well. This creativity prompt aims to increase the story value of these photos, making them more attractive to a broader audience through a simple stylistic edit. Remember, you don't need Photoshop to accomplish this.

Check This Out

Terminology can be confusing in photography. When using Photoshop or any layering program, you would call this technique a 'color overlay' because it uses layering technology. However, you can accomplish the same thing in Lightroom using the Split Toning Tool. In Lightroom or other non-layering editing programs, the process is often referred to as 'Color Grading.' You will also find the same effect being called a 'Color Wash.'

Here is how to do it in Lightroom.



Image 005 – Screenshot and Photograph by Kent DuFault

Several years ago, I visited the Great Wall in Beijing, China. I had little control over the time of day to arrive there, so it was midday before I could start taking pictures. This time of day resulted in lackluster lighting and uninspiring color values. Image 005 is the original without any editing.

You can see that I have opened this landscape photo in Lightroom.

I navigated to the 'Split Toning' tool.

By dragging around the two circular adjustment points labeled Shadows and Highlights, I can place a color overlay/color grade/color wash (whatever terminology you prefer) onto this image and hopefully give it a visual boost.



Image 006 – Screenshot and Photograph by Kent DuFault

With some Split Toning and a little tweaking on the mountains in the background using the Linear Gradient tool and the Brush tool, I achieved a pretty decent shot that looks like it was taken in the early morning or late afternoon lighting.



Image 007 – Screenshot and Photograph by Kent DuFault

When working on stylistic post-processing edits, I often go down a rabbit hole and try all kinds of different ideas (that's the fun part!). I converted the image to a black and white photo in this version, and I also added a light sepia tone-colored overlay.

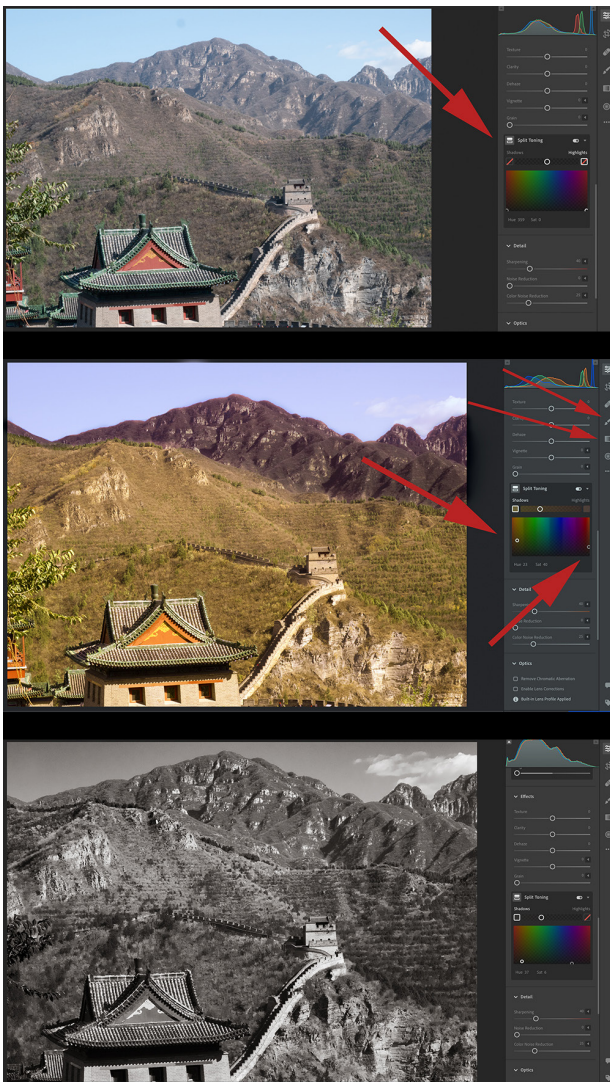


Image 008 – Screenshots and photographs by Kent DuFault

Everyone has their own vision of what makes a great photograph. In this case, I do not doubt that either of the stylistic post-processed versions will outsell the original by a wide margin.

**Pro Tip:**

When I submit my work to the stock photo agencies, I will send them as many variations as I decide are worthy. In the example of the Great Wall, I would send them all three versions. You never know what will click with a buyer. However, keep it real!

**Key Point:**

Stylistic post-processing can be as simple as a slight variation on the color scheme. A great place to begin stylistic post-processing is to evaluate your original photograph. What were you trying to say? How can you direct the viewer toward your intended story? In my example of the Great Wall, I wanted to attract immediate attention to the foreground and then draw the eyes along the wall to the middle ground. I didn't want viewers to continue to the background. If you look at the original, you'll notice how the area that I wanted to highlight blends right into the landscape. (That was probably China's original intent!) However, my post-processing has made that area the unmistakable subject of the photo.

**Assignment:**

If you're using Lightroom, try improving some of your landscape pictures with the Split Toning tool. Be advised: a deft hand goes a long way. In my example, I wanted my edits to appear real. You should strive for that as well. It's easy to go overboard and turn a photo into an overly color-saturated mess. Strive for realism, and then you have a license to go bonkers!

Make it Look Old with Stylized Editing

Have you ever paged through an ancient photo album and wondered at the pictures? I like converting my modern digital color photos into something that looks like a 100-year-old film photo.

I don't do it all of the time. But when the right situation presents itself, I enjoy the outcome.



Image 009 – Photographs by Kent DuFault

Creating a stylistic landscape photo such as the two photos above is super easy!



Image 009a – Photograph by Kent DuFault

The original file from the camera lacked any strong interest through lighting or action, yet I liked the scene and the composition. The 'old picture' look brought it back from the trashcan!

Here Is How to Get Started

First of all, you need to download the editing app, Snapseed. The best part of this is that Snapseed is FREE! I think it is one of the best photo editing apps out there. I use it all the time.

You can get Snapseed for Apple IOS, Android, and Windows PC. At this time, there is no version available to reside on the Apple OS platform, which is what my desktop workstation is currently.

To get around that, I simply transfer my DSLR image files to my iPhone and process them

there using the Snapseed app. I then transfer the files back to my iMac for further post-processing or uploading to my stock agency accounts.

When you get into Snapseed, look at these tools to create the 'old photo' effect: Vintage, Retrolux, Grunge, and Frames.

Here is something to entice you to try this and let you know that it's not hard.

Remember the Great Wall picture discussed above?



Image 010 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

This old photo effect took me less than two minutes, and that included moving the file from my iMac to my iPhone and back again. I rather like this shot as an old photo!



Assignment:

Acquire the free software editing app Snapseed and create some old-looking photos from your current landscape photography library. Select images that fit the mood!

Embracing the Process

I am one of the worst when it comes to this statement that I am about to make. I grew up seeing Ansel Adams as the next thing to God. He was my hero. At age 15, I built a darkroom in the basement of my parent's home. I spent hours, days, weeks down there trying to emulate the exquisite landscape photography produced by Adams.

I get it if you feel some resistance to this creativity prompt. I indeed resisted the idea of stylized landscape photography for a long time.

But consider this: We don't create our photographs in a bubble. We want people

to see them, admire them, perhaps even buy them. This fact means keeping up with what's current, and in the field of landscape photography, what's current is scenery that borders on non-reality. Heck, even the manufacturers of photo equipment and photo software use shots like that in their promotion, social media, and advertising materials. Typical doesn't cut it anymore – not in this genre.

I want my photos to be accepted and sold. Do you want that too? If so, then embrace stylistic processing (to a degree).



Key Point:

You can use stylistic processing in your landscape images while still holding them in the realm of believability.



Image 011 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

Split Rock Lighthouse is one of the most popular and photographed landscape views in my area of the world. This particular camera point-of-view (POV) is quite popular. It hides some of the uglier items located on the grounds up near the lighthouse. It also gives a nice view of the Lake Superior shoreline.

There is no doubt that Image 011 is a pretty picture. The problem is that millions of people have photographed this scene over many decades. This shot, as pretty as it is, will not get noticed among its competitors. There are

simply too many versions of this image out there in the world.

This lighthouse scene is a case where diving into some stylistic processing can bring home a winner.



Image 012 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

When visiting Split Rock Lighthouse, I found a camera angle that was a little different from what you would typically see. I'm not the only one who has ever taken this shot, but with this angle, I'm starting with something a bit more visually fresh than the first version that I showed you.

Now I need to take this slightly better camera angle and use some stylistic post-processing to make it memorable for a viewer. I created this photo in late autumn, and I wanted to enhance that story.



Image 013 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

Three stylistic edits turned this shot into a winner. These edits included a tonal vignette, a blur vignette, and localized color saturation enhancement with the Brush tool.

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**Key Point:**

If you genuinely desire to bump your landscape images into a new category of creativity and acceptance, you must learn how to use the Brush tool in post-processing. Landscape scenes are vast and vary widely in lighting, tonal changes, and color. You must be able to get in there and post-process different elements of your scene as if it were a puzzle, with each edit being an additional piece of the whole. In the above example, the puzzle pieces were the foreground foliage, the lighthouse and surrounding elements, and finally, the sky.

A crucial factor in this Lighthouse photo's success is the warmth of color; it enhances the autumn feeling and creates a sense of nostalgia. Does anyone want a pumpkin spiced latte?

**Pro Tip:**

I will often photograph a scene with my iPhone first before using my DSLR. I can then very quickly introduce some stylized edits to see how they look.

**Assignment:**

Select five landscape photographs that you believe are your very best. Spend time with each one at your editing workstation. Look for local stylized edits that could improve your original intent. Think about the lighthouse picture. The final stylized version isn't that far off from the original. Still, it truly brings home the original plan of autumn nostalgia.

As a second step to this creativity prompt assignment, spend some time shooting landscape photography with stylized processing introduced into your thinking and planning of the pictures.

**Remember:**

Use stylistic processing to bring home the concept of your photograph. Resist the temptation to try and improve a poor photo with exotic manipulation. Stylistic post-processing can be done to your current work. However, if you add it to your thought process while shooting, you will see magnificent results.