

# Stunning Black & White in Five Easy Steps

*A simple, powerful RAW conversion workflow for beautiful black and white*

“Many photographers do not realize that they can create incredible black-and-white images from RAW files using only Adobe Camera Raw,” says Victoria Bjorklund, a Seattle-based fine art photographer ([victoria.bjorklund.com](http://victoria.bjorklund.com)). “I do very little manipulation in Photoshop,” she explains, noting that after her Adobe Camera Raw (ACR) processing her Photoshop work is usually limited to resizing and output sharpening.

Bjorklund has developed a simple, yet powerfully robust black-and-white RAW processing workflow with ACR that all photographers can easily put into action. And, of course, it’s just as valuable to photographers using Adobe Lightroom (LR), as the programs share the same RAW processing engine and interface.

## For the Seasoned Pros and Newcomers Alike

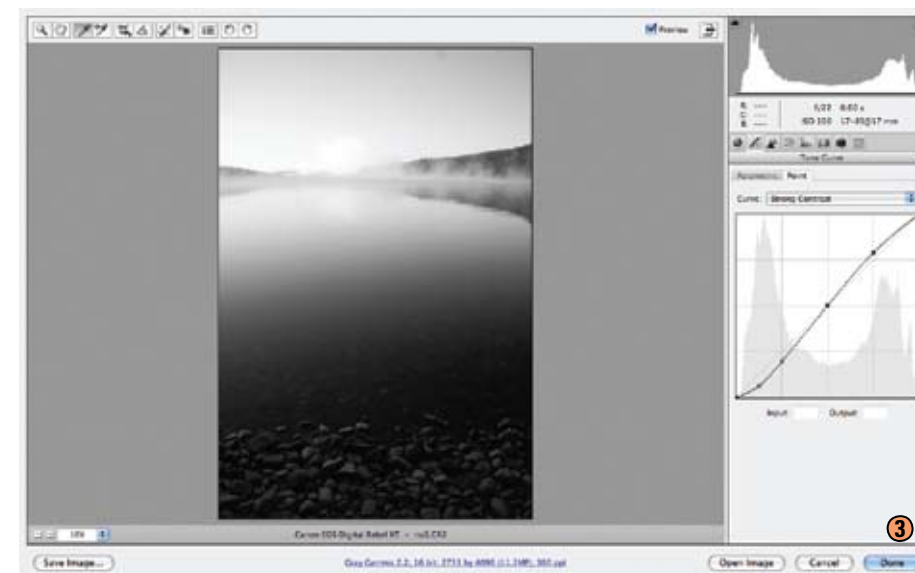
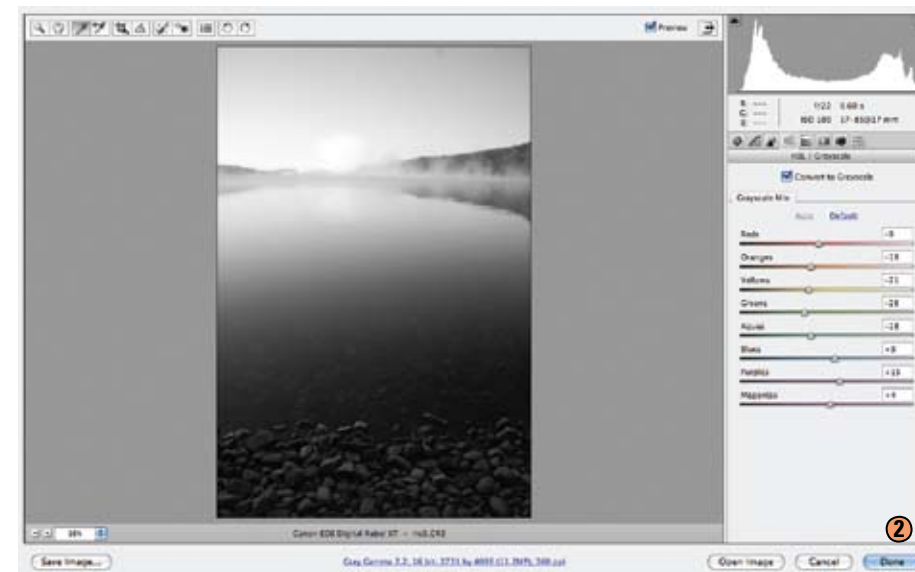
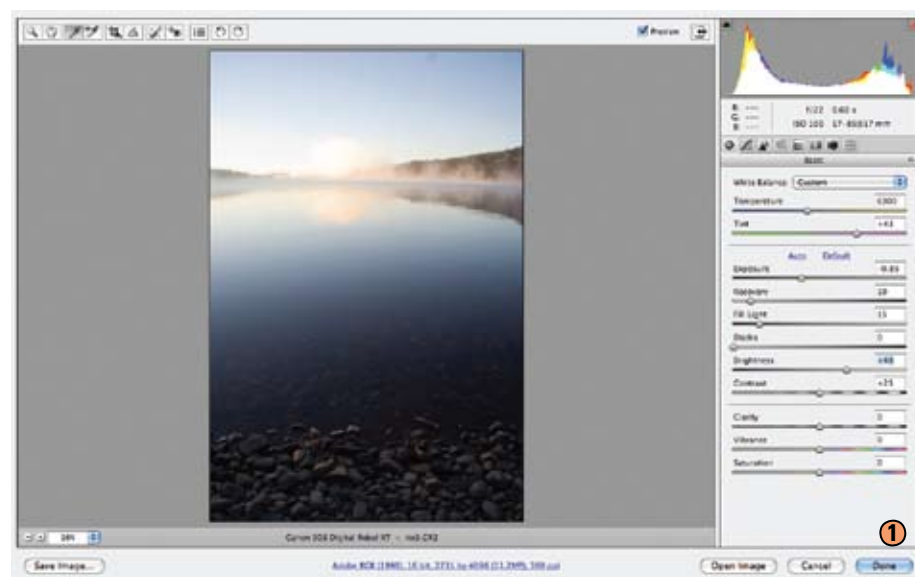
Both clients and photographers are increasingly interested in black-and-white imagery. Bjorklund’s workflow is just the ticket for both newcomers to digital black and white as well as those pros who mastered black-and-white techniques in Photoshop. Bjorklund produces gallery quality prints with little fuss, although she certainly insists on retaining control over the subtlest tonal adjustments.

Bjorklund brings a unique perspective to digital black and white. She is a driven artist and like many of today’s emerging photographers, her first experience was with digital, not film. After taking her first digital images in 2005, she became so dedicated to becoming a fine artist that in 2006 she began the intensive, yearlong black-and-white photography program at the renowned Maine Photographic Workshops (since renamed

**Top:** Victoria Bjorklund processed “Quietness No. 3” entirely in Adobe Camera RAW, performing only output sizing and sharpening in Photoshop.



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Maine Media Workshops).

Of the handful of students selected to attend the program, Bjorklund was the only one who chose to work digitally. “While my classmates were in the wet darkroom, I was working on my computer in my digital darkroom,” Bjorklund recalls. One of her focuses has been to master the techniques that will save her as much time working on the computer as possible.

The following strategies reflect Bjorklund’s workflow in the CS3 version of ACR, but these techniques remain valid for CS4.

## Basic B&Ws in Two, Automated Steps

To make fast black-and-white RAW conversions, photographers simply need to:

- Check the Convert to Grayscale box.

“I think it is more important to avoid creating severe spikes or drops or anything jagged along the curve.”

This is found at the top of the ACR/LR HSL/Grayscale panel.

- Select the High Contrast curve. This is found in the Point tab in the

Tone Curve panel.

These two automated steps will result in a decent image, but hardly anything stunning. However, these processing controls can be applied to images en masse, which makes it much easier for photographers to assess which captures have the most black-and-white potential.

Just as critical, this down-and-dirty conversion is often more than adequate for creating proof galleries for clients. This is particularly valuable for high-volume photographers, such as portrait and event photographers, who want to give their clients a black-and-white option.

## A Powerful Five-Step B&W Workflow

To create stunning black-and-white images in ACR/LR, Bjorklund suggests this five-step workflow she used to process “Quietness No. 3” from RAW capture to gallery-quality print.

**1. Correct color temperature and adjust exposure in the Basic panel.** After performing any desired cropping and straightening, start off by making standard adjustments in the Basic panel to create a neutral color temperature with a healthy exposure—fixing any highlight or shadow clipping and ensuring a robust histogram. (*Image 1*)

“I correct the white balance in ACR by using the eyedropper tool and clicking on a neutral gray element in my image,” explains Bjorklund. “This makes a difference because all colors will be converted to shades of gray, and I want my highlights to be white and not yellow.”

**2. Convert to Grayscale.** Checking the Convert to Grayscale box in the top of the ACR/LRHSL/Grayscale panel desaturates the image, giving it a black-and-white appearance (grayscale). With this single action, ACR/LR also automatically and intelligently sets the eight color sliders of the Grayscale Mix to try to create the best looking black-and-white image based on a given image’s content. (*Image 2*)

**3. Select the High Contrast curve in the Tone Curve panel.** Almost all RAW files will look too flat after only selecting Convert to Grayscale. This step will bump up the contrast. It also adds additional anchor points on the curve to help facilitate work later on. (*Image 3*)

**4. Fine-Tune Conversion with Curve Adjustments.** Even the High Contrast curve will only get a RAW image in the



ballpark. “Black and white is all about contrast,” says Bjorklund. “And the best way to control the contrast of an image is to manipulate the tonal curve.” (Image 4)

Bjorklund notes that ACR/LR’s tonal curve works just as it does in Photoshop. For photographers not entirely comfortable making curve adjustments, this is the perfect opportunity to learn through experimentation. RAW processing is non-destructive, and the curve is easily reset by selecting High Contrast.

“Many photographers suggest that when adjusting your image you should keep the curve in a horizontal S-shape,” says Bjorklund. “However, I think it is more important to avoid creating severe spikes or drops or anything jagged along the curve.” She says the curve is a representation of the tones within an image, and suggests that photographers aim for

“Don’t try to tweak adjustments until you understand where the underlying colors are in your black-and-white image.”

a smooth transitional line between the shadows and highlights.”

**5. Make Final Tonal Adjustments with Grayscale Mixing.** The magically powerful

Grayscale Mix tool in the HSL/Grayscale panel offers photographers mind-blowingly powerful control over final tonal adjustments. Use this space-age control to simply perform subtle tweaks or to make drastic, creative enhancements. (Image 5)

Employing eight sliders for different colors, grayscale mixing allows photographers to adjust the tonality of specific areas in a grayscale image based on the underlying colors in that image. Grayscale mixing is easy to understand. Slide a given color to the left (negative) to make the tone of that color area darker; move it to the right (positive) and that color’s tone will lighten.

For example, to deeply intensify a blue sky, simply dial down the Blues and Aquas sliders. That’s it! The sky will darken dramatically, with very little impact to the overall brightness and contrast of the image.

“Don’t try to tweak adjustments until you understand where the underlying colors are in your black-and-white image,” Bjorklund says. She suggests that the best way to gain mastery over grayscale mixing is to go to extremes, toggling back and forth between the grayscale image and the underlying RAW color image.

### The Smart Approach

This five-step workflow will help you achieve black-and-white success with little fuss and minimal Photoshop work. Of course, you will not be able to truly judge your work until final sizing, sharpening and output from Photoshop. This is why Bjorklund relies on Smart Objects.

“I open all of my images from ACR into Photoshop as Smart Objects,” says Bjorklund. “This allows me to go back after I have printed an image to make further refinements in ACR, and the image will still retain any of the Photoshop adjustments that I have made.

Bjorklund’s straightforward, black-and-white workflow in ACR/LR combined with Smart Objects allows any photographer to quickly make stunning black-and-white images from RAW captures. OC

*Ethan G. Salwen is an independent photographer and writer based in Buenos Aires, Argentina. He specializes in Latin American cultures, and also covers a wide variety of topics for professional photographers including digital technology, marketing techniques and industry trends. Salwen received his training in photography at Rochester Institute of Technology.*