• how to consciously retouch •

the follow-along cheatsheet

Frequency Separation in Photoshop:

What is it? It's a lot easier to understand than you think, I promise! This practice separates the frequencies in your image - one low and one high. The low frequency will represent the soft transitions of tones and color in the skin. The high frequency will represent the details of your portrait, like pores and wrinkles. It's as simple as that. We do this to help maintain natural pore texture while adjusting tones and colors.

How do I create Frequency Separation happen in Photoshop? By following these simple steps:

1. Open your image in Photoshop. You should only have one layer, labeled Background Layer.
2. Duplicate that Background Layer *twice* by hitting **Control+J** or **Command+J**.
3. Double-click to rename the bottom duplicate layer **Low** and rename the top duplicate layer **High**. This will help you remember which one is which.
4. I recommend you select both of these Layers and **Group** them together into a folder. Then rename that folder **Frequency Separation**. That keeps them apart from all your other adjustments, so they don't interact directly with other layers.
5. Hide the **High** layer then select the **Low** layer.
6. Once selected, go to the **Filter** menu, scroll down to **Blur** and choose **Gaussian Blur**.
7. In this dialog box, you'll play around with the softness of your image. You want to soften the edges in your image, while still being able to see your subjects general face outline. If you blur too much, your transitions will be too broad and create odd color interactions. I focus on one spot in my image I want to adjust - like a too-bright highlight that I want to blend with the rest of the skin - and blur until that starts to blend together. (My sweet spots always fall between **15-30**). Click **Ok** when you're done.
8. Show the **High** layer again. Select that **High** layer.
9. Go to the **Image** menu and select **Apply Image**.
10. In this dialog box, you'll want to select this options for an **8-bit image** (jump to #11 if you're working on a 16-bit image):
    1. **Layer** menu: Select Low (like your Low layer).
    2. **Invert**: Unchecked.
    3. **Blending**: Subtract.
    4. **Opacity**: 100%.
    5. **Scale**: 2.
    6. **Offset**: 128.
    7. **Preserve Transparency** and **Mask**: Unchecked.
    8. Hit **Ok**.

11. For a **16-bit image**:
    1. **Layer** menu: Select Low (like you're Low layer).
    2. **Invert**: Checked.
    3. **Blending**: Addt.
    4. **Opacity**: 100%.
    5. **Scale**: 2.
    6. **Offset**: 0.
    7. **Preserve Transparency** and **Mask**: Unchecked.
    8. Hit **Ok**.
12. Once you're done and you've clicked ok, with your High layer selected, you'll change the **Blending Mode** to **Linear Light**. Your photo should now appear the same as when you originally opened it. If it does not, try going back to recheck all of your settings before continuing.
13. You're created your High & Low Frequency layers! **Huzzah**!
14. For the **High Frequency** layer, I suggest using the **Spot Healing Brush** with **Content Aware** checked in the tool options bar. Make short, quick motions over blemishes to remove imperfections. You can also use the **Clone Stamp** tool, however make sure that the edge of the tool has been adjusted: do this by right-clicking or control-clicking anywhere on your image with the tool selected, then changing the **Hardness** slider to **75%**.
15. For the **Low Frequency** Layer, I suggest you use the **Lasso** tool. Adjust the **Feathering** in the tool options bar to somewhere between **12-30**. You can test the softness of your edge by selecting an area and hitting the **Q** key on your keyboard. Draw broadly around an area you want to soften (like a bright highlight on the cheek, you'll want to draw around that spot, including some darker skin in your selection), then go up to the **Filter** menu and choose the TOP option, which should be **Gaussian Blur**. You can also hit **Control+F** or **Command+F** on your keyboard. Continue drawing around areas you want to soften, hit your Control or Command+F and keep on grooving!

There you have it, that's a quick intro to Frequency Separation! I hope you all get in some practice and fall in love with it the same way I did. It'll change the way you think about portrait retouching, I promise!