BEFORE

Basic Fixes With A Levels Layer
LevelAdjustments Offer a Great First Step for Diagnosing and Then Fixing Issues with Your Picture's Tonal Range

Levels adjustments don't look terribly sophisticated when you compare them with what you can do with a curves adjustment layer, but they are a really quick and easy way to optimize your image ahead of any more detailed work. Often, it's only when you've got the levels right that you can properly see what to do next.

1. Use The Histogram As a Guide
Open "Basic Fixes With A Levels Layers.jpg." First, create a new levels adjustment layer. You'll see that the left-hand (shadow) end of the histogram doesn't go all the way to a full black, so drag the black point slider to the right to meet it.
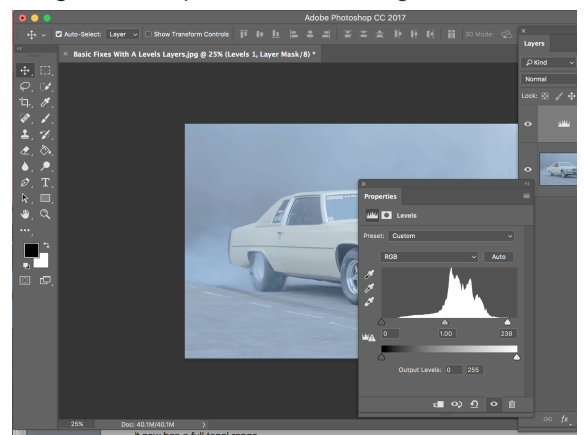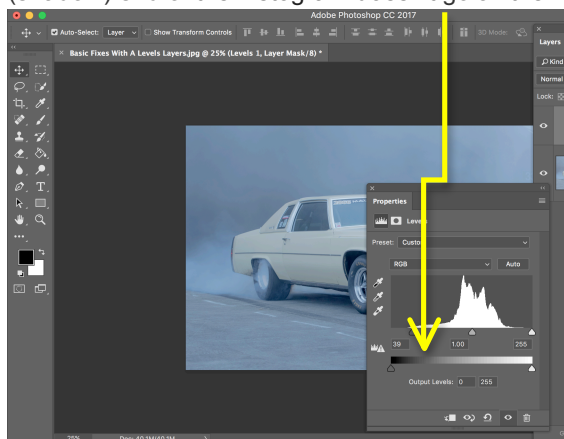

2. Be Careful with the Highlights
Now do the same with white slider on right, dragging it to the left to line up with the right edge of the histogram. This is the usual method for optimizing image levels, but this image still lacks contrast even though, technically, it now has a full tonal range.
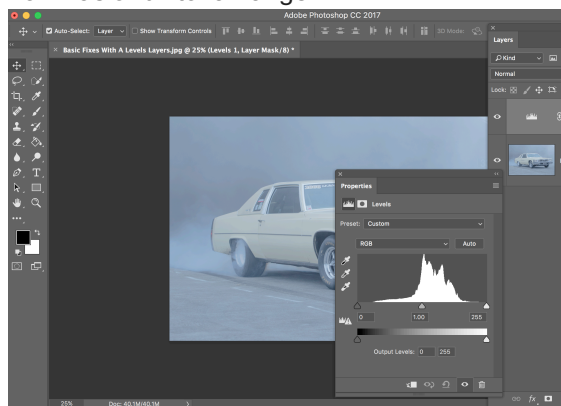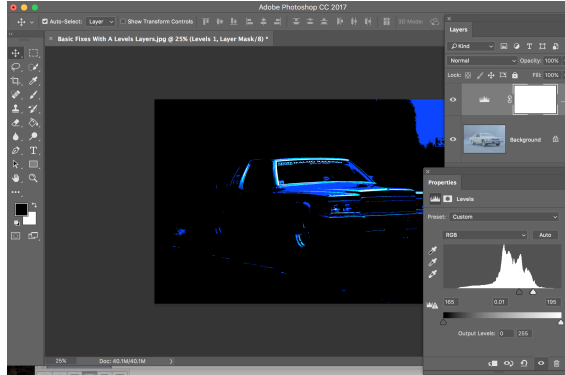
3. Alt-Drag the Black Point Slider

The problem is that we're preserving extreme shadow and highlight detail without knowing whether it 's important. Instead, hold down the alt key as you drag the black point slider. Now you can see where the image will go to a solid black and which areas you can afford to lose.
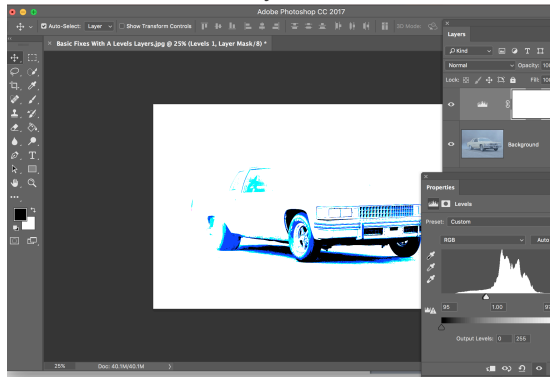

4. Alt-Drag the White Point Slider

You can do the same with the white point slider. Normally, you wouldn't want to clip any highlight detail at all, but we can afford to lose detail in the highly reflective chrome-work in this car. This different "alt-dragging" approach is an improvement, but the picture's still a little weak.

5. Use the Eyedroppers

So here's a third approach which doesn't involve the black and white point sliders at all. Instead, you use the black point, white point and middle 'grey point' eye droppers to click an area you want to be a solid black, a solid white area and a neutral grey tone, like the tarmac near the car.
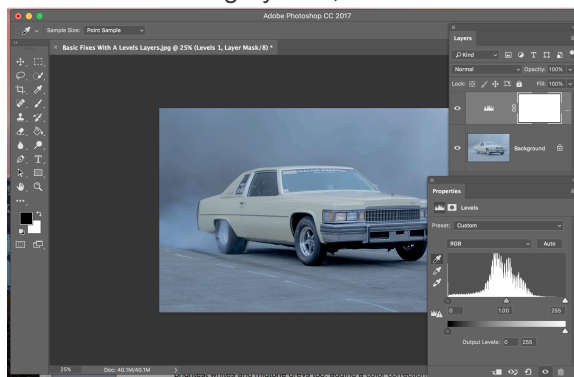
6. Adjust the Mid-Point (Brightness)

The eyedroppers don't just set the upper and lower brightness values, they ' neutralize' the deepest blacks, brightest whites and midtone greys too, adding a color correction effect. And for a final adjustment we can move the mid-point slider to the right to darken the image a little.