

Filter Forge - Sketch and Color 2.0

Beginner Guide

Sketch and Color is based on Photoshop blending techniques, some of which were taught to me by others. I'm familiar with how these work, so the filter is easy for me to use. I hope this tutorial will make it easier for you.

The biggest factor in success is not which effects you apply. It is whether the photo responds to the filter. Some photos will yield amazing results with more than one setting. Others will look awful no matter what you do. Don't become discouraged when photos don't respond the way you hoped they would.

Slider Basics

Learning to adjust the sketch

1. Load your picture and select the lightest of the monochrome presets. Move the Edge Adjustment slider slowly to see how it affects the sketch affect. If you move it too far, the picture will become less sketch-like and more quasi-photographic. I always keep this setting very low, usually below 60.
2. Select the same preset again and increase the Intensity slider to see what it does. Move it up and down to get used to how it works. Now try the Low Gain slider. It darkens the result, starting with the darkest pixels. Now try the High Gain slider. It can get rid of background noise. But if you push it too far, the sketch becomes too faint.

Learning to adjust colors

Some of the color effects will seem similar to you. But in practice, I've found that each one has something unique to contribute, depending on the photo and the position of other sliders. After awhile you will get used to how this works.

1. Load the lightest of the monochrome presets. Take the first color slider and slowly pull it all the way up in steps, allowing it to render. Then all the way down. Repeat this a few times and see how it affects the picture. Then turn it all the way off and do the same for the next slider. Do this for every color slider (Color 1, Color 2, Color 3, Color 4, and Source Color). Keep in mind that the effect will vary, depending on the photo and the position of other sliders. But for now, just try them one at a time.
2. Now, test two color sliders at a time. Make sure you still have the lightest sketch selected, and all colors are off. Raise the first slider to about 20. Leave it at 20 while you raise and lower each of the other sliders in order. Then turn all colors off, and raise the second slider to about 20, and repeat the process you did for the first slider. Continue this process with every color slider.

When you tried two colors at once, you probably noticed that adding a second color sometimes had unpredictable results. It seemed to add something very different from what was there when you used it alone. Or it seemed to add little or nothing. That's because these effects are interactive. Don't panic. It is not necessary to understand how all the combinations work together. Just get used to how each one works alone, and understand that interactions are not always predictable.

Creating a Color Sketch

This section uses only the sliders mentioned above. You do not need the rest of the sliders to get started. The rest are only there in case the primary sliders are not enough. I will explain them after this section.

1. Select a few photos you want to experiment with. Pick photos where the subjects are prominent in the photo, not way off in the distance. I've had the best luck with portraits, animals, and flowers. I have less luck with buildings and landscapes.
2. Load your first photo. Click on every preset, and let each one render fully in the preview. Pick the one you like the best and activate it. Is it good enough to use as is? If so, you are done with the first picture. If not, you can use it as your starting place for more adjustments.

3. If it needs adjusting, start moving the sliders one by one, starting with the first one. If one helps, leave it where it is, and try the next one. If it makes it worse (or does nothing), move it back to where it was. Use only the sliders I covered above. Let the preview render all the way before deciding if the change helped.

Hopefully, at this point you will see something you like. If not, move to the next section.

The Other Sliders

This section covers the sliders not mentioned above. I only use these sliders if I already have something that seems promising, but it just needs a little more adjustment.

1. Hue and Saturation are easy to understand. Hue changes the overall color, and saturation changes the vividness of the color.
2. Deepen and PreGamma are used when the picture seems too faint or weak. Before using them, try pushing the Intensity slider higher. Even much higher. See if this helps. Also, try increasing the Low Gain slider to see if that helps. If that fails, try raising the Deepen slider. Put it back and then try lowering the PreGamma slider. See which solution works better. Or use both.
3. PreLightness increases the lightness of the photo. Sometimes photos have large dark areas that become distracting when they are sent through the Sketch and Color filter. To fix this, raise the PreLightness slider until the problem goes away. After you do this, you might find the overall look of your result seems to have faded. Raise the Low Gain and/or Intensity sliders to fix this.
4. Color 3 Brightness and Color 3 Contrast adjust the look of Color 3. Keep these sliders close to center. I provided these sliders because I was having trouble making good presets for Color 3 without them. So if you are using Color 3, try making slight adjustments up and down with these sliders.

Tips and Tricks

1. A result will not look good unless it has an interesting subject, colors, patterns, composition, etc. Think about cropping your result. Think about whether you would enjoy seeing your result framed and hanging on the wall, or as a print on a textile, or part of a web design, etc. Don't become so focused on the effect that you lose sight of the picture.
2. If the filter is creating a blocky noise or some other annoying texture, there is a good chance it needs a JPEG filter or some other type of noise removal **before** running Sketch and Color. On the other hand, sometimes noise can be interesting. See what works.
3. Keep Edge Adjustment and High Gain sliders in the lower settings. Keep Color 3 Brightness and Color 3 Contrast close to center. Avoid using Randomizer with this filter. Too often it moves sliders into ranges that don't work well.
4. Color 4 is good for adding subtle color when all other colors are off.
5. Source Color's flexibility can be seen when other colors are used. To understand this, try turning Source Color up high, then adjusting other colors.
6. Think about combining effects, or using a photo editor in other ways. For example, if one setting makes 80% of the photo look good, and another setting (or even a different filter) works better for the remaining 20%, combine the results in your photo editor. And, of course, there are any number of additional improvements you can make in a photo editor (like Photoshop).
7. If you are struggling with a photo and nothing seems to work, give up and move on. Don't become glued to your computer screen. Life's too short!