Expose to the Right

- The goal is to make an exposure where the majority of the information is as close to the right edge of the histogram WITHOUT a spike (clipping) at the extreme right side.
- This allows more data to work with in processing, reducing the risk of banding, loss of detail, lack of tonal separation in the shadows, and noisy images.
- The size and shape of the histogram is irrelevant. (There is no “normal” histogram)
- If there is space between the levels you captured and the right edge, you have “left potential image quality on the table.”
- Use your LCD for composition and focus, not exposure. An ETTR image will likely look overexposed.
- Shoot in RAW, not JPEG.
- Since the histogram you see on the LCD is a JPEG interpretation of the RAW image, it’s best to turn off in-camera JPEG settings such as saturation, contrast, sharpness, color profile (e.g., vivid). This will result in a more accurate rendition of exposure displayed in the histogram(s). Better yet, check your exposure (histogram) in Live View.
- It’s much better to reduce an ETTR image’s exposure to a lower level in post-processing than to increase an underexposed image’s exposure because…
- Even though you can make a slightly underexposed image look pretty good, it will fall short in quality when printed. By increasing exposure in post-processing, you drag the noise from the darkest areas of the histogram farther to the right.
- There are 4 possible histograms that you’ll see, Red, Green, Blue and Luminance (a combination of R+G+B). There is a risk that relying solely on the Luminance histogram could under-state the risk of clipping highlights because it represents the average of RGB and one of these color channels could be overexposed (clipped). So, look at each channel’s histogram and if one of these is clipped and an important element of the image is overexposed, use exposure compensation to decrease overall exposure.
- This brings up the benefit of the “Blinkies” or the Highlight display on the LCD. Used in conjunction with the histograms, you can see precisely where in the image there may be overexposure and decide if it’s worth doing something about.
- Specular highlights, such as the sun, reflections off metallic surfaces, etc. may be desirable, so it’s not an absolute that all clipping is bad.

Frank G. Lahman, 12/12/13