Initial image processing

STEP ONE; Process the image in Adobe Camera Raw to refine overall exposure, color, and contrast. If needed, remove flaws, such as vignetting, chromatic aberration, and noise. Save the file at the native resolution of the digital camera sensor as a 16-bit image in the ProPhoto RGB color space.
STEP TWO: In Photoshop, I use Pixel Genius PhotoKit Sharpener (www.pixel-genius.com) to apply input sharpening, which offsets the inherent and optical softness of the RAW camera file. After inspecting the sharpening, and possibly adjusting its strength with opacity, flatten the file. Mofe: This is the only time I'll flatten layers because I've found that I never readjust the input sharpening, and maintaining the input sharpening layers almost triples the file size.
STEP THREE: Correct perspective, alignment, and remove lens distortion using a combination of Lens Correction and Free Transform. The Lens Correction filter (Filter>Distort>Lens Correction) is a fantastic feature to straighten, align, and reposition how the image falls onto the image plane.
Then I use Free Transform (Command-T [PC: Control-T]) when I need to refine individual image corners via the Distort menu or in the rare case that I use Warp transform (Edit>Transform>Warp) to bend an image into shape.

Global tonal and color correction

Now that the image is straight and square, concentrate on tone, color, and detail, starting with overall global improvements and further refining the image with selective tonal improvements. The tonality of the image—be it color or black and white—is the basis for emphasis, interpretation, mood, and emotion. The color of the image is the mood and interpretation of the image, so start by finding a neutral and then refine the overall color to better convey the spirit of the image to your viewers. Enhancing details is often accomplished by both delicate dodging to lighten and burning to darken specific areas or by applying creative sharpening to make essential areas in the image appear sharper.

STEP FOUR: Add three adjustment layers, from bottom to top,
as follows:

- Levels (Image>Adjustments>Levels) to refine the black

and white points and tweak the midtone, if needed.

- Curves set to Luminosity to improve contrast.
- A Hue/Saturation or Selective Color or Color Balance

layer to add, subtract, enhance, or change color. The color quality of the image is the musical score in a movie;
it's the emotion of the image.

Note: Now that I'm spending more time and care in the conversion of the RAW file in Adobe Camera Raw, I find my images need fewer global improvements.

Specific tonal and color correction

STEP **FIVE:** Apply image-specific dodging and burning to draw the viewer's eye to the lighter areas. Of course there's more than one way to dodge and burn in Photoshop, but here's how I maintain flexibility and have tremendous control over the image:

- **To Dodge:** Add a Curves adjustment layer (Imago Adjustments>Curves) and click OK without changing any settings. Change the layer blend mode to Screen and reduce the layer Opacity to 35%. Next, choose Image>Adjustments>Invert to invert the layer mask to black, then use a soft-edged, 50% Opacity white Brush to paint in the areas that need to be lighter.
- **To Burn:** Add a Curves adjustment layer and click OK without changing any settings, then change the layer blend mode to Multiply, and reduce the layer Opacity to 35%. Go under Image>Adjustments>Invert to invert the layer mask to black, then use a soft-edged, 50% Opacity white Brush to paint in the areas that need to be lighter. The beauty of using separate layers for dodging and burning is that you have infinite control over the effect by adjusting the opacity of each layer and the opacity of the brush.

Focus, atmosphere, and sharpening

STEP SIX: The final step is to refine the details, focus, **and** atmosphere. Because sharpening and softening are resolution-dependent and the effects would change upon resizing the image, I often do this step after the image is resized for final output.

Sharpen specific areas of an image:
> Click on the topmost image and press Command-Option-Shift-E (PC: Control-Alt-Shift-E) to merge all working layers up and change the layer blend mode to Overlay. The image will temporarily become very contrasty. > Choose Filter>Other>High Pass and in the dialog, set the Radius to between 2-5 to define the edges of the image. Click OK to close the dialog. > Now under the Layer menu, choose Layer Mask>Hide All and use a soft-edged 75% Opacity white Brush to paint in the areas you want to be sharper.

Soften specific areas of an image:
> Turn off the sharpening layer and press Command-Option-Shift-E (PC: Control-Alt-Shift-E) to merge all working layers up and change the layer blend mode to Soft Light.
> Choose Filter>Other>High Pass and in the dialog, set the Radius to between 2-5 to define the edges of the image. Click OK.
> Now go under the Image menu and choose Adjustments> Invert to invert the image, which will soften rather than sharpen the image.
> Finally, select Layer>Layer Mask>Hide All and use a soft-edged, 75% Opacity white Brush to paint in the areas you want to be softer.

experiment with texture and borders:
Not all images require additional creative interpretation and in the example (below), I cropped the image and used a simple black border to elegantly frame it.

output sharpening;
After I've saved the layered master file, I create a duplicate file, flatten it, and resize it to fit my output. Then I'll use Pixel Genius Photo-Kit Sharpener to apply output and paper-specific sharpening.