Monitor Calibration: Tips and Myths – Glenn Pure

You've probably read how important it is to use a calibrated monitor when you are working on photos for posting on BLP or elsewhere, for use into photobooks, printing etc. But perhaps you've not done so because it's 'too hard', too complicated or simply not going to make much difference? I can say from personal experience that I put off monitor calibration for a long time, thinking much the same. I now calibrate regularly and think it's worth dispelling some myths.

How do I know if my monitor needs calibrating?

It can be hard to tell! Some hints are that other people's photos you view on the BLP site or elsewhere don't look optimal. Maybe a little too bright, or dark, wrong contrast, or with a colour cast visible? Maybe other photos look pretty good but maybe just a little "off"? Don't forget, other photos you are looking at might be from people who have a monitor that's a bit out of whack too. The only sure way to know if yours needs calibrating is to see what happens when you try it!

Will it make much difference if I calibrate?

Again, the answer is similar to the previous. If you don't know how much yours is out, you'll never know how much difference it will make.

Calibration is only feasible for expensive, high-end monitors.

Not true! Many consumer-grade monitors are surprisingly good. I have a fairly basic Acer monitor and it performs remarkably well at tonal and colour rendition. But when I first calibrated, my monitor was way off. Here's an online test from Eizo, a company which makes top quality monitors:
https://www.eizo.be/monitor-test/

Calibration is difficult, time-consuming and requires expensive calibration hardware.

First, it's actually very easy to do. Yes, you can spend significant amounts on a calibration hardware tool (with associated software) like those branded Spyder or ColorMunki. This gear will automate the process and give the most accurate result but it's not necessary and not what I do. I use the inbuilt and simple-to-use calibration tool in Windows. A similar or even more powerful tool is also built into Mac computers. Since these tools are already part of the computer operating system, there is no cost or installation involved.

How do I access the inbuilt Windows or Mac calibration tools?

In all current Windows systems, go to your control panel or application search tool and search for *'Calibrate display color'* (note American spelling). Click the search result to run the calibration routine, which allows you to adjust the gamma, brightness, contrast, and colour balance settings of your monitor. I don't use a Mac but there are good instructions to be found by searching the internet. Here's one description of what to do, for example:
https://www.intego.com/mac-security-blog/color-calibrating-your-macs-display/

There are also online monitor calibration tools that are free. A search will turn up some options, and we even have a link to one on the BLP site under [Resources - Simple Monitor Calibration](#).

However, I find the built-in Windows tool a lot simpler and quicker to use. It only takes a minute or two to run, and it's always there when I need it.
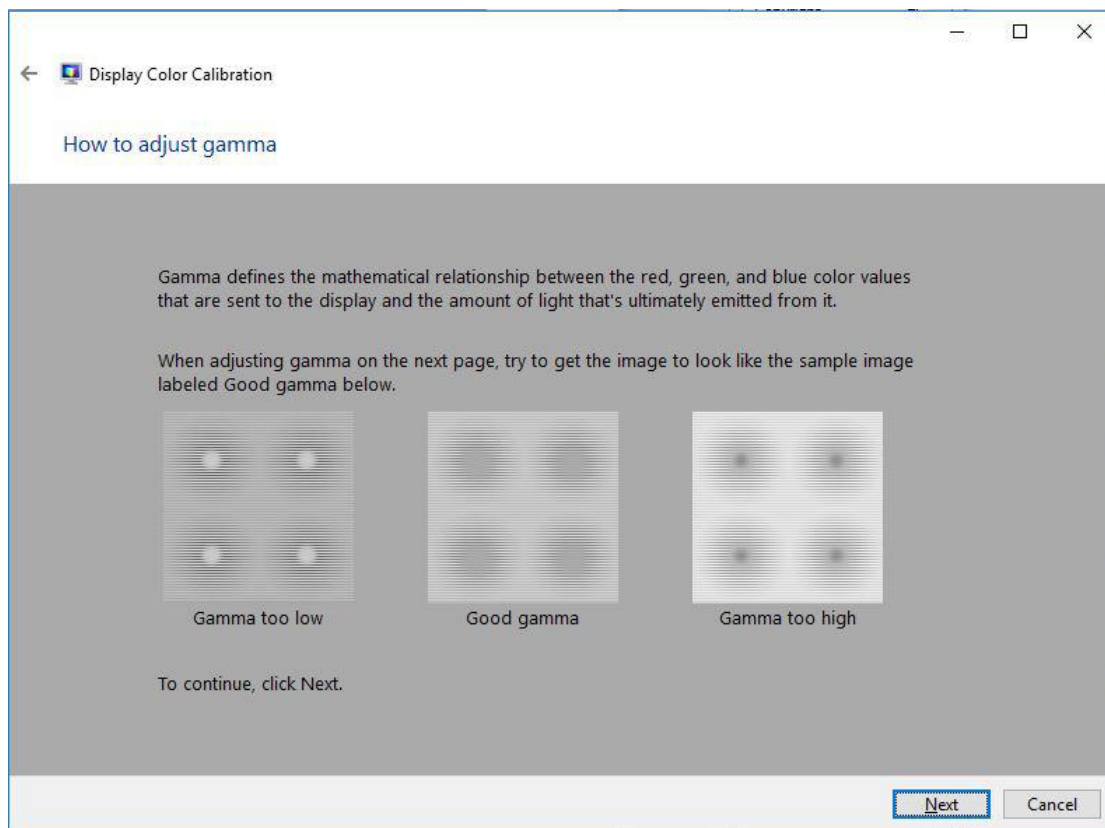
One of the screens from the Windows calibration tool

Do I need to do anything special before I calibrate?

Not really; but be aware that your screen colour and brightness all appear relative to the room lighting you are working in. If you look at your monitor in a dark room at night, it will look a lot brighter than in a room with the sun flooding in. The colour may also look different under warm artificial light versus daylight. It's best to use your monitor (and calibrate it) in consistent, modest lighting conditions. It's also a good idea to let your monitor run for 10 or 15 minutes before calibrating to allow it to stabilise after being turned on.

How often should I calibrate?

The normal recommendation is every one to two months.

OK, this all sounds too easy. What's the catch?

The only catch is that if your monitor is a fair way out, many of the photos you've worked on in the past might not look much good after calibrating your monitor. At least with the Windows calibration tool, you can run it and still chose to keep the old monitor settings at the end of the process. But remember, while your photos might look good to you with an out-of-whack monitor, most other people won't see them that way.