

How to Use Sepia

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General Notes

Sepia toner is a two-bath toner; to tone, you use two different chemical solutions in succession. The first solution bleaches the image, then the second solution “redevelops” it. Sepia toner produces a range of warm brown colors.

Sepia toner sometimes comes as a liquid, and sometimes as a powder. Either way, you mix the stock chemicals with water to make a working solution. The first bath, the bleach literally makes the image start to fade and disappear; it is converting the metallic silver to another compound. Then, the second bath, the toner, “re-develops” the image. This new image is a warm brown color.

Set Up

It’s best to dedicate a set of trays only for toning, and to clean them thoroughly before and after use. Any chemical residue in the trays can cause staining or inconsistent results. To tone with Sepia Toner, you’ll need 5 clean trays:

Tray	Purpose	Contents
1	Pre-soak	Plain water bath for pre-soak
2	Bleach bath	Sepia Part A mixed with water
3	Rinse tray	Running water, if possible
4	Toning bath	Sepia Part B mixed with water
5	Holding bath	Running water, if possible

Procedure

After pre-soaking, immerse the print completely and as quickly as possible in the bleach. Bleach to the desired amount, agitating constantly. Rinse the print to remove all traces of the bleach solution to avoid contaminating the next bath and weakening its effectiveness. Then, soak the print in the toning bath for two minutes or so, agitating constantly, to redevelop the image.

The degree of color in the print depends solely on how long you bleach the print. The longer you soak the print in the bleach, the more brown color in the redeveloped image. For instance, a short bleach of 1 minute will generally result in a cooler brown; a bleach of 5 minutes will generally result in a very warm brown.

The time in the toning bath is not as important to image color. Redevelop for two minutes or so, and remove the print. Developing for longer has little effect on image color, and may just weaken the solution.

To determine the color you want, start by bleaching a print completely, which could take up to 10 minutes or more. Then, bleach two other prints (or scraps of a print) for the half that time and a quarter of that time, respectively. Or, bleach for a short time (e.g., 1 minute), followed by bleaches of 2 to 3 minutes and finally 5 to 8 minutes. This

method gives you a range of colors to choose from. Results will vary depending on the brand of toner, the paper and the print developer.

After toning, fix the prints in fresh fixer for 2 minutes to remove any “undeveloped” silver halides that were not “redeveloped” in the toning bath. Then, wash the print in an archival washer for 30 minutes. Dry as you normally would.

It’s preferable to have running water when toning, but not essential. If you do not have running water, make sure to change the water in the rinse tray every 10 to 15 minutes, and the water in the holding bath every 30 minutes or so. Trace amounts of toner in these baths can cause additional, unwanted toning to occur.

To Try

To achieve a warm, rich, red, reddish-brown, or orange-brown color, try using gold toner after toning a print in sepia toner.

To achieve an additional range of color, bleach the print in Sepia Part A, but then re-develop with Polytoner or brown toner.