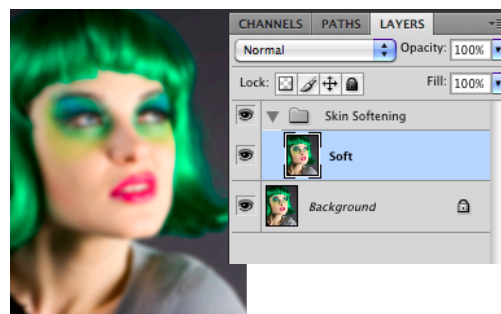# Advanced Skin Softening Tutorial

This is a technique to soften skin, while keeping some texture in the smoothed areas, thus avoiding a soft lens look. I highly recommend recording the first two steps as an Action, then manually editing the mask, then record a second action with the rest of the remaining steps.
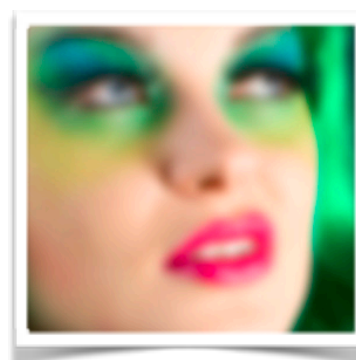
Step One:

First, we need to set up the structure of our document. If you'd like to save an action of this process, name it Skin Softening Step 1 and press Record now. Start with duplicating your original layer. To do so, select Layer > Duplicate Layer. Name the new layer 'Soft.' Select the layer and go to Layer > New > Group from Layers. Name the new group "Skin Softening."

Duplicate the layer, apply a Gaussian Blur, and put it, in a layer group. Here, a 20 px Gaussian Blur was used.

Step Two:

Adding the softness! Apply a Gaussian Blur to soften the skin texture. To do this, select the Soft layer and go to Filter > Blur > Gaussian Blur. The amount may depend on the size of the face in the frame and the resolution of the photo. For this 8"x10", 300 ppi image, I applied a 20 px blur. However, the amount you need to blur will depend on how much the face takes up of the frame. The blur amount should be enough to even out any small bumps in the skin and should look like a smooth gradient. If you use too much blur, you will lose your highlights; not enough and you may add the illusion of bumps to the skin.
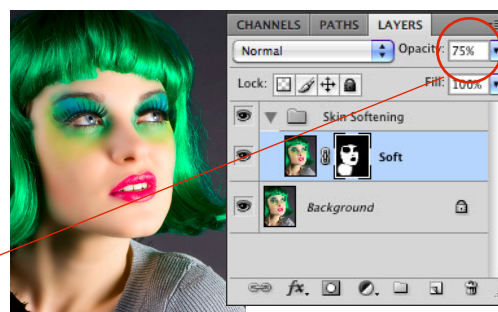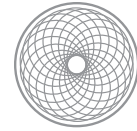
Next, select the Soft layer and go to Layer > Layer Mask > Hide All. This applies a black layer mask, hiding the entire layer. Stop the recording of your action now. You must do the editing of the mask manually each time, per each individual photo.

The blur should be smooth and even without bumps. If there are bumps, blur it more.

Step Three:

Choose where you apply the softening.   Zoom to 100%. Select the layer mask and use a soft paintbrush to paint the mask with white to reveal the Soft layer over the skin area. Be very careful not to catch the edges of the nose, lips, hair, eyes, or other non-skin detailed areas. These areas need to stay sharp! When you are done, set the layer opacity to about 75%. Use your own discretion as to how much to blend it back with the original photo.
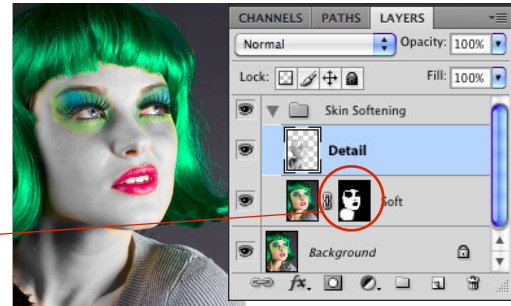
Mask the Soft layer and set to 75% opacity.

Step Four:

Now you want to get some texture to add back in. This is a good point to start the second Action recording. Name the action Skin Softening Step 2 and select Record.

Load the layer mask as a selection. You can do this clicking on the mask icon while holding Command (Mac) or Control (PC).
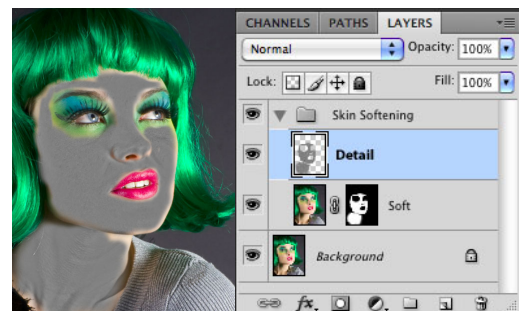
Next, select the background layer and copy and paste it using the selection. A shortcut to do this in one step is Command + J (PC: Ctrl+J).

Rename the layer "Detail" and move the layer to the top of the layer order.
Finally, desaturate the layer by going to Image > Adjustments > Desaturate, or using the shortcut Command+Shift+U (PC: Ctrl +Shift+U). The layer should now look like a gray mask over the skin area of the photo.

Load the mask selection and copy/paste the original layer, then desaturate it and bring to the top of the layers.
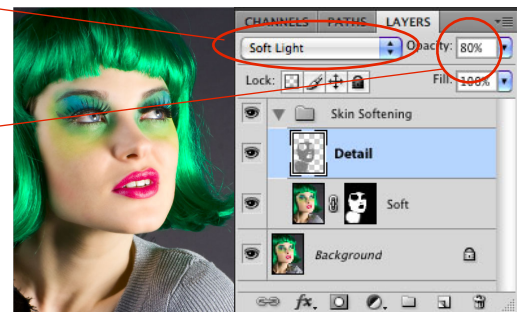
Step Five:

Next we are going to refine the texture we want to bring back and prepare it for blending. Select the Detail layer and apply the High Pass filter to it by going to Filter > Other > High Pass. There is no exact number to use, just move the slider until you see slight highlights and shadows around the major edges. For this image, I applied High Pass at 20 px. This part will look very strange.

Apply the High Pass Filter to the grayscale layer. Here, High Pass at 20 px was used.

Step Six:

Now we need to blend the Detail Layer with the Soft Layer. Select the Detail layer and set the layer blending mode to Soft Light for a more subtle effect, or Overlay for a more intense effect. The image should now look like it's coming together. Finally, use the layer opacity setting to dial in the amount of the Detail layer that you want to bring in. For this image, I set it to 80% opacity.

FINISHED!

You can save this as a psd, select the layers and convert it to a smart object, or flatten the image and save it as a copy of the original. Enjoy the skin softening!

Set the Detail layer to the Soft Light blending mode. Dial in the detail you want with the layer opacity setting.