Among the first things one does to establish a proper image for post processing is to assure the image is well exposed, has true color balance and provides reasonably good contrast. All of these can be dealt with two very simple adjustment layers, Levels and brightness/Contrast.

First correct for color balance:
Use the gray eyedropper in the Levels adjustment layer for this job. This eyedropper (the center one in the Levels window) will balance the entire image for you if you can locate a place in the image that has a neutral gray tone. Such tones are usually available in shaded parts of white clothing, or a white wall, a white sign, clouds might be a gray blue use caution, etc.

The black eyedropper (left eyedropper) will allow you to establish a black level for something in the image that you know to be the blackest black in the image. Alternatively, the white eyedropper (right eyedropper) will allow you to select an area that you know to be the brightest part of the image. This process can establish exposure. If you do not know exactly where these areas are in the image, use the method below.

Adjust exposure:
A properly exposed image will have a histogram that extends from just above the left edge to just below the right edge.

Adjust the whitest whites. The right edge slider at the bottom of the histogram will adjust the value given to the whitest part of the image. To find the whitest part of the image, hold the “alt” key down while sliding the right-hand slider to the left. The image will turn black, and as you slide the slider left, parts of the image will begin to appear as spots. Colored areas represent those colors that are saturated. You can usually tolerate some saturation but you must evaluate the image for yourself. You can continue moving the slider until you find an area that turns white. The location of your slider usually will coincide with the location where the histogram begins to indicate pixels.

Adjust the blackest blacks. The left edge slider at the bottom of the histogram will adjust the value given to the blackest part of the image. To find the blackest part of the image hold the “alt” key down while sliding the left slider toward the right. The image will turn white, and as you continue to move the slider right, parts of the image will begin to appear as spots. Colored areas represent those colors that are very dark. You can usually tolerate more saturation in the dark areas than white (blown-out) areas in the bright areas. Continue to move the slider right until you see some Black spots. This will usually coincide with places in the histogram that begin to indicate dark area pixels.

Adjust the mid-tone values. The center slider at the bottom of the histogram balances the center tonal value for the entire image. As you move this slider left, it establishes a brightness value of 128 to darker and darker areas thus making the image appear brighter. As you move the center slider to the right it establishes a mid-tone value to lighter and lighter areas of the image making the entire image appear darker.

Adjust Brightness and Contrast. To change the brightness you must use the “brightness/contrast” adjustment layer or the “curves” adjustment layer if you have it available in your version of Photoshop Elements.

The “brightness/contrast adjustment does exactly that. Move the sliders and establish an over-all image that provides the best appearance.