

Layers and Masks—Tips & Tricks

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Layer Types

Ordinary Layers

Adjustment Layers

Fill Layers

Smart Objects (Layers) Photoshop CS3 and newer only

What is a mask?

Black conceals. White reveals. (Repeat this mantra every morning!)

If you make a mask for a layer and have an active selection:

The mask will show the selected area with white and hide the non-selected area with black.

Holding the Option/Alt key will do the opposite.

Hold the Option/Alt key and click on the mask to see just the mask.

Hold the Shift key and click on the mask to hide the mask.

Hold the Command (Mac) or Control (Windows) key and click on the mask to load the mask as a selection.

In PS CS3, you can then use “Refine Edge...” when a selection tool is active.

To soften the transition, use the blur tool to do it selectively. Gaussian will work, too; but it’s a “big club” because it works on all edges.

Uses of Layers

Montages

Adjustments

Cloning

Burn & Dodge

Self-blends

Layer-Layer interactions

Masking

Opacity

Fill Percent

Blend Modes

Merge Visible into New Layer—a.k.a. “Mash the left side of your keyboard and press ”E“

For reasons unknown to me, this is not on any menu. Make your topmost layer the active layer first.

Mac: Command-Option-Shift + E

Windows: Control-Alt-Shift + E

Cloning

Make a new, empty layer above your current work. Clone into that layer with the options set to sample “Current & Below”.

Burn & Dodge

Make a new layer, setting the mode to Overlay and filling with overlay-neutral color of 50% gray.

Use the burn or dodge tool on the mid-tones with the opacity set to no more than 20%.

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Mid-tones Enhancement (Contrast & Sharpening)

Duplicate your current work or make a merge of visible into a new layer.

Rename the new layer “Mid-tone Adj” or something similar

Double-click on the right side of the layer in the palette to show the layer style dialog

Set the mode to Overlay

Set the opacity to 20%

In the “Blend if Gray” section for “This Layer”:

Split the effects to start at 50, complete at 70 by dragging the left triangle to 50. Then hold the option (Mac) or Alt (Windows) key and drag the right-hand part of the triangle to 70.

Similarly, split the ending to start at 185 and end at 205.

Then apply a High Pass filter (Filter > Other > High Pass...) with a radius of 50 pixels.

I’ve made an action that does this and named it “Holbert Mid-tone Adj” because I learned it from Mac Holbert and use it on almost all of my images.

Color Burn to Enhance the Sky

Select just the sky using whatever selection tools you want.

Add a new Fill Layer: Layer > New Fill Layer > Solid Color...

Name it appropriately

Set the mode to “Color Burn”!

In the next dialog, “Pick a Solid Color”, move your mouse along the left side of the color picker until you like the effect. You will almost always want the R, G and B values to be equal!

Click OK. Remember, you can change the settings any time just by clicking on the icon.

I learned this from Ben Willmore when he stopped by a workshop I was taking at Anderson Arts Ranch. I’ve never seen it published anywhere.

Smart Object (Layer) with Shadow/Highlight Adjustment (Photoshop CS2 and newer only)

Select an ordinary layer—either your original or a merge of work to that point

Make the layer “Smart” by selecting Layer > Smart Objects > Convert to Smart Object. Note the change in the icon when it’s converted.

Apply a Shadow/Highlight adjustment: Image > Adjustments > Shadow/Highlight...

The advantage of this method is that you can change the S/H settings later, whereas if you apply S/H to an ordinary image layer, once it’s done, you can’t change it. I do this so often, I’ve made an action to do it.

Smart Objects (Layers)

The mask applies to all effects. So if you want to have changeable effects apply to different parts of your image, you’ll need to duplicate your work into a new layer, make it “smart” and apply a new mask to the effects there.

Note that many, but not all filters work on smart objects. Also, there are a few third-party filters that can work on smart objects, notably the newest ones from Nik.

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Resources for Layers and Masks—Tips & Tricks

Adobe Photoshop CS3 Studio Techniques by Ben Willmore, ISBN-10: 0-321-51046-1, Amazon: \$33.00
An excellent beginning-intermediate level book

National Association of Photoshop Professionals (NAPP) Site

<http://www.photoshopper.com/>

For \$99/year or \$180 for 2 years, you get access to a huge number of tutorials and tips & tricks. You also get discounts on hardware, software and workshops. Membership also includes a subscription to Photoshop User magazine.

Photoshop Masking and Compositing by Katrin Eismann, ISBN-10: 0-7357-1279-4, Amazon: \$35.99
This is the definitive intermediate-advanced level book on layers and masking. Even though it was written when Photoshop CS was current (2005), few of the techniques she shows have changed.

The Creative Digital Darkroom by Katrin Eismann & Seán Duggan, ISBN-10: 0-596-10047-7, Amazon: \$29.99

An intermediate-advanced level book that is a wealth of creativity and inspiration

Photoshop Blending Modes Cookbook for Digital Photographers by John Beardsworth, ISBN-10: 0-596-10020-5, Amazon: \$19.77

The best book I've found about layer modes. The "recipes" show amazing things that can be done with self-blends. Written for Photoshop CS2, but works great with CS3. I've made some actions for CS2 and newer that use smart objects so I can adjust gaussian blurs at any time.

Photoshop Fine Arts Cookbook by John Beardsworth, ISBN-10: 0-596-10062-0, Amazon: \$19.79
Another excellent book from Beardsworth that even though it was written for Photoshop CS2 remains relevant for CS3.

Authors' and Books' Web Sites

Beardsworth: <http://www.beardsworth.co.uk/>

Eismann:

<http://www.photoshopdiva.com/>

<http://photoshopmasking.com/>

<http://www.creativedigitaldarkroom.com/>

Willmore:

<http://www.digitalmastery.com/>

<http://www.whereisben.com/>

Recommended Plug-ins That Work with Smart Objects

Nik Software: <http://www.niksoftware.com/index/usa/entry.php?>

Viveza: <http://www.niksoftware.com/viveza/usa/entry.php>

Color Efex Pro 3: <http://www.niksoftware.com/colorefexpro/usa/entry.php?>

Silver Efex Pro: <http://www.niksoftware.com/silverefexpro/usa/entry.php>