



- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Print Longevity
- ▶ Resolution
- ▶ Layer Masks

Layer masks in PhotoShop

Here are a couple of short tutorials to demonstrate how to use layer masks in PhotoShop.

What is a layer mask?

A Photoshop layer mask can be thought of as an invisible mask overlying your image and containing editing information. The mask can be made transparent in some places to allow the background to show through. All this is achieved without actually deleting any information from the image. Layer masks do not take up a great deal of memory and can be removed at any time and the original picture restored. They are saved when you save and close your file.

In Exercise 1 you will learn to combine two photographs using layer masks. In Exercise 2, a second application of layer masks is described.

Exercise 1: Applying and editing a layer mask

1. In PhotoShop, open two different pictures of your own (as in figures 1 & 2). Practice on fairly low resolution images so that you can work more quickly. Position the images on the screen so that you can see both. With the move tool, position the cursor in the centre of File 1 and drag it on top of File 2. If you hold down the shift key at the same time, it will be dropped exactly into the middle of file 2. Otherwise, you can move it around once you have placed it there.

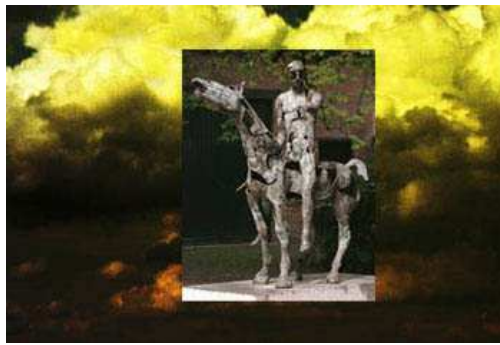
2. File 2 should now contain 2 layers (fig 3). You can check this by looking at the layers palate (fig 4). Now close File 1 - it is no longer needed. Your file 2 should look something like figure 3 at this point.



(fig 1): File number 1



(fig 2): File number 2



File 1 copied onto File 2 as a layer
(fig 3)



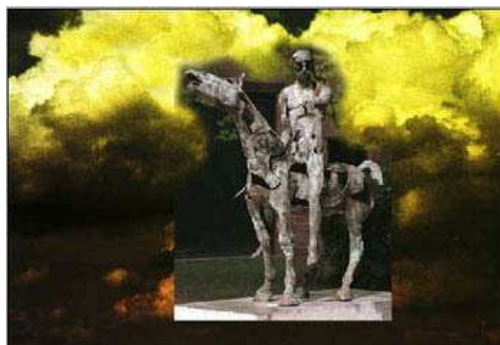
Layers palate shows the two layers
(fig 4)

3. Make sure that the "copy of file 1" is active by selecting it in the layers palate - the layer will be shown as blue with a paintbrush icon against it (fig 4).

Now attach a layer mask to this layer by selecting from the drop-down menus: Layer>Add layer mask>reveal all. (You could alternatively click on the layer mask icon at the bottom left of the layers palate, which is a square with a dotted circle inside). The layer mask will be invisible but you can see that a mask is now linked to the top layer by looking at the layer thumbnails. The layer mask thumbnail is shown alongside the layer thumbnail and shown linked to it with a chain link symbol.

4. From the tools palate, select a paintbrush or airbrush, then from the brush sizes, choose a fairly large size. Check that the paint colours are black and white (if not, press D to return to default colours).

5. Make sure the layer mask symbol - the square with a dotted circle inside - is showing in the layers palate, next to the eye icon (fig 6). This enables the paint tools to edit the mask. If it is not visible, click on the layer mask thumbnail to reveal it. Then, with black paint selected, start to paint on layer 1 and "paint through" to reveal the background image (fig 5). If you paint out too much, change the paint colour to white and paint the layer back in again. You can change the brush size and hardness to match the edge of the subject. The layer mask thumbnail shows the area you have "painted" as a black and white silhouette.



Painting away the layer (fig 5)



The layer mask selected (fig 6)

6. You will find that the choice of brush type will give a harder or softer edge to

the blend - a pencil will give a very hard edge. If you paint with grey instead of black and white you will see that the blended area will be semi-transparent. By using different shades of grey, you can choose how transparent the top layer becomes and control how much background shows through.



Layer mask complete (fig 7)



(Fig 8)

7. In the example above (fig 7), the resulting image is not quite right, because the horse's feet need to be blended in to simulate being hidden by cloud. To achieve a soft blend it was necessary to add a copy of the sky layer on top of the horseman, add another layer mask to this and paint through it with black paint in some areas and grey paint in others until the desired effect was achieved (see fig 8 & 9).



(Fig 9)

Note: When you are happy with the blend you can choose, if you wish, to make the changes permanent by selecting Layer>Remove layer mask>Apply (or Layer>Remove layer mask>Discard to remove the mask without applying the changes). Alternatively you can leave the masks in place, so that you can return to edit them later.

Exercise 2: Creative colour in a monochrome image

1. Open a colour image and make a copy of the background. On the top copy, select Image>Adjust>Desaturate to change it to monochrome. The image will now appear as monochrome on the screen.

2. Add a layer mask to the monochrome copy as in Exercise 1.

3. Using black paint, paint over an area of monochrome to reveal the colour image beneath.

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