

# The Power of Presets

with Dave Cross

When many people hear “presets” they think of Lightroom, but there are all kinds of presets in Photoshop – and they all have something in common: they can save you time. The idea behind most Photoshop presets is to have a starting point – initial settings that you can still change if necessary.

## Tool Presets

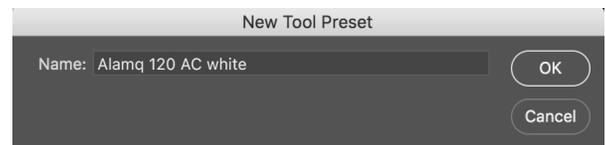
Most tools have settings that affect the way the tool operates. Rather than always having to remember to go through and check every setting before using a tool, you can save a preset. The process is pretty simple (the harder thing is to get in the habit of using these presets).

**STEP ONE:** Choose the settings for the tool. (With the Type tool it’s easiest to temporarily create some type and format it to look the way you want).

**STEP TWO:** Click on the tool icon in the Options Bar to open the Tool Preset Picker

**STEP THREE:** Click on the new icon to give your preset a name.

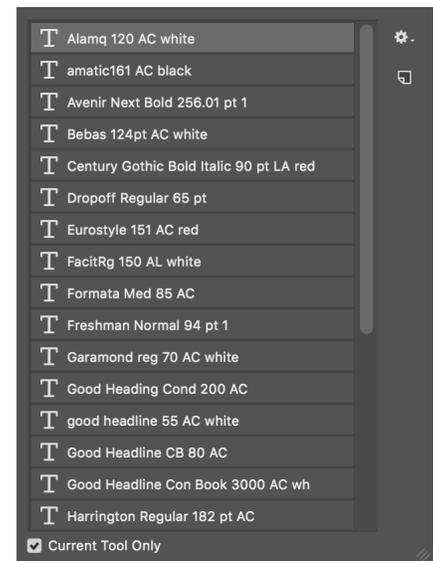
**NOTE:** Although Photoshop prompts you to name the preset starting with the tool name, it’s really unnecessary since the tool icon will appear there. Also, some presets offer the option to include the color as part of the preset.



Once you have saved some tool presets it’s simple to use them: pop up the Tool Preset Picker and choose the preset. I recommend having “Current Tool Only” checked so you only see the presets for the tool you’re using.

**REMEMBER:** Choose the preset *before* using the tool – you cannot enter some type and then apply a preset. You must choose the preset first and then use the tool (hence the “PRE” part of the word preset).

**Hint:** Consider making a tool preset for the “Normal” settings for each tool so it’s easy to get back to settings such as Normal Blend mode, 100% Opacity etc.



## Brush Presets

Just about anything can be turned into a Photoshop brush, and that brush shape can then be used by any tool that uses the brush picker (Brush, Healing, Clone Stamp etc.) Just using the Brush tool alone, there are tons of interesting possibilities that come from make custom brushes out of textures, old text, water splashes, paint or just about anything else you can imagine.

Photoshop can create a brush out of anything you can select, but the first thing that's important to know is that the brush can only paint in one color. In other words, you could create a brush from a photograph, but when you use the brush it's a grayscale brush that uses the current foreground color.

When defining a brush, the shade of gray is equivalent to opacity, i.e. Black will be 100% opaque, white will be 0% and shades of gray will be somewhat see-through.

Here's a simple example of making your own brush, to create a signature you can easily add to your photos.

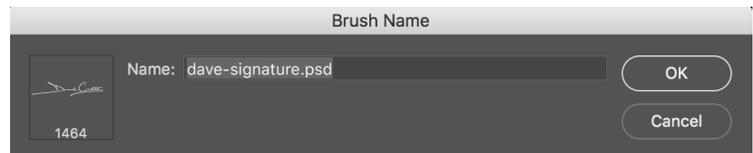
STEP ONE: Sign a piece of white paper and take a photo of it. Open a large version of the photo.

Hint: It's almost always best to make a brush bigger than you think you'll need it: you can always scale down a brush, whereas if you scale a brush large, it will lose quality. The maximum brush size is 5000 pixels – if the command to define a brush is greyed out, try making the image just under 5000 pixels.



STEP TWO: Make sure that the background is white and your signature is black. A simple way to do this is to use the Levels command: use the white eyedropper to click on the background and the black eyedropper to click on your signature.

STEP THREE: From the Edit menu choose Define Brush Preset. Name the brush (if you wish) and click OK.



Now to use your signature brush, add a new layer, choose your Foreground color and click once. (If the brush is too large, use the left bracket key to decrease the size).

Remember, the brush will be created as a grayscale brush that will use your foreground color, so when you look at images to see if they'd make a good brush, imagine them as a grayscale.



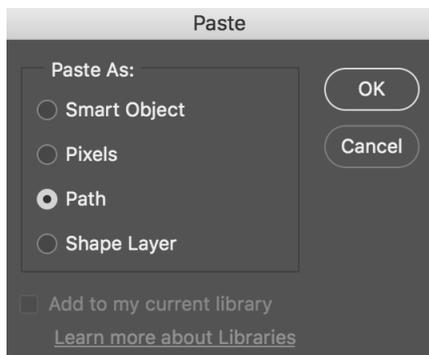
It really starts to get interesting when you realize that you can create brushes from just about anything. For example, I have created brushes from photos of writing on an old map, feathers, stone and smoke (among other things).

## Shapes

In a similar concept to Brushes, you can create custom shapes from existing artwork, although this works best from vector artwork such as an Adobe Illustrator file. This is because shapes are vector-based and as such as very scalable.

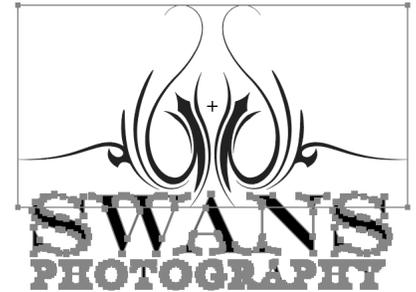
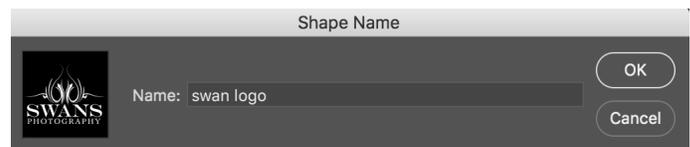
Starting in Illustrator, select all the artwork. If your artwork contains type, you'll have to convert the text to outlines (from the Type menu).

Copy the artwork, switch to Photoshop make a new document and Paste. From the Paste options that appear, choose Path.



A new path will appear.

From the Edit menu choose Define Custom Shape, then name your shape.



Now your custom shape will appear in the Custom Shapes Picker, and can be dragged to any size.

Once again keep in mind that the shape will appear in your current Foreground color.

It's also possible to create custom shapes based on paths that you create in Photoshop (without any help from Illustrator). Create a path using the Pen tool or any of the Shape tools and then from the Edit menu choose Define Custom Shape.

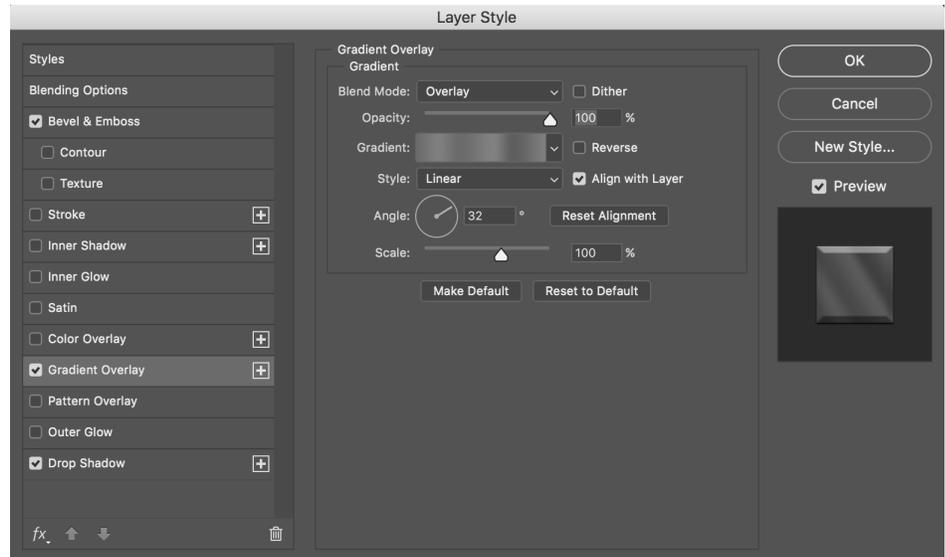


## Styles

I think it's safe to assume that most Photoshop users have applied a Layer Style to a layer: Drop Shadow, Bevel and Emboss, etc. I'm often surprised at the number of people who don't take full advantage of layer styles by creating reusable, one-click styles. Especially when you see how easy they are to create and to edit.

Once you have applied a series of layer styles to a layer and are happy with the way the results look, go to the Styles panel and click on the New Style icon. Name the style. (You can also save a style while you're in the Layer Style dialog, by clicking the New Style button).

From then on when you want to apply the same look to a different layer, just click once on your style. All the individual layer styles that make up that style will appear under the layer, so you can easily edit the individual effects if necessary.



It's also possible to create a series of individual styles (e.g. just a drop shadow, just a stroke, etc.) that can be applied on top of each other. Normally when you click on a style preset it will replace any existing style, so you have to indicate that you want to add a style rather than replace. You do that by holding down the Shift key. Now you can build a look by Shift-clicking on a series of individual styles...and then you could save a new style from the look you built from your individual styles.

## Swatch Presets

Often we find ourselves using specific colors for specific projects or clients. In these cases it can be easier to create and work with sets of swatches. You can either do this directly in Photoshop or by importing color swatches from Illustrator or InDesign.

In Photoshop you would use add the specific colors to the Swatches panel, and then use the Preset Manager to select and save the colors as a set. That set can then be loaded into the Swatches panel whenever you need them. In Illustrator and InDesign you can save the swatches as an ASE (Adobe Swatch Exchange) file and then load those swatches into Photoshop.

## Patterns

To understand how patterns work, think floor tiles: you need to put in a new floor in your kitchen so you go to the flooring store and pick out a design you like. Many of those tiles have been created so that when you install them edge-to-edge, there's no obvious border or seam between them. That's the basic idea of the built-in Photoshop patterns:

fill an area with one of these patterns and you shouldn't see an obvious seam. (To take this analogy a step further, in your kitchen you'd have to cut the tiles to fit the shape of the room, while in Photoshop you make a selection of the shape you want to fill, and the pattern fills in that shape). Like flooring, some Photoshop patterns are square and some are rectangular (hardwood floors?)

### Creating your own pattern

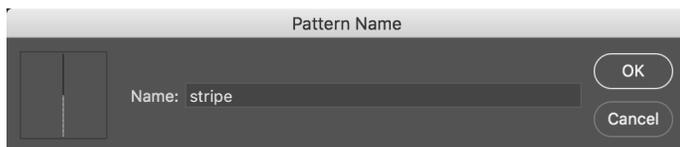
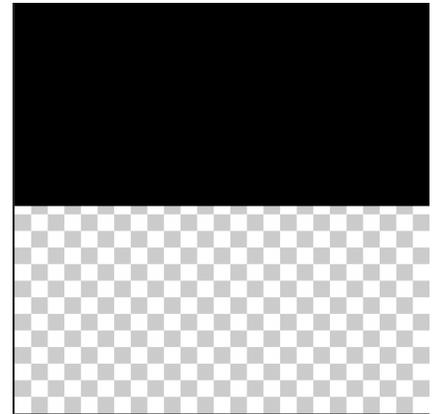
You can create a pattern from just about anything you can select (or if you have nothing selected the pattern will be created from the entire document). However, unless you plan accordingly, most patterns that are created from a photograph will show an obvious seam between where the pattern repeats. Perhaps it's more likely that you will create a pattern from a graphic. Here's a simple example of creating a stripe pattern that can be applied as a repeating pattern.

STEP ONE: Create a new document: the size isn't crucial, but it's often easier if it's a square.

STEP TWO: Add a new layer, select the top half of the document and fill with black.

STEP THREE: Hide the Background layer to create a pattern that includes transparency.

STEP FOUR: From the Edit menu choose Define Pattern. Name the pattern and click OK.



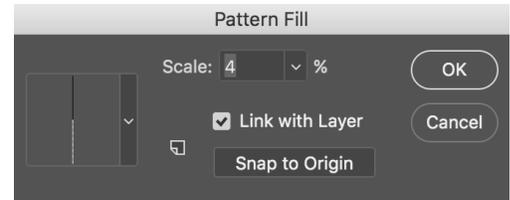
### Applying patterns

There are a number of different ways to apply a pattern and like everything in Photoshop, the method you use will depend on what you're trying to create, and how much flexibility you require. The first method is to select an area and use the Fill command (Edit>Fill or press Shift-delete (PC: Shift-Backspace)). In the dialog, choose Pattern in the "Use" menu and then pick your patterns from the pop-up dialog of patterns. You can also choose a Blend mode and Opacity at this time, although it's probably best (if possible) to create and fill the selection on a new layer and change the blend mode and opacity of that layer.

If you want to apply a pattern in a more freeform, paint-it-where-you-want approach, try the Pattern Stamp Tool. Sharing the same slot in the Toolbox and the Clone Stamp tool, the Pattern Stamp Tool should probably be thought of as the Pattern Brush, since there's really no similarity between it and the Clone Stamp Tool. In other words, you don't have to click a reference point, you just use the Options Bar to choose the size of brush and what pattern you want to use and start "painting". Once again, it's probably best to take advantage of layers to create a new layer for your pattern painting.

The only drawback to these two methods is that you cannot control the size of the pattern, only the area in which it is applied. If you do need to change the size of the pattern itself, then you'll want to use the Pattern Overlay Layer Style or the Pattern adjustment layer.

If you have an object on a layer to which you want to apply a pattern, use the pop-up Layer Style menu to select Pattern Overlay. Here you can choose the pattern along with the Blend Mode, Opacity and Scale you wish to use. Check "Link With Layer" if you want the texture to move with the layer (as opposed to the pattern staying put when you move the object on the layer). Take advantage of the Preview to find your ideal combination of settings.



In contrast to the Layer Style that is "attached" to the contents of a layer, the Pattern Fill adjustment layer creates a new layer filled with the pattern of your choice. Like all adjustment layers, it comes with a layer mask so you can determine where you want the pattern to appear, by painting with black in areas where you do not want the pattern to be visible. And, as in this example, you can change the Blend mode or opacity of the adjustment layer.



## Gradients

Although it's probably less common to create Gradient presets compared to some other presets, like other presets saving custom Gradients can save you time.

There is one small twist to saving a Gradient preset that often trips people up: unlike other presets where you click a New preset button, in the Gradient Picker the button says New. For some people that implies that you should click that button first and then change the setting, but it still works like other presets. That is, you start with an existing gradient, edit it the way you want and then click the New button to create the preset.

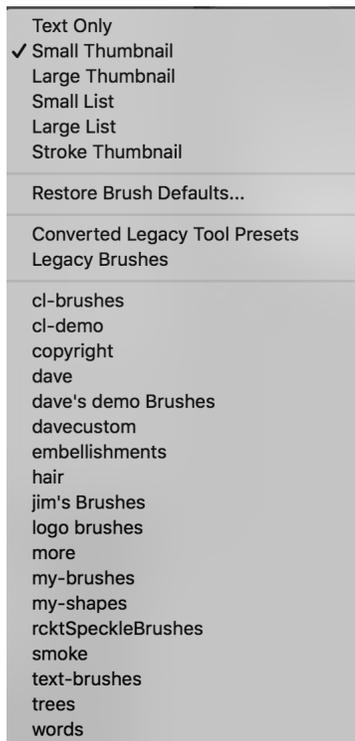
You can change colors in a gradient by double-clicking on the color stops underneath the gradient. To add more colors to a gradient, double-click underneath the gradient.

## The Preset Manager

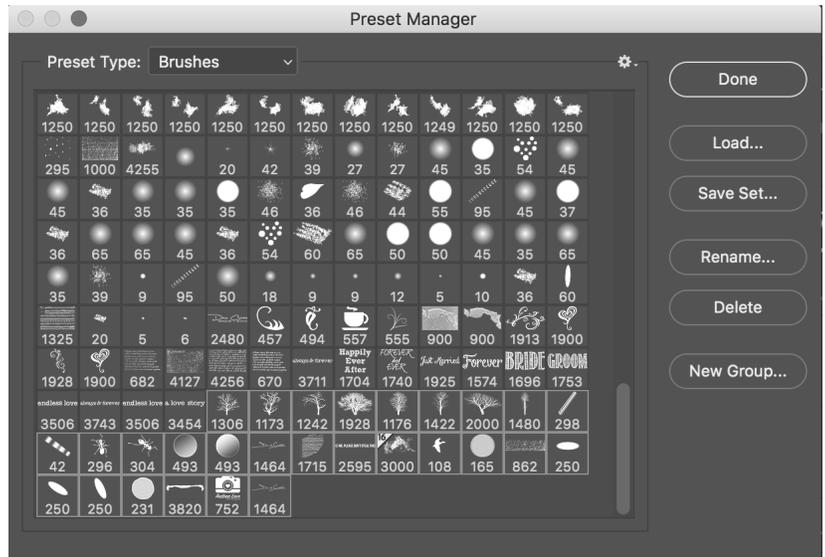
The Preset Manager is (as the name suggests) the manager of many of the presets. Using the Preset Manager you control which presets you want to appear in various panels and you can also create backup sets of presets.

Go through the preset panels (Brushes, Swatches, etc.) and if there are any presets you never use – or you just want to change the preset order – do that in the Preset Manager. To change the display order just click and drag within the Preset Manager.

You can also create sets of presets, either as a backup plan or to share presets with other people. Just select the presets and choose Save Set.



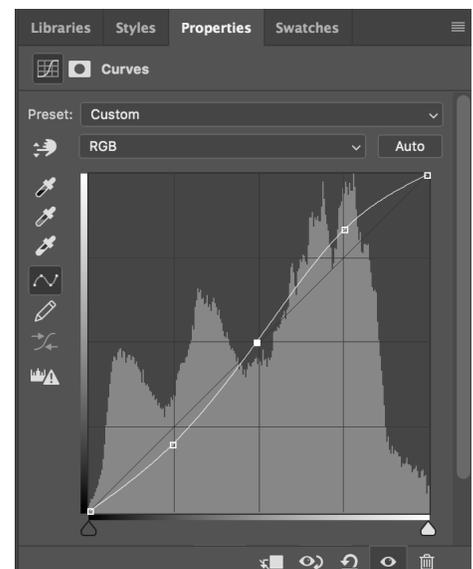
If you save the set into the suggested folder, your custom set will appear in the menu for that tool.



## Adjustment Presets

If you use adjustment layers you can create your own presets. For example, if you often add a Curves adjustment layer and create an “S Curve”, creating a preset will save you from having to start from scratch each time. (It’s important to note that when you apply an adjustment layer preset you can still tweak the results – it just happens to do most of the work for you)

To make your own preset in Curves or any other adjustment layer, use the flyout menu in the Properties panel and choose Save “adjustment” Preset – with “adjustment” being replaced by the current adjustment layer (e.g. Save Curves Preset). Name your preset and save it into the appropriate folder: you should be directed to the proper location, but just in case, save your preset in Photoshop X>Presets>Curves (or the folder for whatever adjustment layer you’re working with).



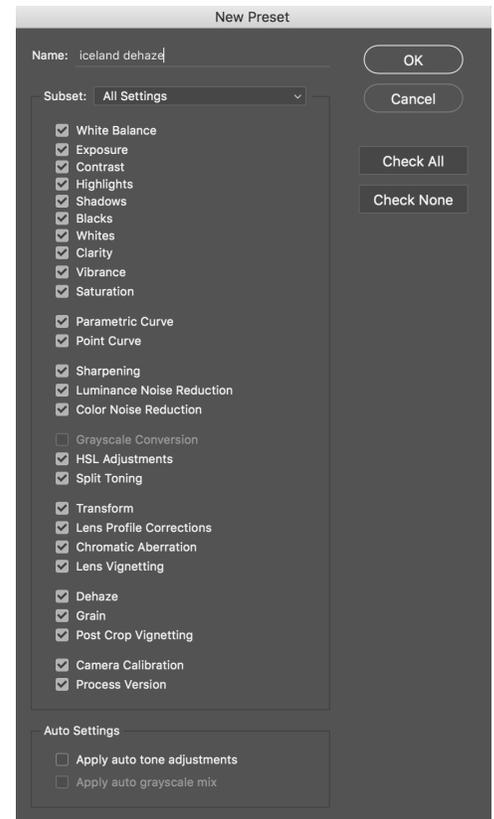
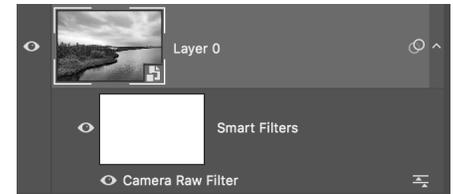
From then on in the Curves adjustment layer dialog, go to the Presets menu and choose your preset (remembering that you can still tweak the settings if you like).

## ACR Presets

Since you can access Camera Raw as a filter in Photoshop, it's worth noting that you can create and use presets in Camera Raw. I suggest using Camera Raw as a Smart Filter so that it's easy to continue to edit the settings.

In Camera Raw apply settings the way you want, and then go to the Presets tab to save a new preset. You can decide which settings you want to include in the preset.

Then you can click on the preset to apply the settings, knowing that you can continue to edit those settings.



## Keyboard Shortcuts

Okay, technically this isn't a preset, but if you set up a custom keyboard shortcut ahead of time, maybe it could be thought of as a preset? There are keyboard shortcuts for a ton of things in Photoshop, but there may not be one for a function that you use all the time. Go to the Edit menu, and choose Keyboard Shortcuts. You can edit the shortcuts for application menus, panel menus and tools, so choose that first. Then find the command to which you want to apply your own shortcut and click beside it.

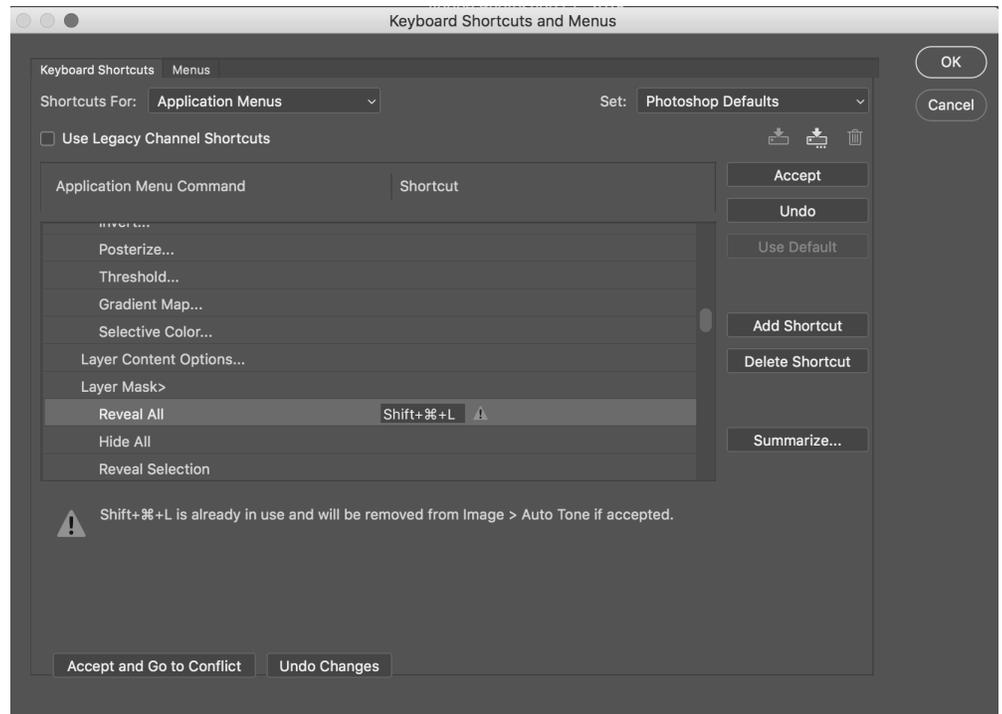
Here's the tricky part: finding a shortcut that isn't already taken. I suggest entering the shortcut you'd like to use and seeing to which command it is currently applied. In some cases you'll note that the shortcut is used by some command you never use, so in that case you can accept the change.

In this example I wanted to create a keyboard shortcut for Add a Layer Mask. I tried the shortcut Command-Shift-L (PC: Control-Shift-L) and it told me that shortcut was in use by Auto Tone (see next page).

Auto Tone? Never heard of it\*, so I am perfectly fine with accepting that change. And from now on I can press that shortcut to add a Layer Mask to my current layer.

Of course you have to make these decisions yourself – try a shortcut, see what it is used for, and decide to accept the change or not.

(\*I'm saying that for dramatic effect: I have heard of Auto Tone, I just never ever use it)



Here's a quick list I put together of commands that I *personally* will “never” use and their shortcuts (and therefore I could assign them to a different command)

Auto Tone: Shift Command L (PC: Shift Cntl L)

Auto Contrast: Option Shift Command L (PC: Alt Shift Cntl L)

Auto Color: Option Shift Command B (PC: Alt Shift Cntl B)

Print One Copy: Option Shift Command P (PC: Alt Shift Cntl P)

Here's a secondary list of commands that I *might* (rarely) use, so I would also consider reassigning these shortcuts

Liquify: Shift Command X (PC: Shift Cntl X)

Save for Web & Devices: Option Shift Command S (PC: Alt Shift Cntl S)

File Info: Option Shift Command I (PC: Alt Shift Cntl I)

Color Balance: Command B (PC: Cntl B)

Vanishing Point: Option Command V (PC: Alt Cntl V)

Close & Go to Bridge: Shift Command W (PC: Shift Cntl W)

Disclaimer: Of course you need to evaluate which commands you do or do not use – these are just suggestions.....

### Final Thought

There are other areas in Photoshop where you can create and use presets such as some Filters. So anytime you are in a dialog, take a look and see if there is the option to save a preset – it can save you a ton of time.

You can find out more about Dave Cross at [learningphotoshop.cc](http://learningphotoshop.cc)