

# Amp up your Design Efficiency in Photoshop

## with Dave Cross

### Keyboard Shortcuts

One of the easiest ways to work more quickly and focus on the creative side is by using keyboard shortcuts. If you're not a big shortcut user, start with selecting tools: tap the single letter associated with a tool. That's much quicker than moving over to click on a tool.

Start with the main tools you use and gradually add more.

V = Move    L = Lasso    C = Crop    T = Type    B = Brush    M = Marquee

Add in

D = Default Colors    X = Swap Foreground & Background

### Customize Shortcuts

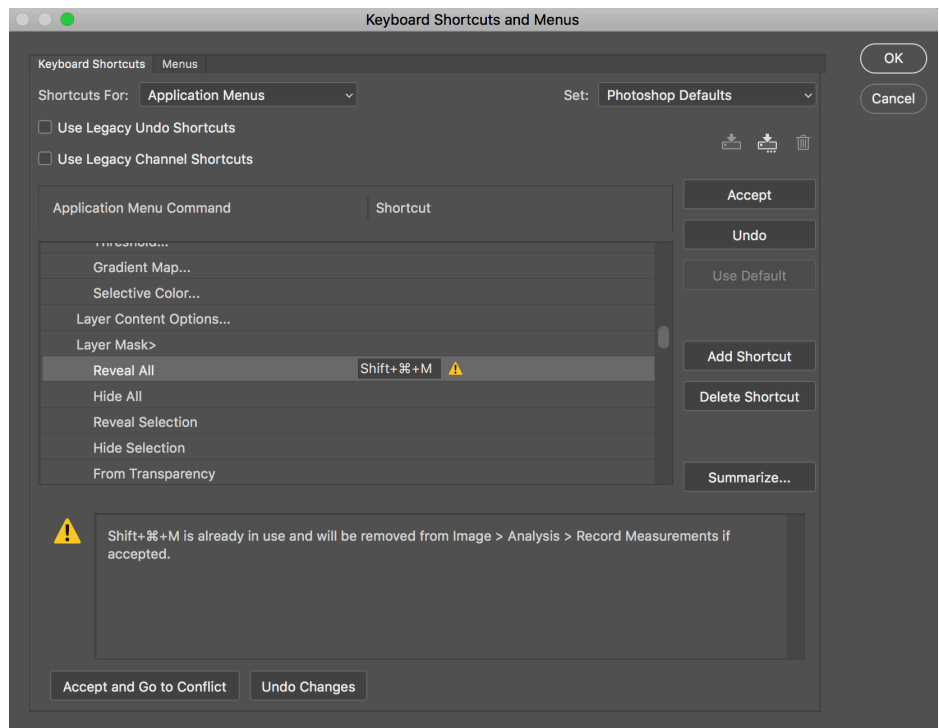
It's also easier to remember and use shortcuts that you have created (rather than the ones allocated by someone at Adobe). If there are functions you use all the time that don't have a shortcut, you can re-allocate one.

Go to Edit > 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.

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-M (PC: Control-Shift-M) and it told me that shortcut was in use by Record Measurements. I never use that so I am perfectly fine with accepting that change.



Here's a quick list I put together of commands that I personally will "never" use and their shortcuts (and therefore ones I could assign 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.....

## Opacity Shortcut

Use the keyboard to change the Opacity setting. This works with both tool settings and Layer Opacity.

Rather than clicking on the Opacity setting, just tap the first number of the opacity you want: 1 for 10%, 20 for 20% etc. To get to 100% press 0. With Layers you can also tap 00 for 0% Opacity – that turns out to be a great way to show and hide a layer without going anywhere near the Eye icons on the Layers panel.

When there's a second option such as Flow (with tools) or Fill Opacity (with Layers), press SHIFT and the number to change that setting.

## Brush Shortcuts

When working with brushes, making the trip up to the Options Bar to change the brush size is a waste of time. Use one of these methods:

- Use the [ and ] keys to decrease and increase the brush size
- Hold down Control and Option (PC: Right-click and Alt) and drag to the left and right to resize the brush
- Take advantage of the pressure sensitivity settings on a Wacom tablet

You can also change the hardness of a brush using shortcuts:

- Use SHIFT and the [ and ] keys to decrease and increase the hardness of brush
- Hold down Control and Option (PC: Right-click and Alt) and drag up and down to change the harness of a brush

- To change to the next brush in the Brush Picker, press the . (period) key
- To change to the previous brush in the Brush Picker, press the , (comma) key

## The Option/Alt Key

Remember this one and you'll always find a way to save time. One of my former students once referred to this as the "make better" key because it almost always adds something to a function. For example:

- In most dialog boxes, hold down Option/Alt to change the Cancel button to Reset
- When moving an object (layer, etc) hold down Option/Alt to make a copy rather than just moving it
- Hold down Option/Alt to Transform towards the center
- Hold down Option/Alt and click on the Eye icon beside a Layer to hide every other layer. Click with Option/Alt again to show the again.
- Hold down Option/Alt and click on the Layer Mask thumbnail to view the Layer Mask

## Path Shortcuts

Although there are separate tools for Add Anchor Point, Delete Anchor Point and Convert Anchor Point, you don't need them. With an existing path and the Pen tool, clicking on an existing point will delete it, clicking on the path will add an anchor point, and holding down Option/Alt will convert from a curved to a straight anchor point and vice versa. Holding down Command/Control will temporary switch to the Direct Selection tool.

## Layer Keyboard shortcuts

Speed up your work with layers by using these shortcuts...

### Selecting Layers from the Image

With the Move tool active, hold down Command/Control to click on a layer in the image window to activate that layer in the Layers panel. Or Right-click to pop up a list of layers that are available at that location. (Naming your layers is important when using this shortcut).

### Targeting Layers with Shortcuts

To activate the layer above or below the current layer in the layer stack, use these shortcuts: Option-[ (PC: Alt-[) targets the layer down one layer in the stack. Option-, (comma) (PC: Alt-,) targets the layer at the bottom of the stack. Option-. (period) (PC: Alt-.) targets the very top layer. These shortcuts are particularly useful when recording an action, so that the name of the layer is not recorded.

### Moving Layers with Shortcuts

To move the active layer up or down in the layer stack, use these shortcuts: Command-[ (PC: Cntl-[) moves the layer down one layer in the stack. Command-Shift-[ (PC: Cntl-Shift-[) moves the layer to the bottom of the stack (above the Background layer, or to the very bottom if there is no Background layer). Command-] (PC: Cntl-]) moves the layer up one layer in the stack. Command-Shift-] (PC: Cntl-Shift-]) moves the layer to the top of the stack

## Create a New Layer Below

To create a layer underneath a layer, Command (PC: Control) click on the new layer icon with the layer selected. The layer will automatically appear below the layer that you selected.

## Hide a Layer Shortcut

As a quick way to hide and show a layer without moving over and clicking on the Eye icon beside the layer: press 00 to hide the layer and 0 to show the layer. 00 for 0% opacity, 0 for 100% opacity.

## Layer and Mask Shortcuts

If you have a Layer with a Mask and you want to activate the Mask, press Command-\ (PC: Cntl -\). To activate the layer, press Command-2 (PC: Cntl -2).

## Undo Layer Visibility

By default, clicking on the Eye icon to hide and show layers is not undoable. If you want to be able to use the Undo/Redo and Step Backward/Step Forward commands to show and hide layers you have to change one setting. In the History panel flyout menu, choose History Options and in the dialog check Make Layer Visibility Changes Undoable.

## Lock Shortcuts

Press the / key to turn on and off the lock functions for layers – if nothing is locked it will toggle on and off lock transparency. If you had already turned on a lock (Lock image pixels, Lock position or Lock all) this shortcut will toggle on and off that lock.

## Tool Presets

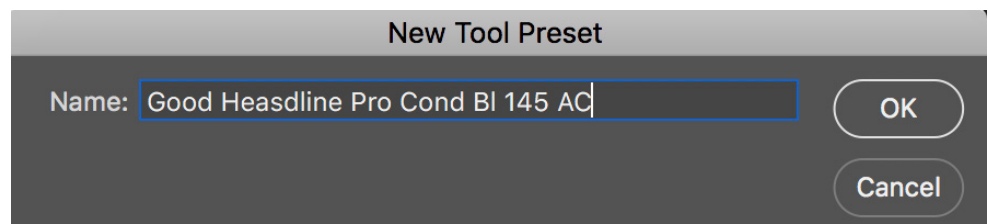
Most tools have settings that affect the way the tool operates. Rather than always having to remember to go through and check every setting before using a tool, you can save a preset. The process is pretty simple (the harder thing is to get in the habit of using these presets).

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.



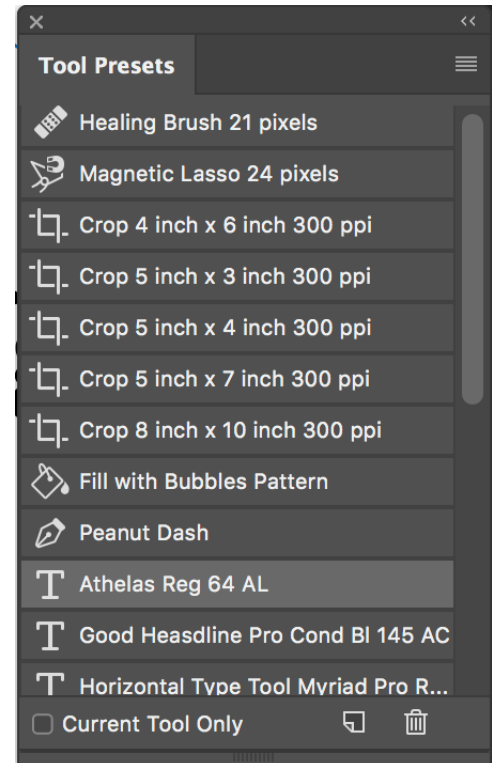
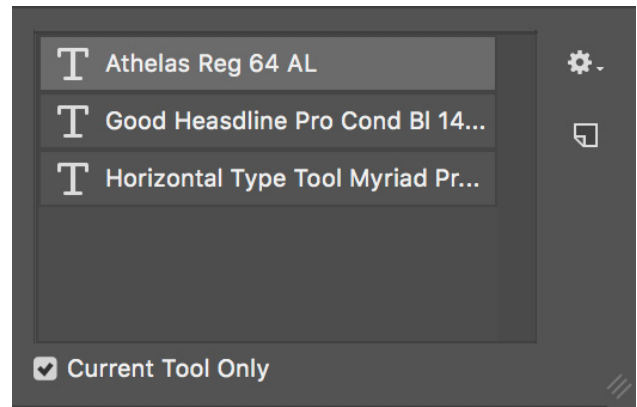
Once you have saved some tool presets it's simple to use them: pop up the Tool Preset Picker and choose the preset. I recommend having "Current Tool Only" checked so you only see the presets for the tool you're using.

**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.

Bonus Tip:

Show the Tool Presets panel and use it to switch to a tool *and* apply the settings from the preset.



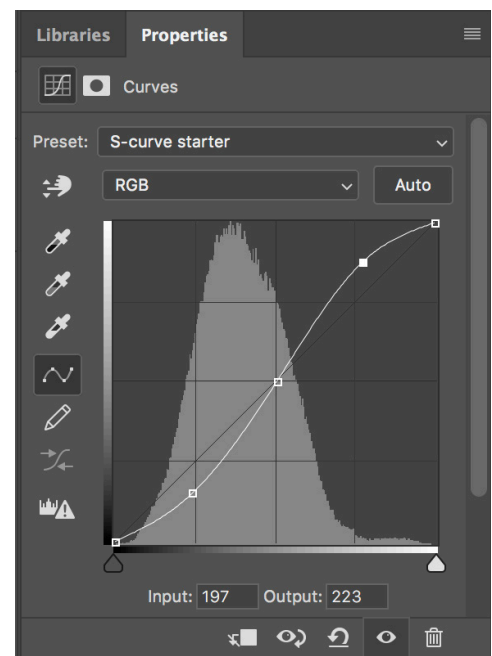
## Other Presets

A very effective way to think of presets is as a starting point: you can always change settings etc. but starting with a preset can save you time. For example, if you often apply an "S-curve" in Curves, create a preset for it – then you can always tweak it on an image-by-image basis.

To do this, add a Curves Adjustment Layer and make an S-curve. Use the flyout menu to Save a Curves Preset.

Name the preset and save it into the prompted folder.

From then on when you add a Curves Adjustment Layer, pick the preset you created, and tweak if necessary.



## Add Canvas with the Crop Tool

When you need extra canvas and it doesn't have to be a specific numeric amount, instead of using the Canvas Size command, use the Crop tool. Click on the Crop tool and then drag any handle outside the current canvas size. As soon as you press Enter, canvas will be added – transparent pixels if the layer is unlocked (or a Smart Object) or in the Background color.

To fill in the extra canvas you have a couple of options, and it will depend on the background. For a mostly solid background color like this example, select as much of the existing background as you can and copy it to a new layer. Then use Edit>Content-Aware Scale to fill in the extra space.

If the background has texture, try using the Content-Aware Move tool with the Mode set to Extend. Add a blank layer and make sure Sample All Layers is checked. Again select as much of the existing background as you can and then drag to fill in the extra space.



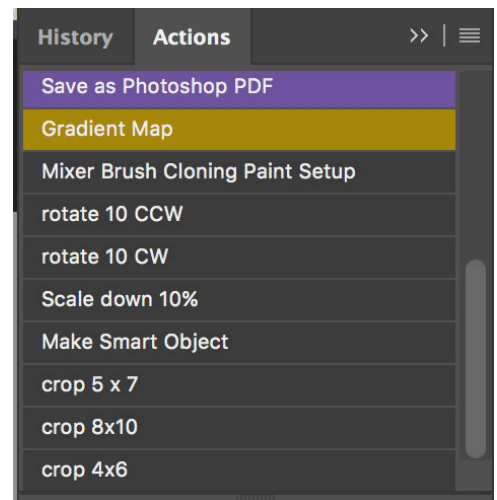
## Simple Actions

Not every action needs to include multiple steps - you can also create a series of single-step actions. Just record individual operations, especially ones that require going to sub-menus or inside dialog boxes.

One example: record a one-step action that chooses a commonly used tool preset.

Then you can use the Actions panel flyout menu to switch to Button Mode – now you have a series of one-click actions.

You can also record an action that plays a series of these single actions.

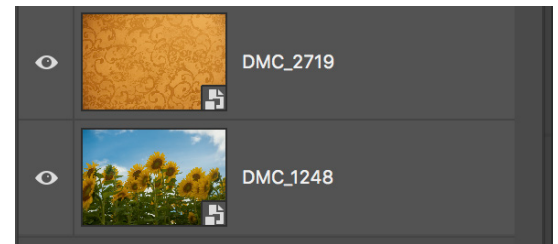


## Blend If

I talk about this function in just above every Photoshop class I teach because I think is just a valuable technique. Having said that, it doesn't always work the way you want, but it's certainly worth trying.

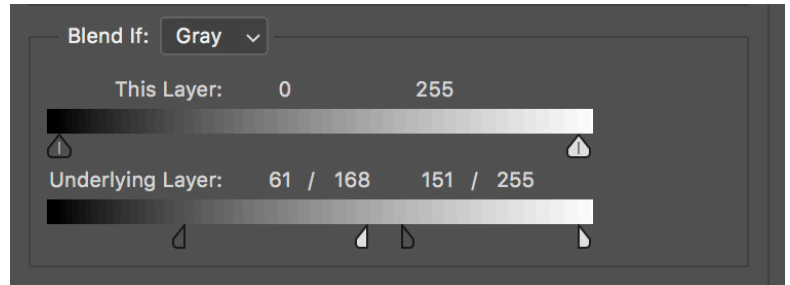


In this example I want to blend a texture with an underlying photo. Just changing the Blend Mode along didn't work, and I didn't want to have to do a lot of masking. So instead I double-clicked to the right of the name of the top layer, to open the Layer Style dialog.



In the Blend If section I experimented with the 2 sliders: "This Layer" is my texture overlay and "Underlying Layer" is the flower photo.

To get a better result, hold down Option/Alt (there it is again) to split the triangle into two halves. After 20 seconds I got this result [below].



It's important to note that both layers are Camera Raw Smart Objects which means I can continue to edit them. In the image below I changed the texture to Grayscale in ACR.



## Layer Styles

When most people think of Layer styles they probably think about Stroke, Drop Shadow, Bevel and Emboss etc. There is so much more to Layer Styles! And you can apply these less-commonly-thought-of styles very easily.

These functions are included in Layer Styles and can be copied and pasted or saved (more on that in a minute):

Blend Modes

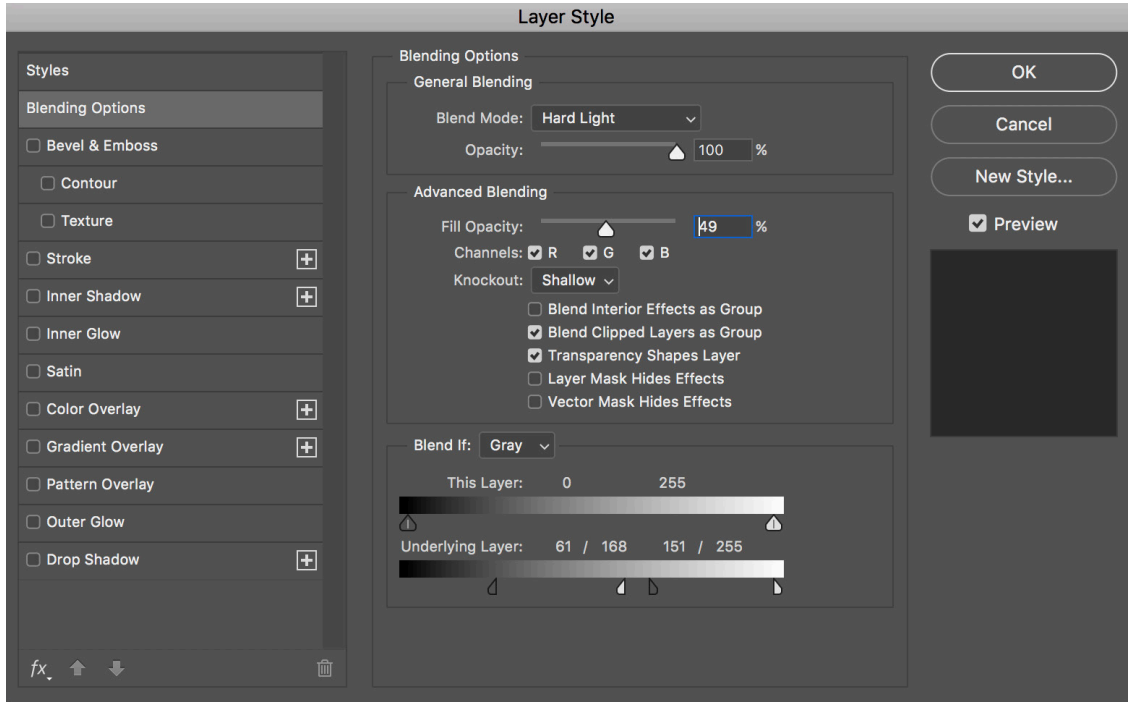
Opacity

Fill Opacity

Knockout

Blend If Sliders

NOTE: Although you can drag and drop while holding down Option/Alt to copy Layer Styles from one layer to another, these functions will not copy



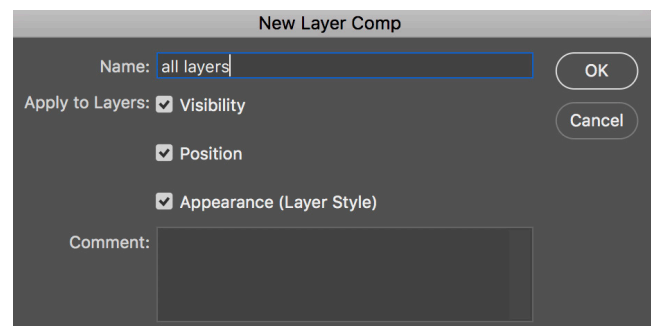
To copy everything you must either use Copy Layer Style/Paste Layer Style or create a New Style.

## Layer Comps

One of the most powerful ways to experiment in Photoshop is to create multiple layers and then try various combinations: hiding, showing and moving different layers around. You can make this process simple and efficient – and readily accessible – by using Layer Comps.

The basic idea of a layer comp is to capture the current status of the Layers panel: what layers are visible, where they're positioned and what layer styles (if any) are applied. By creating a series of Layer Comps you can quickly and easily switch between different layer combinations.

Typically you'd do this after you have created a series of layers, including different choices of sizes, fonts etc.





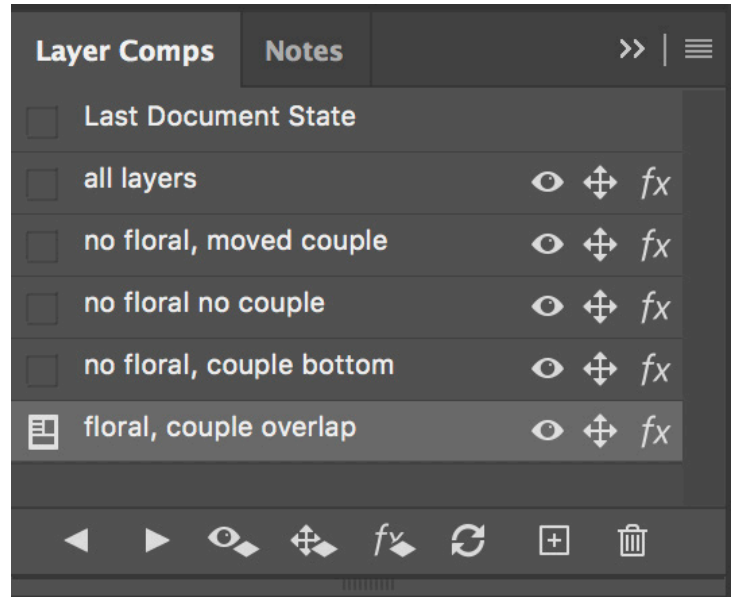
Layer Comps “remember” the visibility, position and appearance of the layers, but not the content. In other words, you cannot change the size of an object, the typeface of a type layer or anything like that without it affecting all layer comps. If you want to have one large logo and a smaller version, you’d have to duplicate the layer and use Free Transform to make the second logo smaller – then show or hide the appropriate version.

By the same token, if you want the option to choose between white text and black text, you’ll have to make 2 versions of the type layer, one white and one black.

Once you have a list of comps you can easily browse through them by clicking on the arrows, or look at a specific comp by clicking to the left of the comp you wish to view.

Layer Comps are “stored” in a psd file, adding very little to your file size, and are a great alternative to creating separate files.

And remember, Layer Comps can include Layer Styles, which as we saw also means Opacity, Blend If sliders etc.



## Smart Objects

The best way I can think of to describe a Smart Object is as a container – a special, magical container! Think of it this way: when you convert a layer to a Smart Object you are putting the contents of that layer into a container. At any time you can double-click on the Smart Object to view (in a separate document) the contents of the container.

When you apply a filter to the Smart Object, the container shows the effects of the filter(s), but the contents remain unchanged. This means you can always edit or remove the filter, even after saving the document.

Here’s the magical part of the container: you can scale and rotate the container but once again, you can always get back to the original contents, even scaling them back to their original size.

As we’ll see, Smart Objects offer some major advantages including:

- the ability to apply editable filters
- the creation of an editable version of Camera Raw
- the option to create “templates”
- the option to apply filters to text while keeping the text editable

There are a number of ways to create a Smart Object from one or more layers. After selecting the layer(s), use one of these methods:

### 1. Convert to Smart Object

This option is available by Control-clicking (PC: Right-clicking) beside the layer, from the Layers panel flyout menu, or from the Layer menu)

### 2. Convert for Smart Filters

Under the Filter menu, choose Convert for Smart Filters.

You can also create a Smart Object as you open a file, by using File>Open as Smart Object rather than File>Open.

If you have a document open and would like to create a Smart Object in the document from another file, use File>Place. When you place a file into the document it automatically is added as a Smart Object. In addition, if you drag in from a Library it will create a Smart Object.

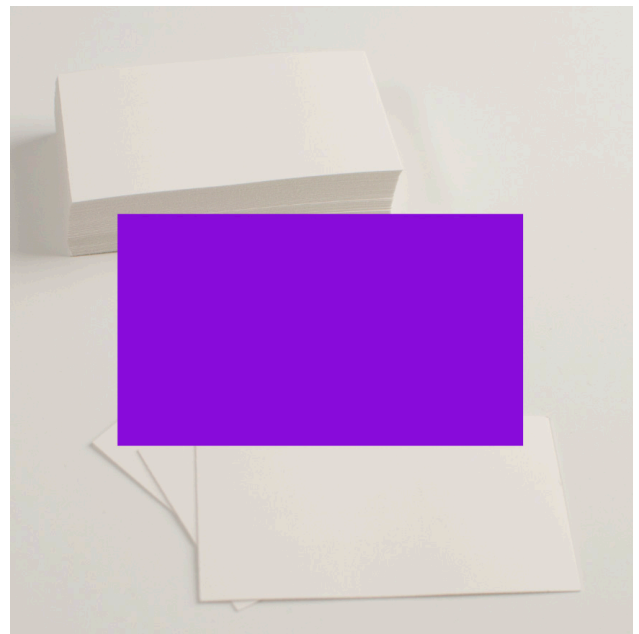
Camera Raw and Lightroom both have an option to work with Photoshop as Smart Objects.

### Smart "Templates"

The word "template" doesn't appear anywhere in Photoshop. Unlike some applications that have a "Save as Template" command, in Photoshop when you save as a PSD file that contains Smart Objects, it acts like a template. I use the term template to point out the possibilities of using Smart Objects in this way.

Here's an example that you set up once, and then use repeatedly to show business card designs.

Start with a photo of blank cards.



Add a new layer and add a selection in a 3.5 x 2 ratio and fill it with a color. This will be your placeholder for all the cards.

Convert that layer to a Smart Object.

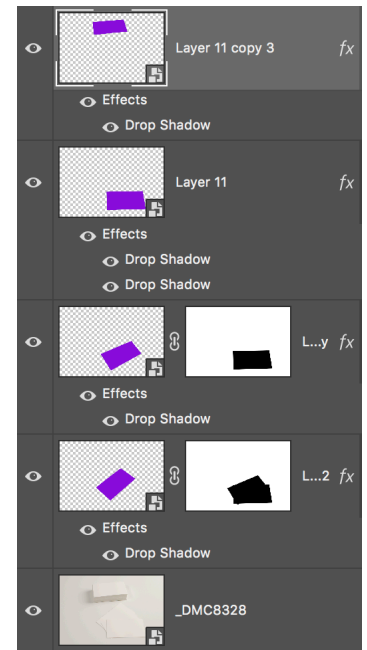
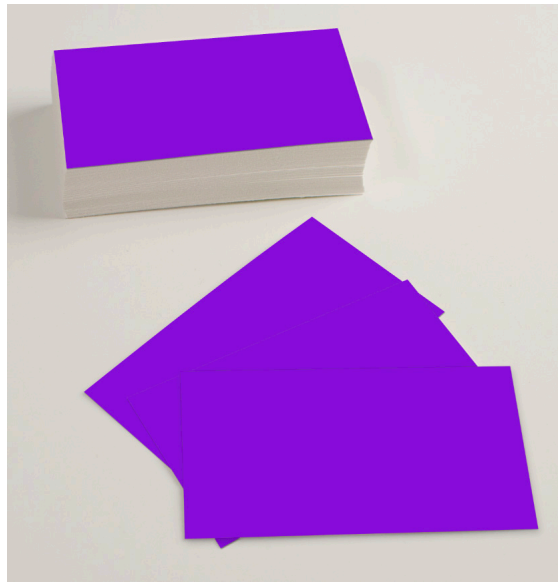
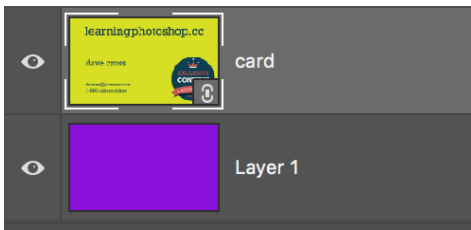
Duplicate that Smart Object until you have enough copies for each of the cards.

Transform and mask each copy to match up with the cards.

Save as a PSD. Now you have your template\*.

Double-click on any one of the Smart Objects.

Place the card design artwork into the contents document, sizing it to fit.



Save the contents document and when you go back to the main document, all the Smart Objects will update.

\* Saving as a PSD does not create a true template. But if you rename that file to .psdt instead of .psd, it will become a template and an untitled copy will open.



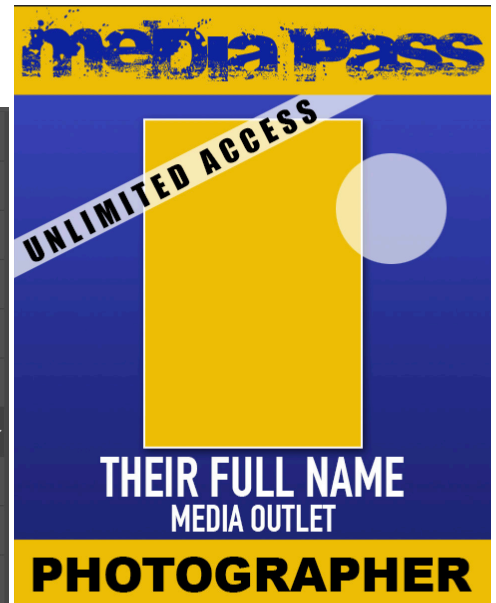
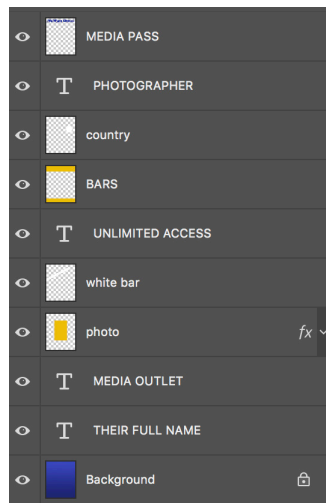
## Data Driven Graphics (Variables)

When you have to create a series of graphics where some elements stay the same and some elements change (e.g. name, company, title etc), Variables are the way to go. (Think mail merge for graphics).

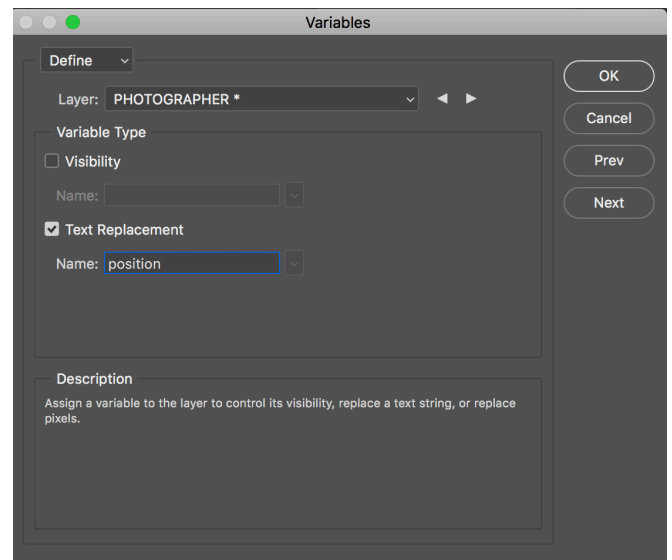
First we create a typical Photoshop document using layers. It's important to name your layers with a helpful name. In this document we're going to create what amounts to "placeholders": layers that will be replaced with data that varies with each layout.

In this example I've created media passes for photographers at an event. Each photographer would provide their photo, their name and who they work for, so 3 layers would change while the remainder stay the same. When laying out the artwork for the pass I create a layer for the photo (including stroke and drop shadow layer styles) and two type layers.

Hint: when setting the type, use a very long name (e.g. Matthew J. Kloskowski) and adjust the point size to make sure it fits – if that long name fits, all the rest should.



Once your document is complete (and saved) you need to tell Photoshop which layers are the variable ones. You do this from Image>Variable>Define. In the dialog go through the list of layers and assign a variable to the layers that will change. For example, my photo placeholder (called photo – remember the hint about naming your layers?) will be replaced with each person's photo. I clicked on Pixel Replacement and named that variable "photo". What you call the variable isn't important but later you do have to remember what label you used.

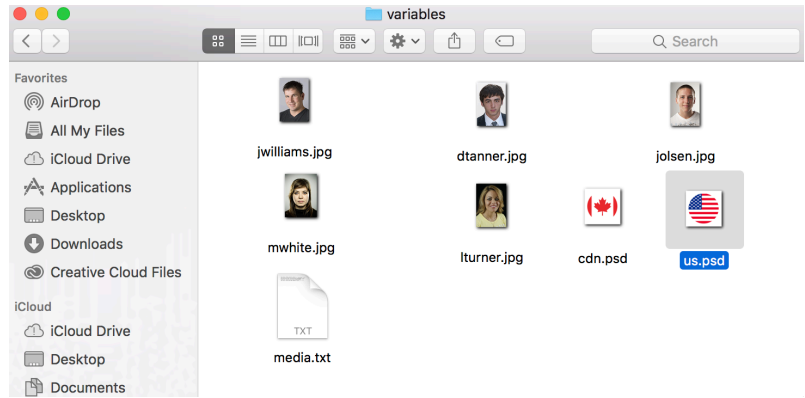


Next you create a text file that contains two things: the variable by name on the first line, and then one line per person that contains their name, their company name and the name of the photo file. Save that file as a plain text file.

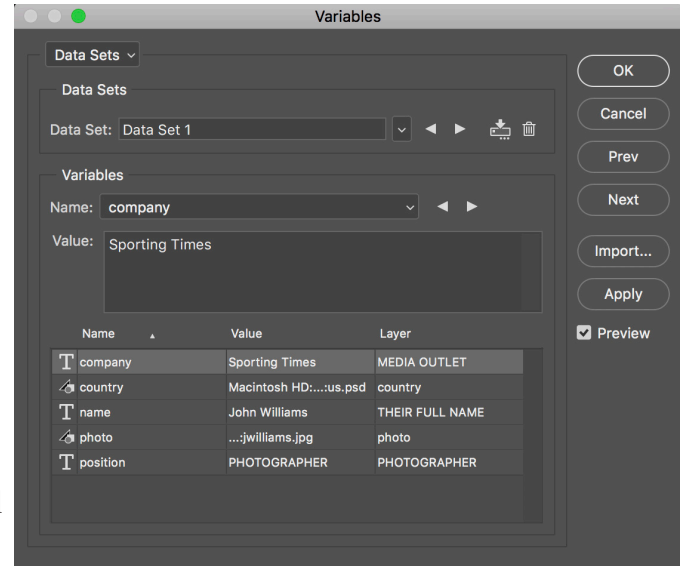
```
name, photo, company, position, country
John Williams, jwilliams.jpg, Sporting Times, PHOTOGRAPHER, us.psd
Mary White, mwhite.jpg, The Sporting Blog, PHOTOGRAPHER, us.psd
Jimmy Olsen, jolsen.jpg, Daily Planet, WRITER, cdn.psd
Danny Tanner, dtanner.jpg, Sports Centre, PHOTOGRAPHER, cdn.psd
Lana Turner, lturner.jpg, ESPN, PRODUCER, us.psd
```



All the files go into the same folder: the text file along with each person's photo (making sure the file names match up with the text file).



Now go back to the document, this time using Image>Variable>Data Sets. Click on the Import button and navigate to your text file. As soon as you turn on the Preview you should see the first photo, name and company displayed in your document. You can scroll through (and Preview) all the records in your text file by clicking on the small arrows to the right of the Data Set field.



Note: when you click OK, your document will return to its “placeholder” look. The final step to create the actual files is found under File>Export>Data Sets as Files. In the dialog, select a folder to put the files and set up a naming system if you like. Click OK and all of new documents will be created, one for each line (each of the people) in your text file.

It's important to note that the resulting files are layered documents, meaning that you can “tweak” the results if necessary. To create flattened jpegs from the layered files, use Image Processor to save a copy as jpeg.

Needless to say, setting up Variables doesn't make sense if you only need to create 2 or 3 customized versions of a document. Where Variables shine is when you have a situation where some photos and text change and you have to create 50 or 100 or 500 versions. Then the small amount of setup time will save you hours and hours of manual labor.



For 32 years Dave Cross has been helping photographers and creative professionals get the most out of their Adobe software. Since 1987, Dave has taught Photoshop, Illustrator and InDesign to thousands of users around the world. He has a Bachelor of Education, is an Adobe Certified Instructor, a Certified Technical Trainer and in 2017 and 2018 was named an Adobe MAX Master Instructor. Dave has taught for Adobe, at Photoshop World, Creative Pro Week, Imaging USA and at numerous corporate locations. Dave has written many articles and multiple books, and has taught many online courses for Kelby Training, Creative Live and now through his own training site [LearningPhotoshop.CC](http://LearningPhotoshop.CC).

Over the last 20 years, Dave has taught Photoshop in every state in the United States, throughout Canada and in Europe, consistently earning rave reviews. In 2009 Dave was inducted into the Photoshop Hall of Fame.