

Mastering Layers

with Dave Cross

Just about everything we do in Photoshop uses layers – or at least we should consider using layers to do everything.

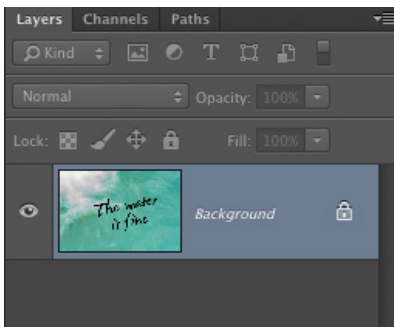
To understand the concept of layers lets put aside the computer for a moment and imagine you just had a printed photo. If you take a pen and write directly on a photo, you're making a permanent decision.

If you make a mistake or want to change your mind, tough!

Instead, by putting a sheet of clear plastic over the photo you are “protecting” it from any permanent changes.

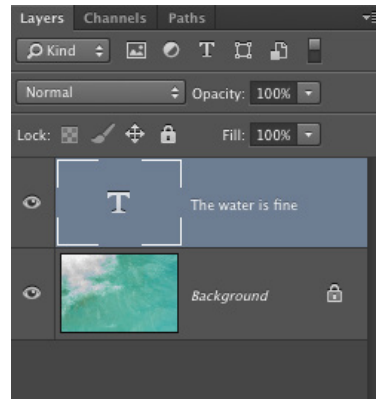
After writing on the sheet of plastic you can move it, hide parts of it or throw it away – without any lasting affect on the photo.

So in many ways, layers can be thought of as sheet of plastic that you pile on top of each other to create the look you want.

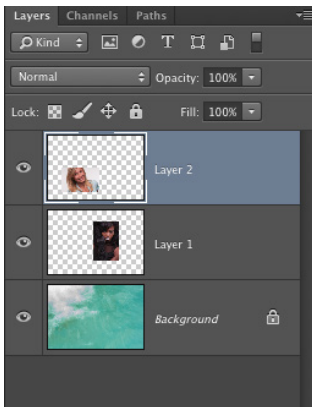


...create a separate layer so you can move it around, make it more see through and in the case of type, change the font, color etc.

Rather than working directly on the Background layer and being destructive...



Layers should be thought of as a stack. In fact many people use the term “layer stack” when talking about a bunch of layers in a document. If you think of a stack of clear plastic sheets, you would build up a document by stacking sheets, overlapping the images you want to appear – from the bottom up.



In Photoshop the equivalent of the clear plastic sheet is a checkerboard pattern that indicates transparency on a layer. By default it is a light gray pattern but you can change that setting in the Photoshop preferences.

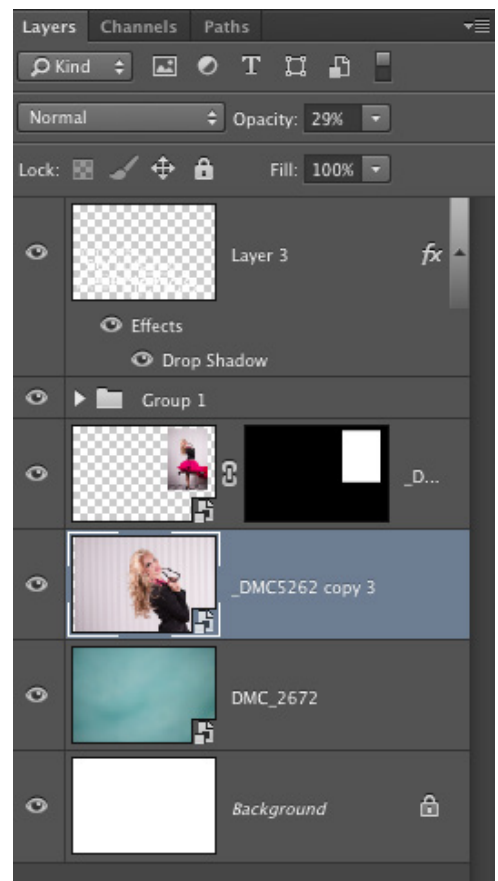


Once you have a stack of layers, you can change the stacking order by dragging layers up or down in the Layers panel. Note that by nature the Background layer is “locked” so that you cannot drag any layers below the Background.

Important Note: Although the Background layer has a padlock symbol to indicate that it is locked, it’s really only locked from being moved: you can still paint, clone, heal etc. directly onto the Background layer – none of which is a good idea!

The eye icon beside each layer controls layer visibility: click on the eye to hide the layer, click again to show the layer.

You can make a layer more see-through by lowering its opacity, using the opacity slider at the top of the Layers panel. As long as the document is saved as a layered PSD, you can always come back and increase the opacity again.



Blend Modes

You can also alter the appearance of a layer by changing its Blend Mode (from the menu that says Normal). Blend modes compare the pixels on the current layer with the layer(s) below and create a different result depending on the mode you choose.

Here are a few examples:

Normal (no Blend Mode)

Multiply [left]
Soft Light [right]

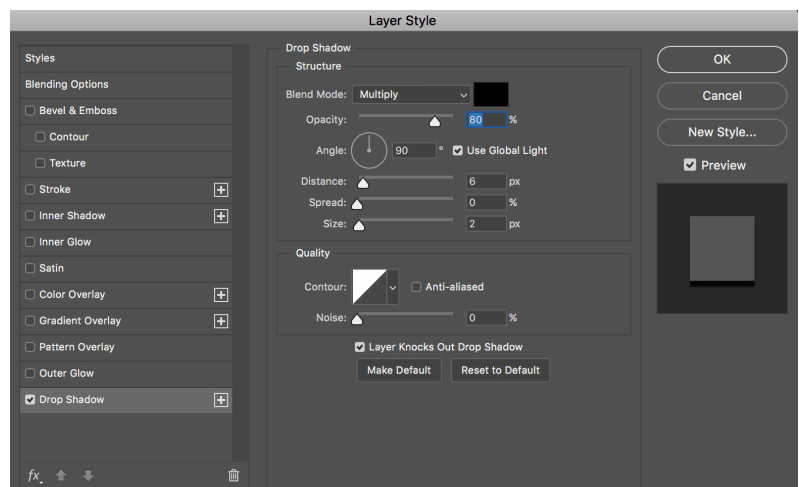


Although there are 27 Blend Modes, once again it's likely that you'll regularly use a handful of modes, and occasionally experiment with others.

As with most Layer functions, you can always change the Blend Mode of a layer.

Layer Styles

Layer Styles allow you to add effects such as drop shadows to the contents of a layer. Choose the layer and then from the bottom of the Layers panel choose from the Layer Style menu (2nd menu from the left). In the Layer Style panel choose the settings to create the effect you want. Once again, these effects can be edited at any time.



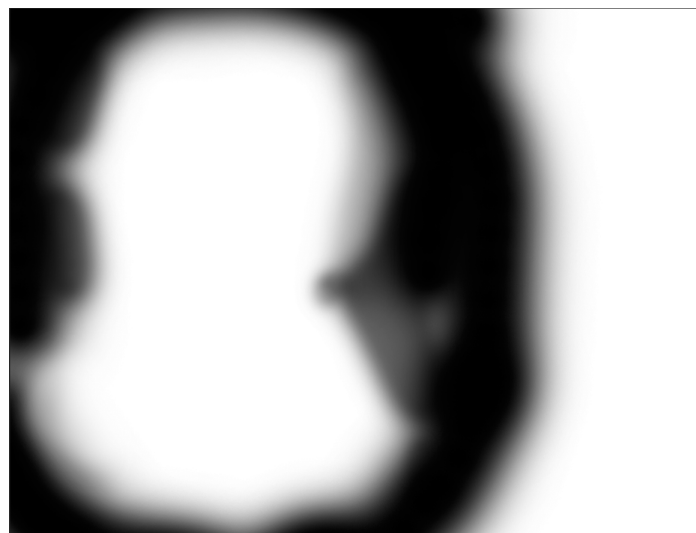
Tips for Success with Layers

1. Name your layers. Although it's not absolutely necessary, if you get in the habit of naming your layers (rather than leaving them as Layer 1, Layer 2, etc.), everything is easier when you edit a document. To rename a layer, double-click on the name.
2. Always start by looking at the Layers panel. Before working with layers you need to make sure you've chosen the correct layer: click on the name of the layer you want to work with – don't click on the image window and assume you'll select the correct layer.
3. The Move tool is the main Layers tool – grab the Move tool (or tap V) to select and move layers.
4. Avoid the Flatten command. Flattening a document will combine all the layers into one, removing the ability to edit the layers. To create a version of your document that's flattened, use the Save As command.

Layer Masks

A Layer Mask is used to show or hide a portion of a layer or the affect of an adjustment or Smart Filter. Although a mask can start with a selection, it doesn't have to: you can add a mask and then paint with black and white to hide and show different areas. Someone once coined the phrase “Black conceals, white reveals” and it's not a bad way to remember how a mask works. If you add black paint to a mask you'll be hiding either the pixels on a layer or the effects of an adjustment layer or smart filter.

NOTE: Adding Black Paint doesn't only mean painting with a paint brush. You could also make a selection and fill it with black.



In each case, the principle is the same: Black = hide, White = show...and Gray = kinda.

Sky replacement

You have a photo with a “boring” sky. If you copy and paste a new sky into the document, it creates a layer and covers up the Background layer.



We only want to show the new sky where the old sky was. Here's how.

STEP ONE: Hide the new sky layer and click on the Background layer

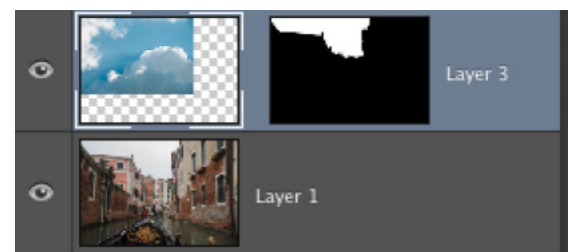
STEP TWO: Use the Quick Selection tool to select the old sky

STEP THREE: Show the new sky layer and make it active (click on it)

STEP FOUR: Click on the Add a Mask button



As you can see from the Layers panel, the entire sky is still there but portions are hidden because of the mask. This way we can reposition the sky layer but it will only be visible within the masked area.



We'll demonstrate in class how to use Paste Into for this purpose.

HINT: Over saturate the sky, then you can lower the opacity slightly to help make things look more realistic.

Put text behind someone

When you open a photo all you have is a Background layer so a person isn't on a separate layer. So how do we make it look like there is some text behind them? A layer mask of course.

STEP ONE: Add 2 text layers. Position them where you want. In this example I changed the Blend mode of both layers.

STEP TWO: On the Background layer, make a selection of the person.

STEP THREE: On one of the type layers, add a layer mask, It will initially be the opposite of what you need. Press Command-I (Cntrl-I) to invert the mask.

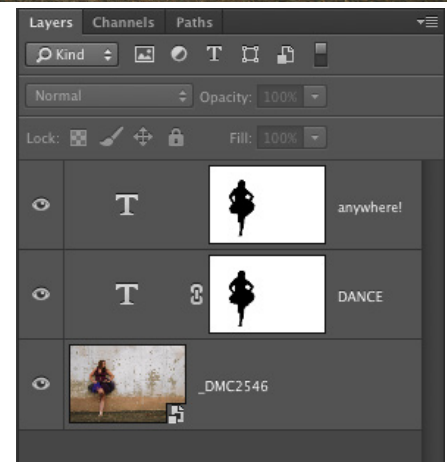
Now the top text will look like it is behind the person.

STEP FOUR: Hold down the Option (PC: Alt) key and drag the layer mask onto the other type layer, to copy it.

STEP FIVE: If you turn off the link symbol between the layer and its mask, you can move the type while keeping the mask in place.



As an added (non-destructive) bonus, the type is still editable so we can reposition it and change the font, size, etc.



Making Adjustments

There are lots of ways you can adjust an image: change the exposure, saturation, color temperature, contrast and much more. One way to do this is to use the commands under the Image>Adjustments menu – but typically those commands are destructive. A “better” way is to use Adjustment Layers.

If you have an active selection and then add an Adjustment Layer, the adjustment will only be applied to the selected area, and a layer mask will automatically be created. White indicates where the adjustment will be visible, black shows the areas where there will be no adjustment made.

If there is no selection and you add an Adjustment Layer, there will be a mask but it will be filled with white (meaning the adjustment will affect the entire image).

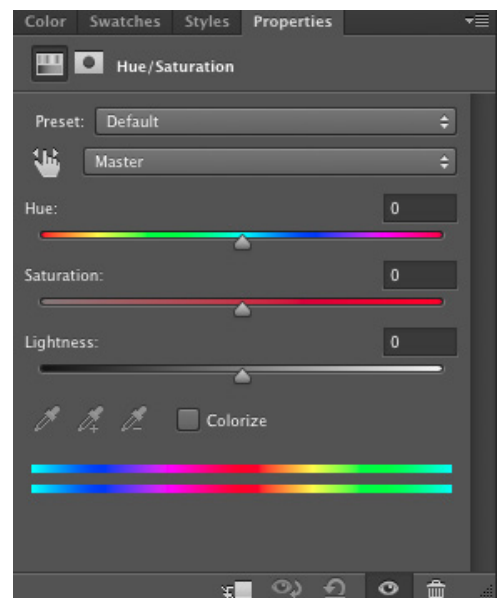
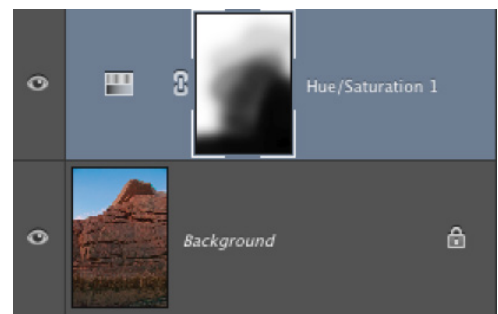
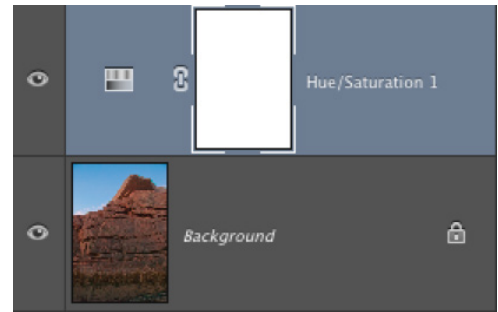
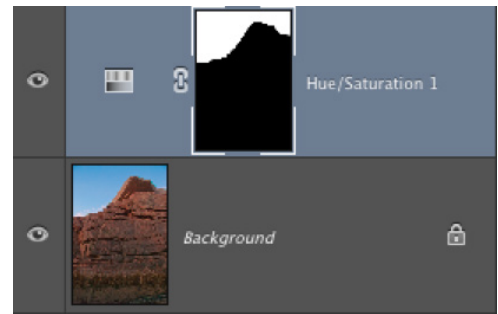
Then you can paint with shades of gray or black on the mask to affect the visibility of the adjustment.

There are some big advantages to using Adjustment Layers:

At any time you can change the settings of the adjustment, using the Properties panel

You can deliberately make over-adjustments to help with masking, and then lower the settings down to more appropriate values.

You can drag and drop an Adjustment Layer from one document to another, to use similar adjustments – and/or to tweak the adjustment.

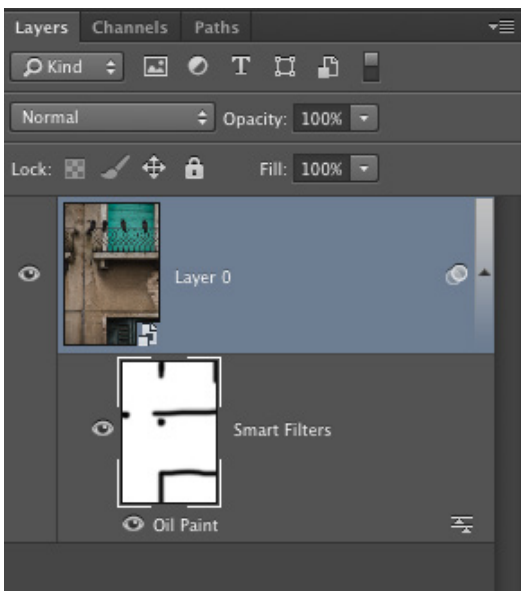


Smart Filters

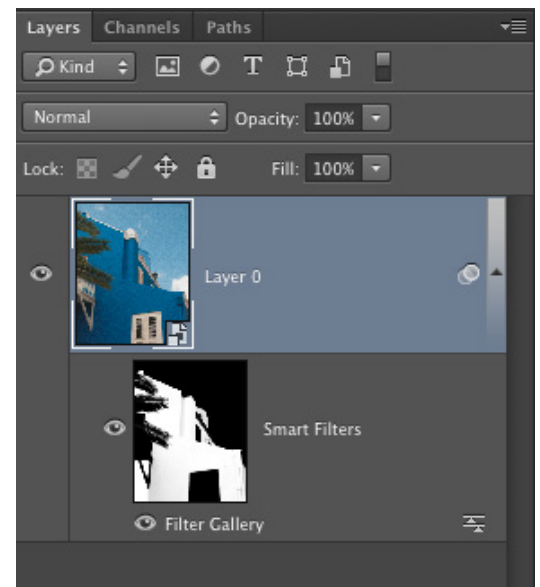
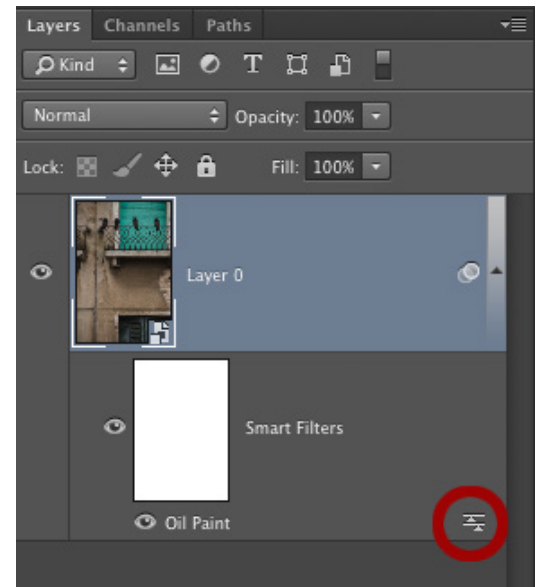
By default filters are not “smart”, but I recommend that you use the smart filter capabilities of filters. By first choosing “Convert for Smart Filters” from the Filter menu, the results of the filter will appear in the Layers panel. (Normally a filter cannot be edited once it has been applied).

As a Smart Filter, you can edit it in several ways:

- Hide/Show the filter with the eye icon
- Double-click on the filter to edit the settings
- Double-click on the filter blending options (circled) to change the Blend Mode and Opacity of the filter
- Paint with black on the filter mask to hide the effect of the filter (below)



You can also make a selection before applying a filter: a mask will be created so that the filter is applied only to the selected area. [right]



It's also possible to apply more than one filter to a layer and then edit and change the order of the filters.

“Hidden” Smart Filters

There are some functions in Photoshop that are not found under the Filter menu but operate in the same (editable) manner as Smart Filters. These include:

Free Transform: If you use the Free Transform command on a Smart Object the transformation is re-editable

Puppet Warp: Puppet Warp applied to a Smart Object is editable

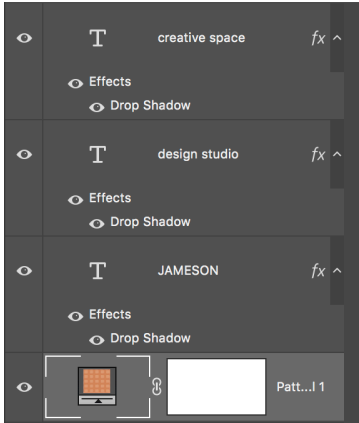
Image>Adjustments: As an alternative to Adjustment Layers you can apply adjustments to a Smart Object and they will display as Smart Filters.

Groups

Putting layers into a Group is often a better choice than merging or flattening layers, because it preserves the individual layers. (In a moment we'll compare Groups with Smart Objects). Along with helping to organize a "crowded" Layers panel, using Groups can help in other ways.

Layer Styles

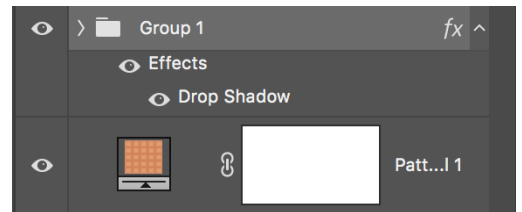
For example, I have 3 type layers and I want to add a Layer Style to each layer. I could add a Drop Shadow to one layer and then Option/Alt-drag the style onto the other two layers.



Although I get the result that I want, if I want to edit anything about the drop shadow, I'd have to edit the Layer Style on each layer separately.



Instead, I put the layers into a Group and apply the drop shadow style to the group: that way every layer within the group has the drop shadow applied. Just as importantly, I can edit the drop shadow for all 3 layers at once – and any layer I add into the group will automatically have the same style applied.

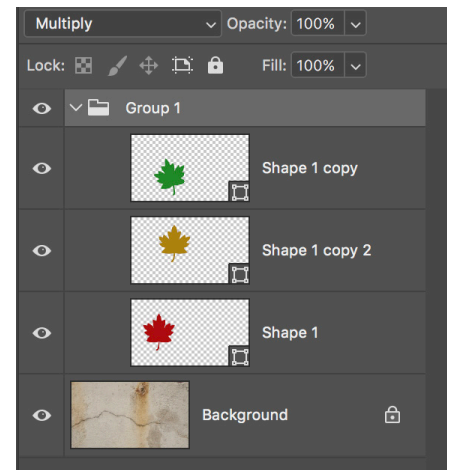


Blend Modes

Groups also can change the way that Blend Modes are applied. In this example we have 3 layers each with a colored leaf. If I apply Multiply mode to each of the 3 layers, each layer interacts with each other and the Background.

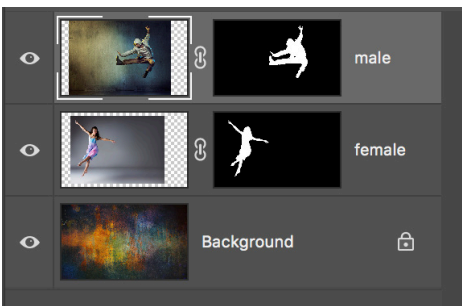


Instead, if I change the individual layers to Normal and change the mode of the Group to Multiply, the layers don't interact with each other but only with the background.

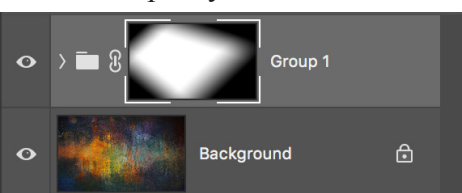


Mask a Mask

Layer Masks can be added to Groups as well as layers, allowing you to “double-up” on masks. Here I have 2 layers each with a mask, but want to mask the overall look as well.



After masking the individual layers and putting them in a Group, I add a layer mask with a couple of gradients. This way I can edit the masks on the individual layers and on the Group. (Note: sometimes it makes sense to put only one layer into a Group so you can have “double masks”).



Groups Versus Smart Objects

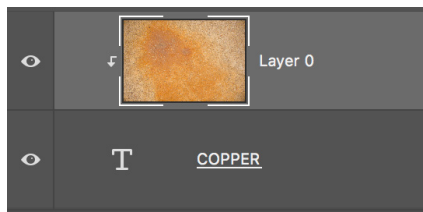
Putting layers into a Group is better than merging, but so is converting these layers into a Smart Object...so which is better? As always, the answer is “it depends”. Converting to a Smart Object will mean that the layer will act as if they are merged: that is, you can apply filters and work with what looks like one layer – but the contents (the original layers) are still available. You cannot apply a filter to the contents of a Group, but as we’ve just seen, you can do a lot of other things using Groups. So the choice you make will largely depend on the situation.

Clipping Masks

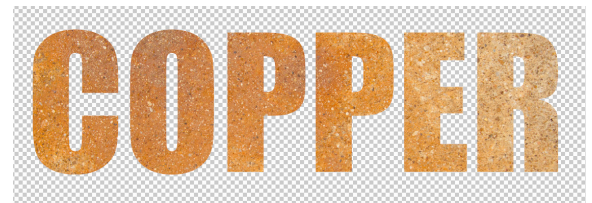
Another style of shape-based masking is done using Clipping Masks. A clipping Mask is done using the contents of one layer to mask (or clip) additional layers. Since it is a transparency-based function, the color of the layer contents is irrelevant. Here I added a type layer on top of a photo.

In order for the Clipping Mask to function, the layer doing the clipping has to be directly underneath the layer that will be masked. So in this example the order of the layer needs to be switched. Unlock the Background layer and drag it above the type layer.

To create a Clipping Mask, make sure the top layer is selected and press Command-Option-G (PC: Cntl-Alt-G), or hold down Option/Alt and click on the line in the Layers panel between the layers you’re working with.



In this case that means that the photo will only be visible within the type.



The advantage of using a Clipping Mask over a regular mask is that as soon as you edit the contents of the clipping layer your results will change. For example, it’s much easier to edit the type in a Clipping Mask than if we have added text to a regular mask.



Clipping Masks can also be made from a Group – with the contents of the Group doing the clipping.

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.

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.