



INTRODUCTION TO GRAPHICS

LAYER MASKING II

Information
Sheet No. PS820

In this information sheet, you're going to discover just what the heck a Layer Mask is and why you'd ever want to use one. It's also going to give you a couple of examples to further illustrate their usefulness. Finally, you'll take a blood oath together and pledge our allegiance to the Mighty Layer Mask, without whom, you'd be destroying vast amounts of pixels each day. Okay, well, perhaps the blood bit is a little strong but hopefully at the end of this info sheet, you'll have a better understanding of just how wonderful masks can be.

What is a Layer Mask?

A Layer Mask is a method of hiding pixels; once you make a selection, you never want to actually delete those pixels. Instead, you want to mask them off. As an analogy, think of a Layer Mask as if it were the masking tape you'd place around the window trim when painting your walls.

Why should You use one?

Using the analogy of painting your home above... rather than remove the window trim completely, wouldn't you rather protect it with masking tape so you can do whatever you want with the walls? Of course you would. The same logic applies to your images. When you want to mess with certain portions of the image, rather than delete the unwanted bits, consider masking them off instead. This way you don't destroy your original image, and your artwork remains flexible and you can experiment with different effects and such.

Have you been convinced yet? Good. Seriously, using a Layer Mask enables you change your mind hundreds of times, and it allows your clients to change their minds

too, without increasing your blood pressure (much).

How to use them

Think of what you're about to do as "painting" on some masking tape. In the world of masking in Photoshop, there are three important things to remember:

1. Black hides
2. White reveals
3. You've got a million shades of gray in between

Example 1: Vignette

There are all kinds of creative things you can do with Layer Masks, such as creating pretty vignettes like the one shown below.

Step 1: Open the image, make sure the Background Layer is editable (just double click on it and give it a name), and use the Elliptical Marquee tool to make a selection.

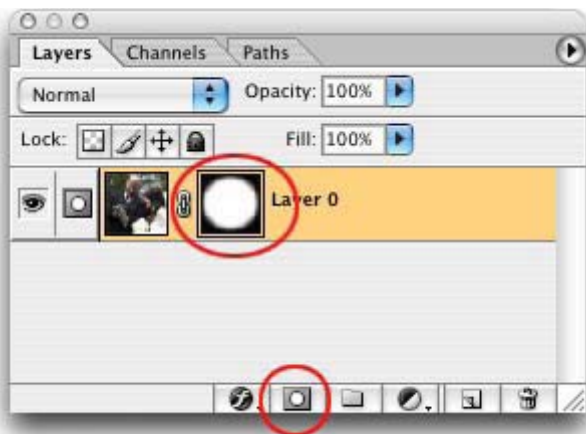


TIP: Holding down the ALT key allows you to draw from the center outward. Holding down Shift key constrains your selection to a perfect circle. Holding down both keys, well, does both!

Step 2: Choose Selection > Feather and enter any number (the higher the number, the softer the edge of our photo will be).



Step 3: In the Layers Palette, click on the tiny circle within a square at the bottom (2nd button from the left as shown below in red below). Afterwards, you'll see another little thumbnail icon showed up next to the image in your Layers Palette (also shown in red below).



Your photo now has a beautiful, soft, faded-out edge to it. If you were to zoom in on the little Layer Mask icon in the Layers Palette, you'd see that the completely hidden bits of your image are black, the soft edge bits are varying shades of gray, and the visible bit is white.



So you used a Layer Mask, what now?

You can do several things at this point, such as:

Option A: You can discard the Layer Mask and do it again. Perhaps you want to move your circular selection around a bit, or maybe the edges are a bit too soft (decrease the Feather amount) or you want them softer (increase the Feather amount). By using a Layer Mask, it's easy to go back and redo this, instead of having to Revert to the original file each time. Major ugh.

To discard the Layer Mask, simply trot up to the menu bar, choose Layer > Remove Layer Mask > Discard.

Option B: You'll also notice an option for Disabling the Layer Mask in that same menu. This is helpful when you are trying a variety of techniques or effects, and you want to toggle masks off and on.

Option C: You can Apply the Layer Mask (also under the same menus above). Beware! Applying a Layer Mask deletes those pixels and makes the mask permanent, which, is what we're trying to avoid in the first place.

FYI, you can access these same options

by right clicking on the Layer Mask itself back in the Layers Palette (this brings up a contextual menu).

Option D (for Power Users!): Edit the Layer Mask freehand style by selecting it in the Layers Palette (you'll see a tiny black border around it). Use the Paintbrush tool and paint with black to hide pixels, white to reveal, and shades of gray to do something in between (think varying levels of opacity).

Example 2: Gradient Fade

Another cool trick you can do with a Layer Mask is to use it with the Gradient tool.

Step 1: Open the image (again, make sure the Background Layer is editable) and in the Layers Palette, click the circle within a square button (like we did above in Step 3).

Step 2: Select the Gradient tool from the Toolbar.



Step 3: Back on your image, drag with the cross-hair of the Gradient tool from the bottom left corner towards the center of your image.

