Double Exposure: A Step-By-Step Guide to Creating Multiple Exposure Images

Double Exposure is a photographic technique that mainly involves combining two exposures to create a single image. The technique yields very interesting results and allows the photographer to produce ghost images and mirror images that tell a story in a unique way that can't be achieved with a single photo. Nowadays, this effect can be achieved with a DSLR camera by enabling Multiple Exposure in the shooting menu and manually capturing both exposures. But for more creative control, you can replicate the effect using Adobe Photoshop or GIMP with your own images.   *Image via Shutterstock.*

5-Steps to Creating Double Exposure Images

This will be a step-by-step tutorial on how to create your very own double exposure effect—from taking your own images to merging them using Photoshop.

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- Step 2: Compose Your Shots
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Image via Shutterstock.

Step 1: Think of Your Theme

Image via Shutterstock.

Before shooting anything, it's best to think of what you want your final image to be. Think beyond the visual appeal and try to think of a good message to convey. All you really need are two images, so take your time in figuring out what you want them to be.

Some of the most compelling double exposure images are composed of a portrait and an abstract or landscape photo with a lot of interesting textures. Create a connection between the two to produce an image that evokes certain emotions and makes your viewers take a few more seconds to observe the photo and contemplate the underlying message.

Step 2: Compose Your Shots

Image via Shutterstock.

Once you've gotten a good idea of what you want your double exposure photo to be, it's time to compose your shot. This is where you can start focusing on the visual aspect of the image— specifically the kind of image you want to capture and use for editing later on.

Do a quick search online for inspiration and think of exactly how you want your two images to look like. Do you want your portrait to be of a woman? Should she be facing the camera or sideways for a dramatic profile view? Will you be using a landscape layer image with lots of trees or a field of flowers?

There's no need to mind the colours of the images as you can easily tweak them in Photoshop later on. Alternatively, just for practice, you can even use free stock photos to create your own double exposure shot so you can skip the entire process of having to take the photos yourself. Just don't enter these in competitions!

## Step 3: Capture Your Base Photo

Image via Shutterstock.

Your base photo can be anything—a portrait, body part, still object, or even a popular scenic spot—as long as it has a main subject, a good amount of highlights and shadows, and a background that is more or less neutral without noisy image elements so that it's easier to edit later on.

For a much cleaner double exposure image, you can try placing your subject inside your frame completely until you can see its outline pretty well. The resulting image will give you something like the image above, where the double exposure image is created with the shape of the tree. Then again, you can always try something else, depending on your preconceived outcome.

Step 4: Capture Your Layer Photo

Image via Shutterstock.

Again, your layer photo can also feature anything from an overhead shot of the city to a grassy yard or forest. Feel free to capture something with intricate details or anything abstract. Go ahead and snap a photo of your desired scene or subject, but also take a few extra safety shots. Consider shooting at an angle or from a different perspective. You'll never know what kind of unique results you can achieve later on with a variety of shots.
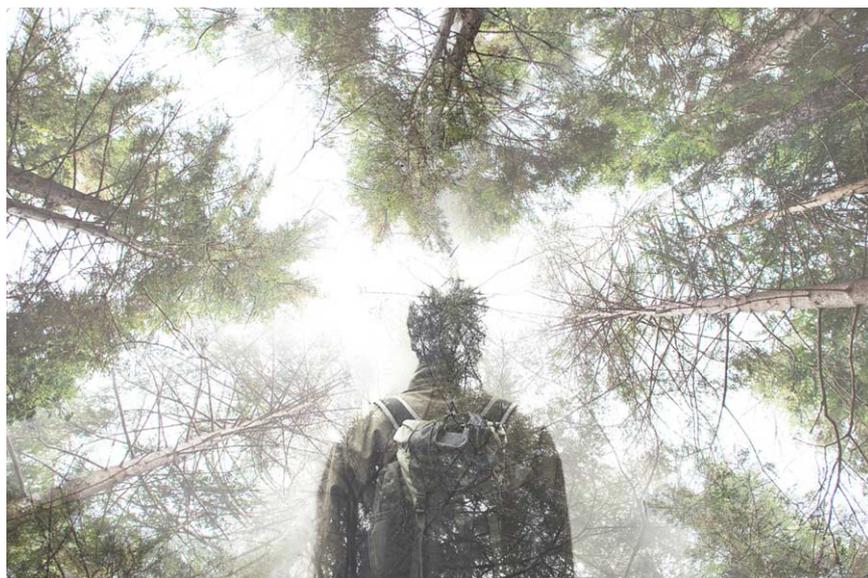
At the same time, remember to evenly expose your layer image. For example, if you've decided on taking a photo of leaves on a tree, look for a good spot that is not too bright and not too dark. This way, you get an image that has a good amount of highlights and shadows that would look more visible once blended with your base photo.

Step 5: Edit & Merge Your Images

Image via Shutterstock.

Here's where all the fun starts. Before anything, export your images and carefully choose two final images that you wish to merge together. Make sure they are of good quality with sharp, well-exposed details. Once you've chosen your best base and layer photos, open both files in Photoshop.

Touch Up Your Base Photo

Take this opportunity to prep your main subject or base photo. Edit out certain imperfections, like sensor dust and blemishes with the **Healing Brush** tool. Move your subject to centre it or off-centre to follow the Rule of Thirds, depending on your desired final composition. Also, remember to tweak the brightness and add contrast in order to optimize the image for blending.

To do this, you can go to **Image** > **Adjustments** > **Levels** or press **Ctrl-L** to open the **Levels** menu. Move the white slider to the left to brighten the image and then move the left black slider to the right to add some contrast according your taste. Or, you can set numerical values: 7 for black, 1.15 for greys, and 197 for whites.

Once you're done, click OK.

Eliminate the Background

If you've taken a photo with a clean background like we suggested, this should be a piece of cake. Simply use the **Quick Selection Tool** or **Magic Wand Tool** to select the entire background area and any other image element that you wish to get rid of, and then go to **Select** > **Inverse** to invert the selection (now your main subject).

While still on the selection tool, use the **Refine Edge Tool**, tick the **Smart Radius box** and slightly increase the **Radius** value in the **Edge Detection** to **1.5** (or higher for frizzier outlines) to reveal minor details like hair strands.

In the Output section, select **New Layer with Layer Mask** in the **Output To** options window. This creates a copy of your image and hides the background without making permanent changes to your image file.

Finally, click on **Add a Mask** and then **Create a New Layer**. Move this new layer underneath the cut-out subject and fill it with white or a neutral colour (like light medium grey) using the Paint Bucket Tool.

Add the Layer Image

Drag the second image on top of the first image (previously edited main subject). With the second image selected, press the **Ctrl** key and click the **Layer Clipping Mask** button of the first image (main subject) layer below. You will then see the moving outline of the main subject's silhouette on the landscape layer. Unlink the mask and move or rotate the second photo until your desired part is within the outlined silhouette.

Blend the Images Together

You can experiment with the layer blending options, depending on your desired effect. For the second image, you can try using the **Screen layer**, which is one of the most commonly used layer blending options for double exposures. It should offer a good amount of transparency to reveal the second photo underneath. However, it might still not be the final output that you're looking for, so go ahead and move on to the final step.

Add a Final Top Layer

Finally, make a copy of the subject layer, drag it on top of the second layer, and change the subject layer's blending mode to **Lighten**. Go ahead and make your finishing touches, such as softly erasing the topmost subject layer to show more of the landscape layer underneath.

Here is a link to a quick Adobe YouTube visual representation about how to create Double Exposures in PhotoShop, like it is explained above: (type the following URL in exactly, it's case-sensitive)

https://youtu.be/RfpIa15w37g