THE DIGITAL DARKROOM - 04

AN INTRODUCTION TO LAYERS IN PHOTOSHOP

A key difference between Lightroom and Photoshop is the use of layers in Photoshop.
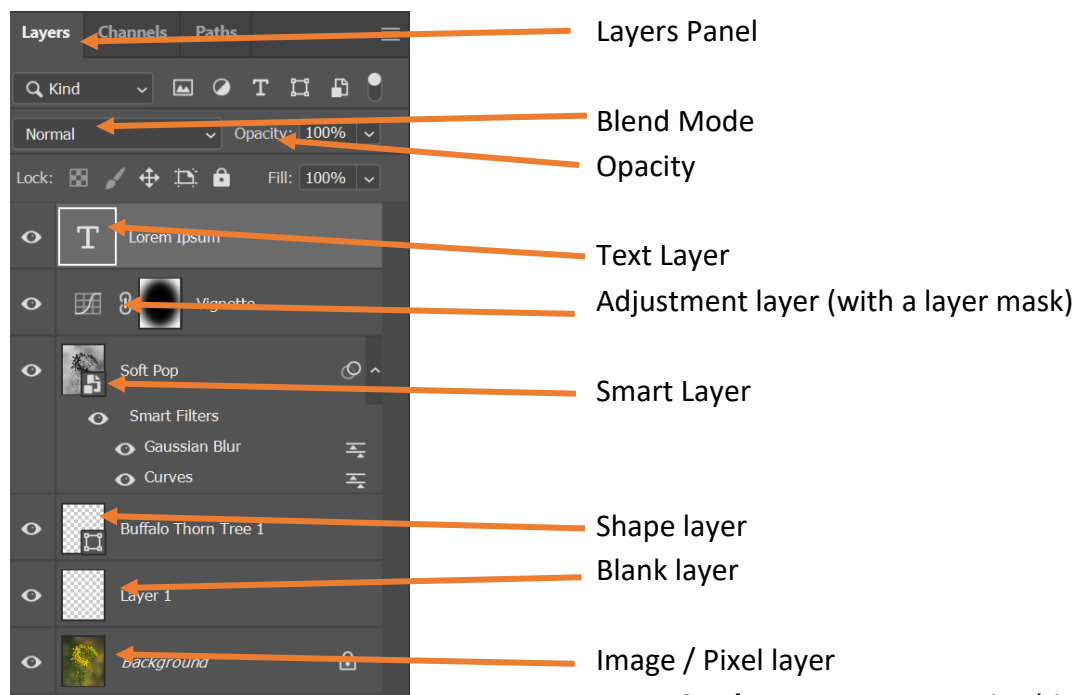
Layers in Photoshop are like sheets of transparent paper stacked on top of each other, where each sheet can contain different parts of a digital image or graphic. Each layer may be adjusted separately without affecting other layers. This makes it easy to modify elements of an image.

Understanding and effectively using layers is crucial in Photoshop as it provides immense flexibility and control over the composition and final output.

Photoshop offers **several types of layers**, each serving a different purpose.

Types of Layers

- Image layers (also called pixel layers) hold imported or pasted photos and graphics.
- Blank layers
- Text layers are used for typography.
- Adjustment layers apply colour and tonal adjustments to the layers below them without permanently changing the original layers.
- Shape layers contain vector shapes that can be scaled without loss of quality.

Layers Panel

Blend Mode

Opacity

Text Layer

Adjustment layer (with a layer mask)

Smart Layer

Shape layer

Blank layer

Image / Pixel layer

Layer Stack: Layers are organized in a stack, with the first layer at the bottom and the newest on top. You can change the order of the layers by dragging them up or down in the stack, which affects how they visually interact with each other.

Opacity and Blending Modes: Each layer has settings for opacity and blending modes, which determine how the layers blend with each other. Opacity controls the transparency of the layer, and blending modes can change how the colours and brightness of different layers interact.

Layer Masks: A layer mask is used to hide or reveal parts of a layer. This allows for complex compositing and adjustments, as parts of the layer can be invisible while other parts remain visible.

Smart Layers: Smart Layers (or Smart Objects) are special layers that preserve an image's source content with all its original characteristics, enabling non-destructive editing. This is particularly useful for resizing and transforming images without quality loss.

Layer Groups: To manage complex documents with many layers, Photoshop allows users to group layers. This helps in organizing the layers panel and can be used to apply adjustments to multiple layers at once.

Layer Styles: Layer styles are effects that can be applied to a particular layer to give it special effects like drop shadows, glows, bevels, and strokes. These are also non-destructive and can be modified or removed at any time.

Note: We will cover more on layers in a future lesson.

MASKING
In both Adobe Lightroom and Photoshop, masking lets you edit only certain parts of a picture without changing the rest. In Lightroom, you can do things like brighten just a person's face with a tool called a radial filter, while keeping the background the same. Photoshop has more complex tools, like layer masks, which are great for combining images smoothly—for example, when changing the sky in a landscape photo. Photoshop also has clipping masks, which are used to place images into shapes or text, creating cool designs. These tools are essential in photography and graphic design because they allow detailed and non-destructive edits.

LAYER MASKS
A layer mask controls the transparency of its layer.
Layer masks are grayscale images-white to show the contents of the layer, black to hide them, and grey to partially show or hide them.
In the following images a subject mask was applied to the image of the flower. The mask is shown in the black and white image. Note that white reveals and black hides. Hence when this mask is applied to the layer only the flower will be visible and any adjustments mad will only affect the flower.
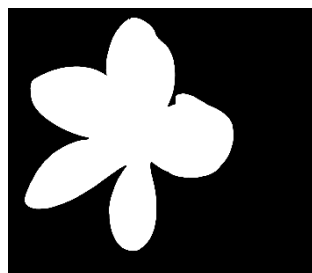
Masks may be inspected by pressing the ALT/OPT key on the mask. A mask may also be turned off temporarily by using the SHIFT key on the mask. These keys act as toggles to return the mask to normal.

You may tell whether you are on the pixel layer or the mask by looking to see which icon has a white bounding box around it. Here the first illustration shows that the mask is active.
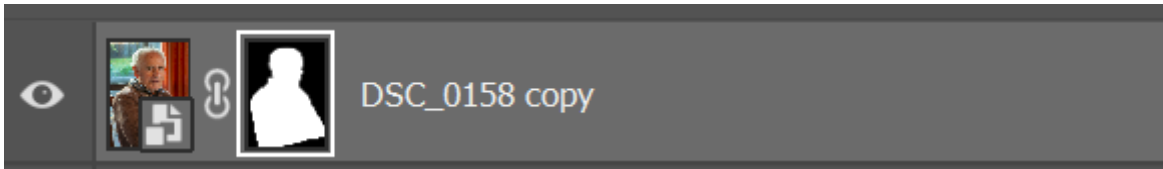
The next illustration shows that the pixel layer is active.
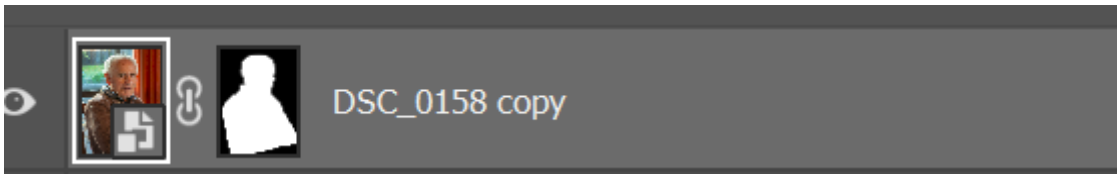
Mask Properties

The properties panel allows adjustments to be made to the mask. The properties panel may be accessed via the windows menu and selecting properties.

- **The Density slider** allows you to decrease the contrast within the mask in a fully editable manner.
- **The Feather slider** helps soften the edges of the mask, allowing adjustments up to a 1000-pixel radius.
- Below this, the **Select and Mask button** opens the Refine Edge dialog, providing enhanced control over the softness and edges of the mask.
- **The Colour Range** button launches the Colour Range dialog, enabling selections based on the colours present in the image you're working on.
- **The Invert button** is useful for reversing a pixel mask. To invert a vector mask, select the vector path outline and switch path modes.
- At the bottom of the panel, there are buttons to **load a selection** from the mask, apply the mask, and a **delete button**.

Select and Mask

Further tools are available to refine the mask. These may be accessed in one of two ways.

(i)   When a selection tool is activated from the tool bar, the tool options give the opportunity for select and mask.
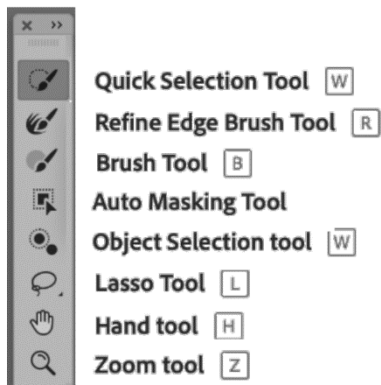

(ii)   Or: if a mask has already been used, then using the properties panel and select and mask from there.

The following screen opens.

On the left are a selection of tools.

The Quick selection tool automatically creates a selection based on colour and texture similarity.

The Refine Edge Brush tool allows fine details to be added to the edges e.g. hair or fur.

The Brush Tool – can be used to finalise or clean up details. Paint over the area in the add mode or in the subtract mode.

Object Selection tool – draw a rectangular or a lasso around an object. This tool then creates a selection.

Lasso Tool – allows freehand selections and allows precise selections to be made.

Hand Tool – is used to navigate around the image.

Zoom Tool – magnifies the area.

Demonstration of select and mask and composite.

Practical examples.

A recommended You Tube video on select and mask.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vUqP4WJ-vTc