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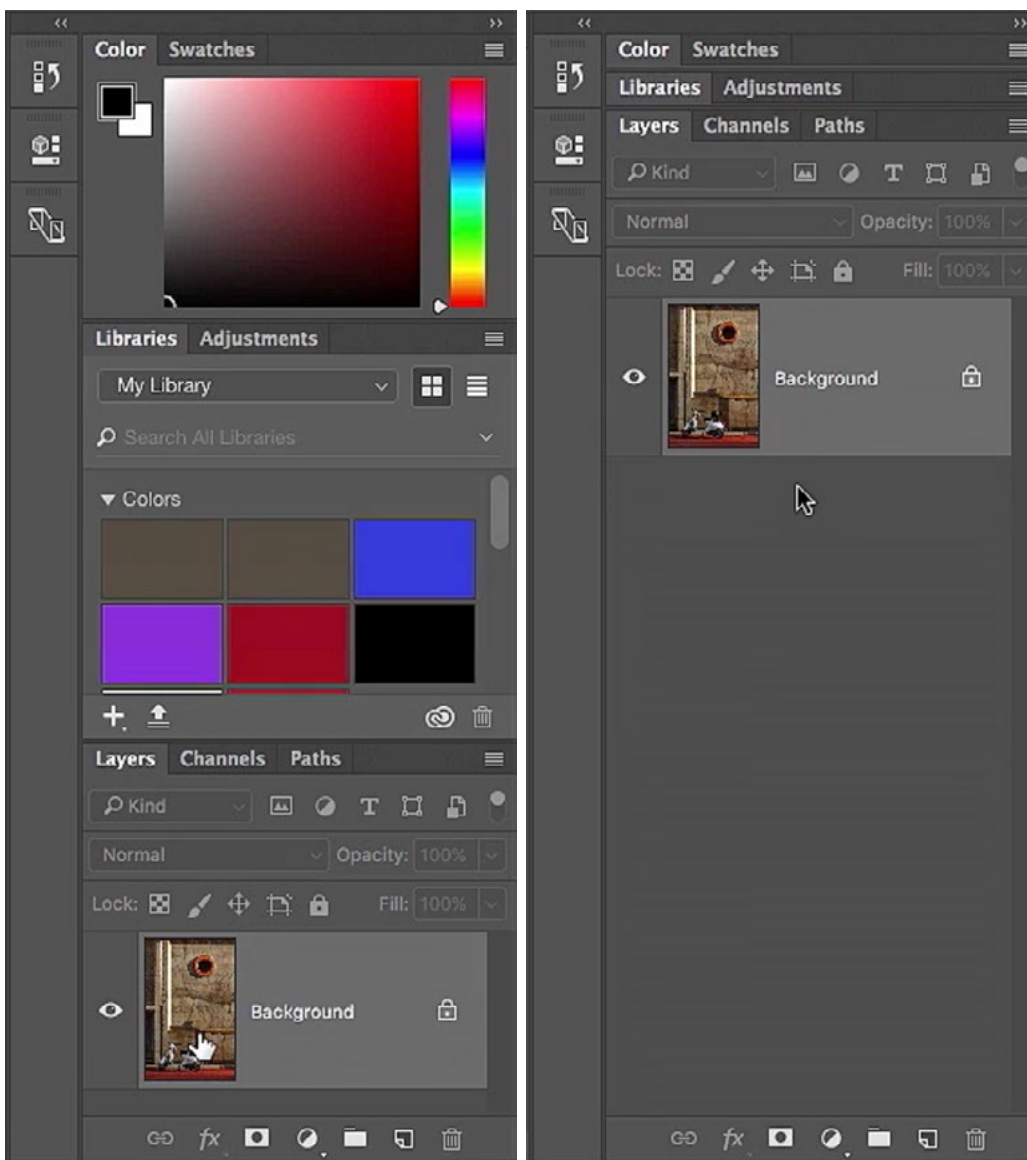
Essential Beginner Tips

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If you are a beginner to using Photoshop, it can seem like a complicated program to understand. This lesson is going to cover the essential tips for getting started.
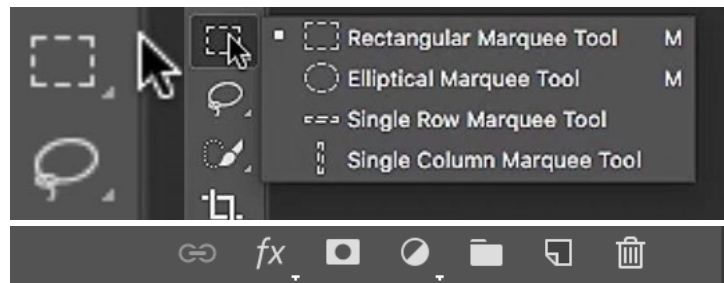
Collapsing panels

The right side of the interface contains a lot of panels and these panels can sometimes feel like they take up a lot of space. Know that you can double-click on the name of a panel to collapse it. This will leave more space for the other panels. Double-click on the name again to expand it.

Far left: The panels on the right side of the interface are expanded. Directly left: We double-clicked on the panel names for the Color panel and the Libraries panel in order to collapse them, leaving more room for the Layers panel.

Triangle = More stuff

The Toolbar is located on the very left side of the interface and contains many of the tools you'll common- ly use in Photoshop. Looking at the icons for each individual tool, you might notice that most of them have a little arrow in the bottom right cor- ner of the icon. This arrow means that there are more tools hidden behind that tool in that same slot. To access the other tools, click and hold on the tool's icon and a menu will pop out, allowing you to choose from all of the tools available in that slot. The little arrow visible on the tool's icon is something that you'll also see in other areas of Photoshop. When you see the arrow, it means that there are more options available that are not currently visible on your screen. Another example of where you'll see this is at the very bottom of the Layers panel. There are a series of icons and two of them have little arrows beneath them. Clicking these arrows will open menus that give you several options. The icons that don't have an arrow will simply do one thing.
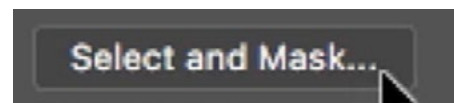
The little triangles beneath or next to certain icons indicate that the tool or function has more options. Click and hold on the icon to access a menu with all of the available options.

... = Has settings

There are some areas in Photoshop where you will see three periods in a row (an ellipsis) like this: **...** When you see this, it means that there are more op- tions related to a particular choice. For example, when you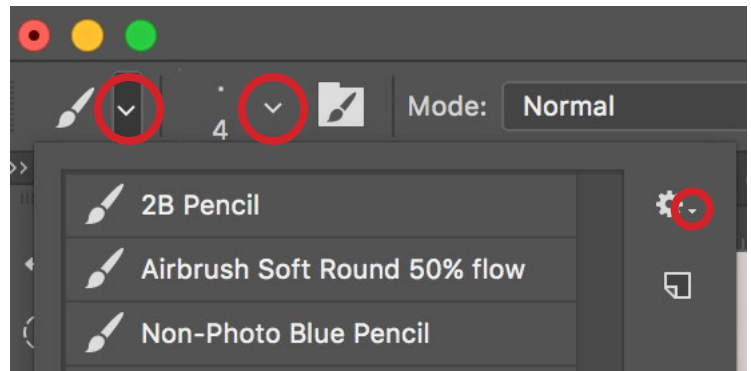 have a selection tool active, the Options Bar at the top of the image window will contain a "Select and Mask..." button. The three periods indicate that Photoshop will ask you for more settings when you click that button. In the case of the Select and Mask feature, a dialog will appear where you will need to work with some masking settings. You will also see options with the "**...**" at the end within the main menu. Whenever you choose one of these options, it means that Photoshop will ask you for more settings.

The "..." means that the fea- ture has more settings.

V= Menu here

A tiny down-pointing arrow (that looks like a v) means that there is a menu. Click on the little arrow to get a dropdown menu containing settings related to the particular feature you're working with. You will see these in many different areas of Photoshop and often times, they are very small and not obvious.
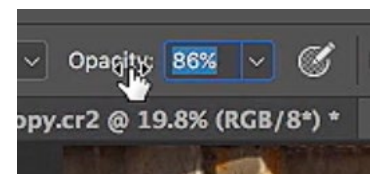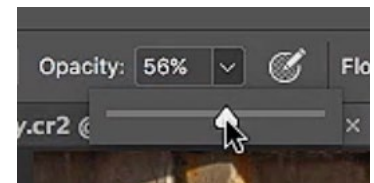

The v symbol means there is a menu available.

Working with numbers

There are several tasks in Photoshop that will require you to enter in numbers. Let's look at a few little tricks that will help you do this most efficiently.
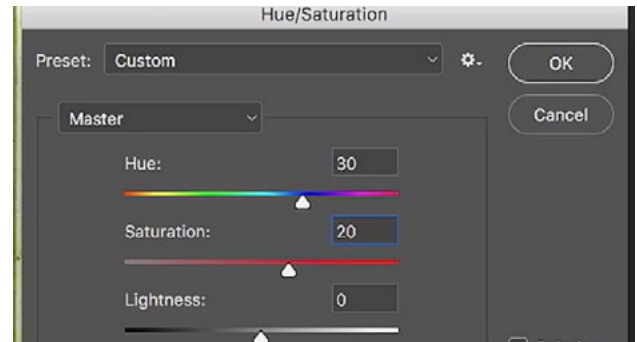
When the Brush Tool is active, the Options Bar at the top of the screen will contain settings for both Opacity and Flow. There are several ways you can change one of these settings. First, you can click on the number to select it, type in a new number and hit the Enter key to confirm the setting. You can also click on the little down-pointing arrow to access a slider that you can drag back and forth to change the setting. The next method is my favorite. Click and hold on the name of the setting (Opacity, for example) and drag left and right to change the numeric setting. This method for changing a numeric setting will not only work for the Opacity and Flow settings, but for MANY other settings as well. You can also click on the number so that it becomes highlighted and then use the up and down arrow keys on your keyboard to change the number. If you add the Shift key, the numeric value will change in increments of 10.

One way of changing a numeric setting like this is by clicking on the triangle icon and then dragging the slider left and right. Another way is to click and hold on the name of the function and then drag left or right.

When it comes to features that use numeric settings, you may want to experiment with different numbers to see what the result would look like. If you highlight a number field, type in a new number and then hit the Enter/Return key, the setting will be applied and the text field will no longer be highlighted. If you add the Shift key while pressing Enter, the text field will remain highlighted so that it's easier to enter in a different setting. By holding the Shift key, you can quickly experiment with different numeric settings without needing to re-highlight the number field.
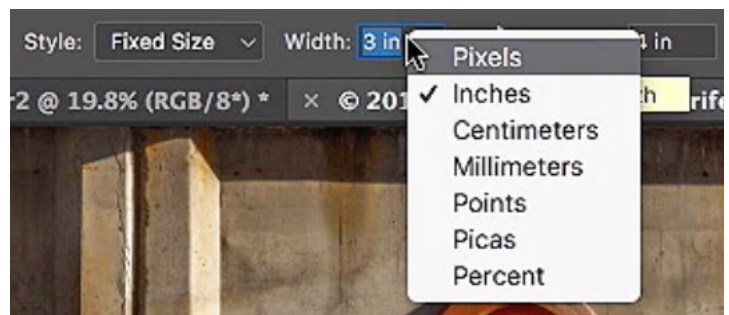
Multiple number fields There are some features in Photoshop that contain more than one number field. For example, the Hue/Saturation adjustment contains numeric fields for Hue, Saturation and Lightness. To quickly switch between these different fields, hit the Tab key. This applies in any feature that contains more than one field for you to type something into.

Use the Tab key to switch between number fields.

Change settings with the number keys The number keys on your keyboard have the ability to change settings, depending on what tool you're using. For example, if you're using the Brush Tool, the number keys will change the brush's Opacity setting. Tapping the 5 key will set the opacity to 50%. Typing the 7 key will set the opacity to 70%, and so on. If you type two numbers in rapid succession, let's say 7 and then 5, you'll get a precise number (75% in this case). To change the setting back to 100, hit the 0 (zero) key. If you add the Shift key (in addition to the number keys), you will instead be changing the Flow setting when using the Brush Tool.
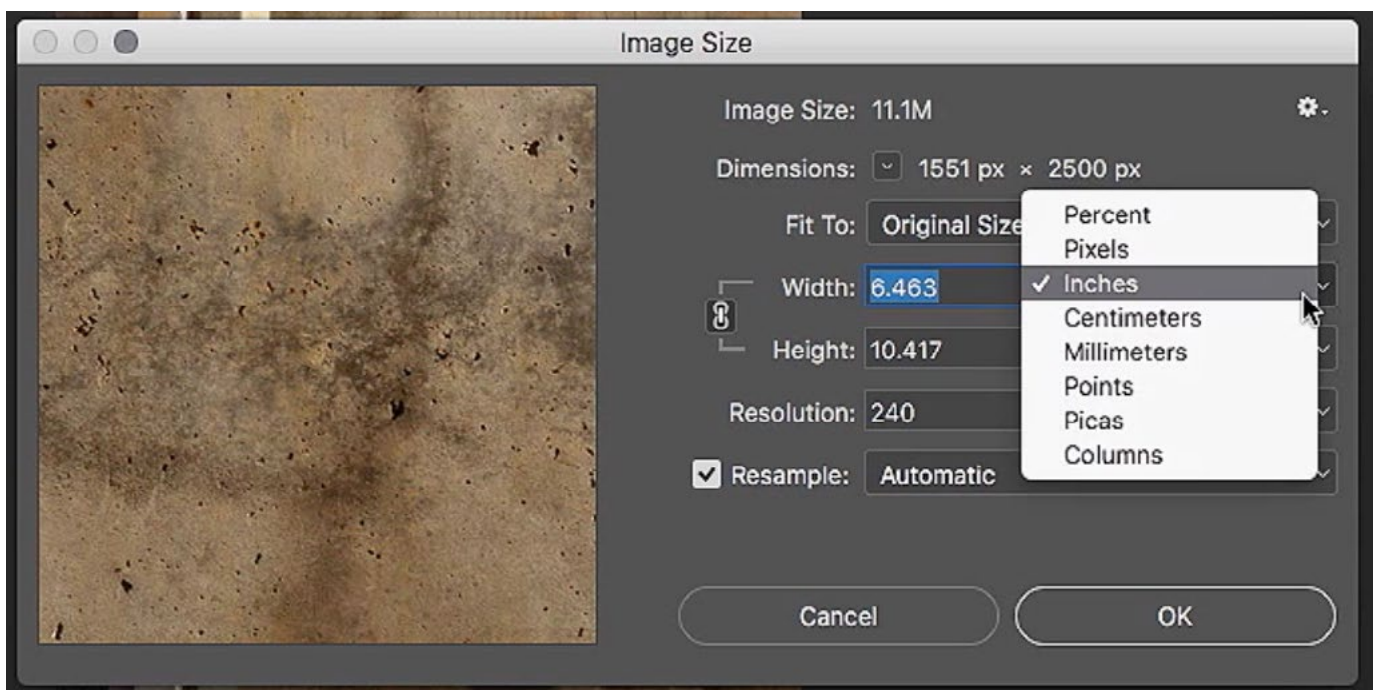
Measurement units Some of Photoshop's Tools make use of a measurement system, and that system can change, depending on what settings you're using. The Marquee selection tools are examples of this. With the Rectangular Marquee Tool active, there will be a Style menu available in

Right-clicking in the text field will present a menu for choosing a unit of measurement.

the Options Bar. When you click on it, you can choose between making a Normal selection (where you drag it out to your desired size manually), a Fixed Size selection or a Fixed Ratio selection. If you choose the Fixed Size option, the Width and Height fields will become available. There are several different measurement units you can use. In the video example, the Width and Height fields were set to pixels (px). Right-click on the number field and a menu will appear, allowing you to choose which measurement system you'd like to use. (On a Mac with a one-button mouse, holding the Ctrl key while clicking is the equivalent to right-clicking.)

Some commands in Photoshop make it a little more obvious that you can change the measurement system. For example, when changing the image size (Main menu: Image > Image Size), there are dropdown menus for the width and height fields that provide you with all of the available measurement units.
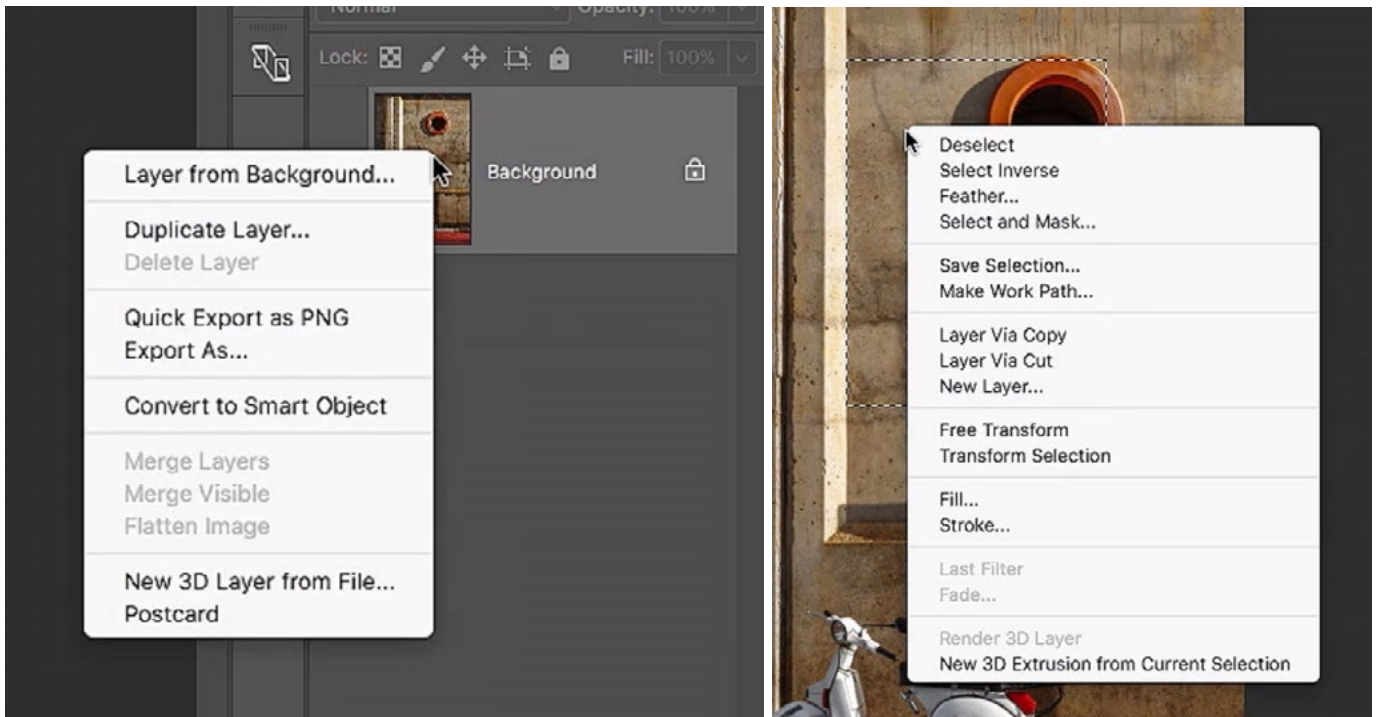

Some Photoshop features, like the Image Size settings (shown above), present you with dropdown menus for changing the unit of measurement.

Right-click to access contextual menu

If you want to access features that are related to the tool or function you're using, you can often times press your right mouse button to access a contextual menu, which is a menu that is specific to whatever tool or function you're working with. For example, if you're using the Move Tool and you right-click with your mouse, you'll get a menu that is related to layers. If you're using a Selection Tool and you right-click on your image, the menu that appears will contain items all related to selections.
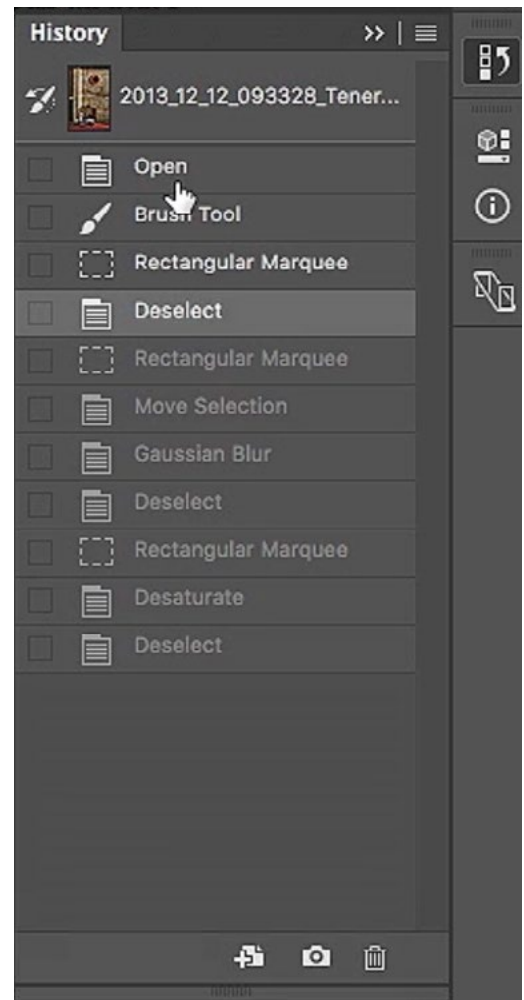

Right-clicking with your mouse will often times present you with a contextual menu, which will be different depending on what Photoshop function you're working with. At left, we right-clicked while using the Move Tool and got a menu related to layers. At right, we right-clicked with an active selection and we got a menu related to selections.

Multiple undos

The Undo command will allow you to undo the very last thing you did in Photoshop. You can access this command by going to the main menu and choosing Undo, which is the top item in the menu. Alternatively, you can use the keyboard shortcut Command+Z (Ctrl+Z on Win). If you use this shortcut a second time, it will redo the step you just undid. What if you want to go back multiple steps? You can do this by going to the main menu and choosing Edit > Step Backward. This will go back one more step in addition to a normal undo. Alternatively, you can use the [more convenient] keyboard shortcut Option+Command+Z (Alt+Ctrl+Z on Win). Using this command, you can go back as many steps as you need to.

When applying the undo commands, you are essentially using your History panel. If the History panel is not already visible on your screen, you can access it by going to the main menu and choosing Window > History. The History panel lists everything you've done to your document since you opened it. You can click on a step to take your image back to that stage in the editing process. When you use the Step Backward command, you are essentially moving one step back in the History panel.

The History panel shows a list of steps you've taken in working with your document. Click on a step to revert the image back to that stage.

The thumbnail at the top of the History panel is a snapshot, and it indicates what your image looked like at the time you opened the document. Click on that thumbnail at any time to revert your image back to the state it was in when you opened the document.

Essential Keyboard Shortcuts

Undo: Undoes the last thing you did in Photoshop

Mac: Command+Z **Win:** Ctrl+Z

Step Backward: Go back one more step in addition to a normal undo

Mac: Option+Command+Z **Win:** Alt+Ctrl+Z

Zoom In and Zoom Out: Make the view larger or smaller in your image window

Mac: Command+＋ to zoom in Command+－ to zoom out

Win: Ctrl+＋ to zoom in Ctrl+－ to zoom out

Fit on Screen: Zoom out until you can see your entire picture

Mac: Command+0 **Win:** Ctrl+0

Quickly access the Zoom Tool: Holding down the following keys will temporarily access the Zoom Tool. Click and hold on the area of your image that you want to zoom in on.
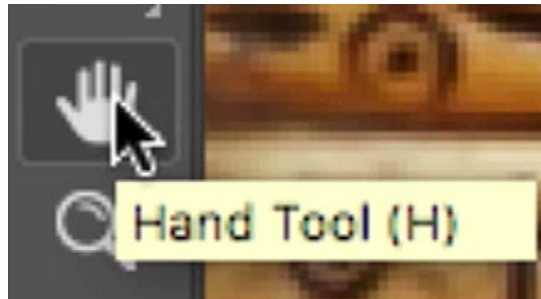
Mac: Command+Space Bar (hold down as you click and hold on your picture)

Win: Ctrl+Space Bar (hold down as you click and hold on your picture)

Quickly access the Hand Tool: Holding down the Space bar will temporarily access the Hand Tool so you can click and drag around your image. When you release the Space bar, you'll go back to the tool you were previously using.

Mac & Win: Space bar (held down)

Tool Shortcuts: Every tool has a keyboard shortcut. Hover your cursor over a tool's icon in the Toolbar on the left side of the interface and a little tool tip will appear, showing you what the tool's shortcut is.

Hover over a tool icon to see a tool tip that reveals the keyboard shortcut.

When in bird's-eye view, the highlighted rectangle will represent the area you will zoom in on.

Bird's Eye View: When zoomed in on an area of your document, you can quickly zoom out to get a peek at the image as a whole. When you release the shortcut keys, the view will zoom in again.

Mac & Win: Hold down the H key while simultaneously holding the mouse button. A box will appear, indicating the zoom location. You can move the mouse (with the button held down) to reposition the zoom location and, when you release the mouse button, it will zoom in to that new location.

Change Brush Size & Hardness: With the Brush Tool active, the following shortcut will give you a red overlay that represents your brush tip, showing you the size and how soft the edge is. Dragging your mouse up/down will change the hardness of the brush. Dragging left and right will change the size of the brush.

Mac: Hold down Control+Option and then hold the mouse button to drag up/down and left/right.

Win: Hold down Alt and the right mouse button to drag up/down and left/right.

When using the shortcut to change brush size and hardness, the red overlay shows a preview of the brush.

Another way to change the brush size and hardness: On both Mac and Win, you can change the brush size by using the square bracket keys ([ ]). The left bracket will make the brush smaller and the right bracket will make the brush larger. To change the brush hardness, use those same left and right bracket keys WHILE holding down the Shift key as well.

Color Picker: With the Brush Tool active, the following shortcut will present the Color Picker. Drag up and down on the vertical color bar to choose the general color and then drag within the color square to determine how vivid the color should be.

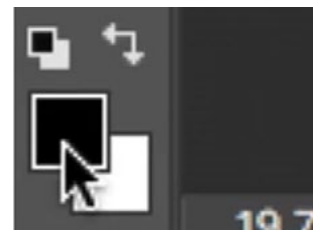**Mac:** Hold down Control+Option+Command and click and hold the mouse button within the image.

Win: Hold down Shift+Alt+Right mouse button within the image.

The color picker shortcut allows you to quickly set the foreground color.

Reset Colors: Set the foreground and background colors back to their default setting, which is black for the foreground and white for the background.

Mac & Win: The D key (This does the same thing as clicking the little black and white squares icon above the foreground and background swatches in the Toolbar.)

The default colors are black and white.

Swap colors: Swap the current foreground and background colors

Mac & Win: The X key (This does the same thing as clicking the little right-angle arrow icon above the foreground and background swatches in the Toolbar.)

Full Screen Mode: Gets most of Photoshop's interface out of the way so that you're only viewing your image. The shortcut will cycle through three different view settings.

Mac & Win: The F key

Hide Extras: This shortcut will hide things like guides, grids and active selections.

Mac: Command+H   **Win:** Ctrl+H

Move Tool: Activate the Move Tool

Mac & Win: The V key