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Layer Groups

Layer Groups

In this lesson, we're going to start exploring layer groups. A layer group is a way to organize your layers or add structure to your document. You can use them with a document containing just a few layers, but you'll find that grouping layers will be much more useful with a more complex document that contains many layers.

Layer groups allow us to move a set of layers at the same time and they allow us to scale or transform many layers at once.

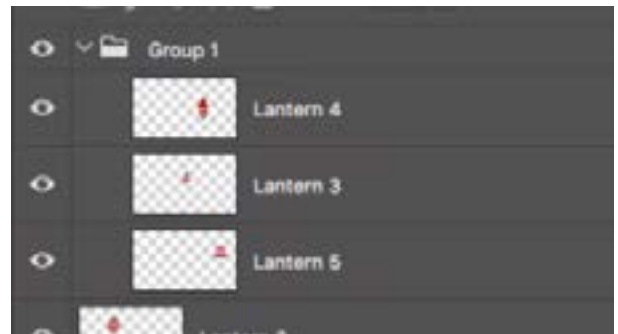
Using layer groups, you'll be able to use features like layer styles, clipping groups and layer masks, and make it so those features affect more than one layer. At the same time, you'll have access to the individual layers whenever you want.

To create a new layer group, or layer folder (the names are interchangeable), click on the little folder icon at the bottom of the Layers panel. If you have more than one layer selected when you click the folder icon, they will automatically be placed inside the group. If you didn't have any layers selected, the group will be empty. To add a layer to the group, simply click and drag it to the group name in the Layers panel. When a layer is part of a group, its thumbnail will be slightly indented.

To collapse a layer group, click on the little arrow to the left hand side of the folder icon for the group. This will hide all of the layers inside the group. Click the little arrow again to expand it.

Here is another way of creating a layer group. Select more than one layer, go to the Layer menu and choose Group Layers. Alternatively, you can use the keyboard shortcut Command+G (Ctrl+G on Win).

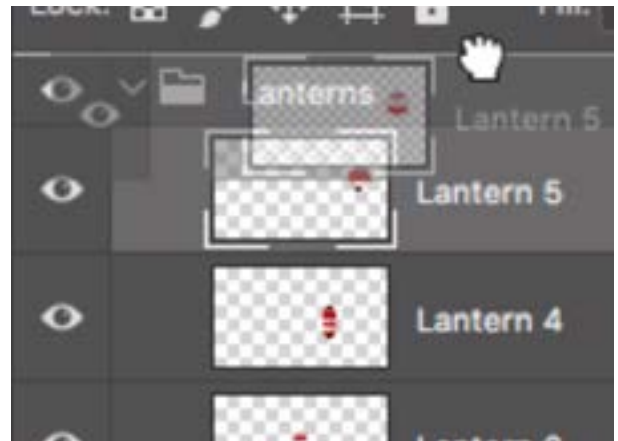
In the Layers panel, you will see an eyeball icon to the left side of the group name. Clicking on it hides the visibility of everything inside the group. Click on it again to make everything visible.



Three layers have been placed into a group and the group is expanded to show all the layers inside.

Things You Can Do with a Group of Layers:

- You can use the Move Tool to move all the layers within the group at once.
- With the name of the group selected, you can free transform all of the layers as a whole.
- If you duplicate the group (by dragging it to the New Layer icon), all of the layers within the group will be duplicated.
- To work on one of the individual layers within a group, expand the group, select just that layer and make the changes to it individually.
- When you click and drag to change the stacking order of the group in the Layers panel, all of the layers within the group will be moved as well.
- If you lower the opacity of the group, all of the layers within it will be affected.
- To remove a layer from the group, drag it outside of the group within the Layers panel.
- To add a layer to a group, drag it within the Layers panel over the name of the group and let go. This will place the layer inside the group.
- To ungroup layers that have been placed into a group, click on name of the group in the Layers panel and choose Layer > Ungroup Layers.
- If you want to delete the folder and all of the layers within it, make sure the Move Tool is active, select the group and simply click the Delete key.
- To name (or rename) a group, click on the name of the group and the text will become highlighted. You can then type in a new name and hit Enter. If you hold down the Option key (Alt on Win) while clicking on the New Folder icon at the bottom of the Layers panel, it will prompt you to give the group a unique name upon creating it.



A layer is being removed from a group by dragging it from within the group to just above the name of the group.



We have structured the document so that all layers that make up the owl are in one group, all layers that make up the green trees are in another group, all of the text is in one group and a second, invisible owl is in another group.

Using a Layer Mask with a Group We have covered layer masks in previous lessons, but a layer mask is a black and white picture that you attach to something. Anywhere the layer is white will leave the layer alone. Anywhere you add black (often times with the Brush Tool) will hide the contents of the layer it's attached to. It's only doing this temporarily, meaning we can always make the content visible again.



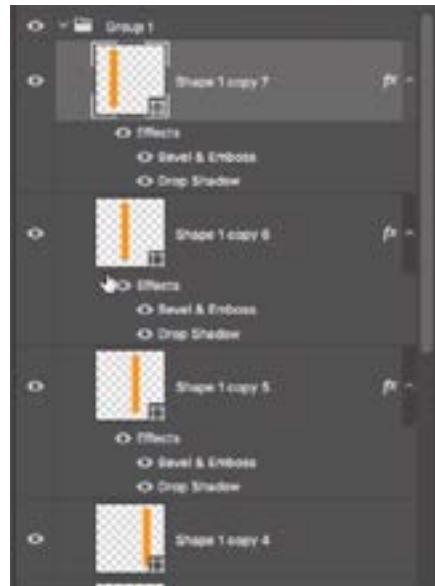
Here, a layer mask has been applied to this layer group and we painted with black on part of the mask.

To add a layer mask to a group, first click on the name of the group to make it active and then click the Layer Mask icon at the bottom of the Layers panel. Painting with black on this mask will hide everything that is inside that group.

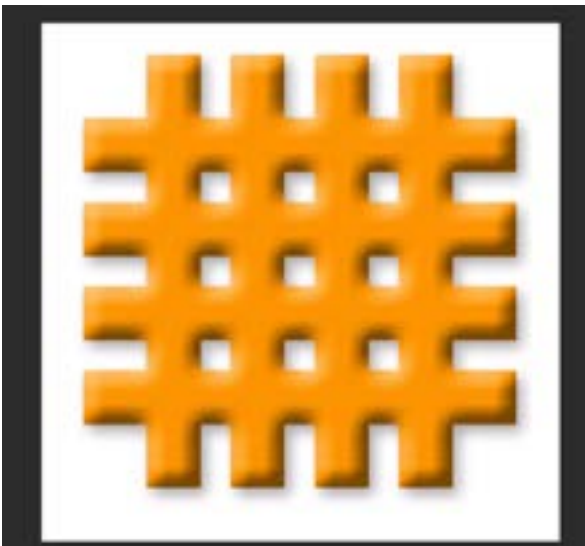
Note that you can also use a vector mask, which will do the same thing, but instead of using the Brush Tool to add black or white to the mask, you'd use the Pen Tool in order to make crisp lines.

Groups and Layer Styles You can also apply layer styles to a group. As a reminder, you add a layer style by activating the layer, or group of layers, you'd like to apply the effect[s] to and then clicking the FX icon at the bottom of the Layers panel. The Layers Styles dialog will appear, inside of which you can add as many effects as you'd like.

When you apply the same layer styles to every layer within a group, it not only complicates the Layers panel by listing the names of the effects under each layer, but it also applies the effects as if each layer is a separate piece. When you apply layer styles to the group as a whole, you only see the name of the effects listed under the name of the group in the Layers panel AND it applies the effects as if all the layers inside the group have been merged into one piece.



At left, the bevel & emboss and drop-shadow layer styles were individually added to each layer within the group. Because of this, each layer was treated as a separate piece.



At left, the bevel & emboss and drop-shadow layer styles were added to the group as a whole and as a result, the styles were applied as if all the layers were one single piece.

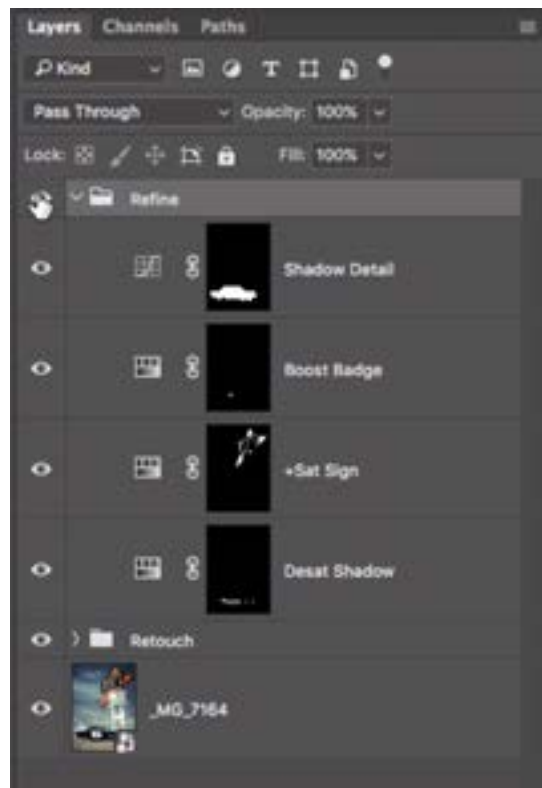
Nested Groups A nested group is essentially a group inside of a group. You would create one group inside of another in order to create more structure in your document. In the example here, we had placed all the layers making up the owl graphic into a group. To further structure the document, we placed all of the layers making up the eyes into a group (inside the main owl group), all of the layers making up the wings into another group, etc. You create a nested group in the same way that you create a regular group. The easiest way is to select all of the layers you would like to include and use the keyboard shortcut Command+G (Ctrl+G on Win).



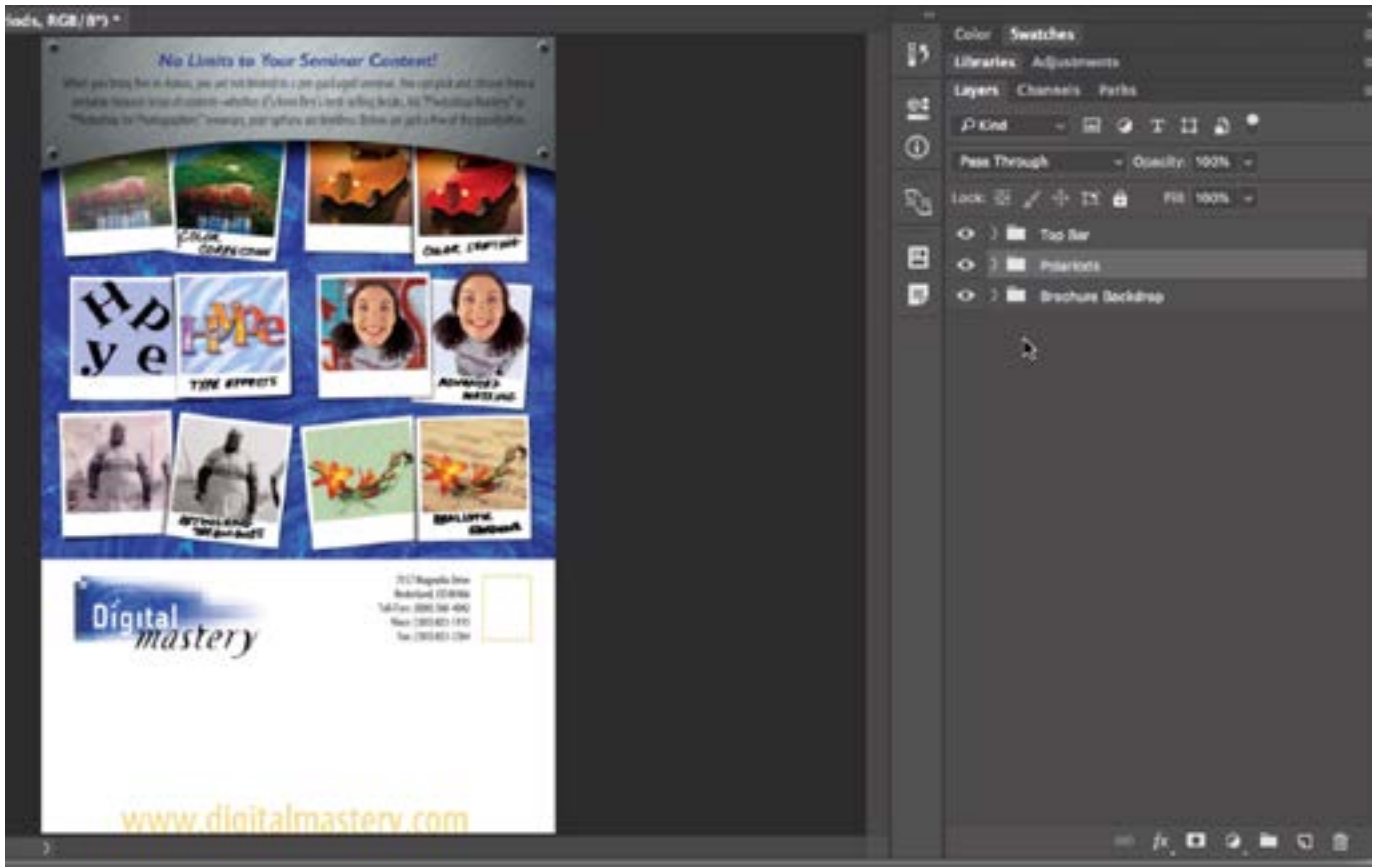
Here, we have some layer groups within another group.

Real World Examples

When I work on a complex image, I try to organize the document so that it's easy to navigate and understand when I return to it later. I use layer groups to accomplish this. Let's look at a few examples of how I used layer groups to organize my documents.



In the Layers panel for this finished photograph, I created one main group for all of my image refinements and another group for all of my retouching work. This makes it easy to see what's going on when I return to the image months or years later.



This is an old brochure of mine. It contains many, many layers and to organize things, I created three main layer groups: one for the top bar, one for the Polaroids and another for the brochure backdrop.

The Knockout Blending Option If you paint on a layer mask with a brush that is set to partial opacity, it can be difficult to make unnoticeable adjustments to the mask layer. Here is an advanced technique for achieving the same end result using groups instead of layer masks. The effect that I'll apply in this technique is a tinted black and white look.

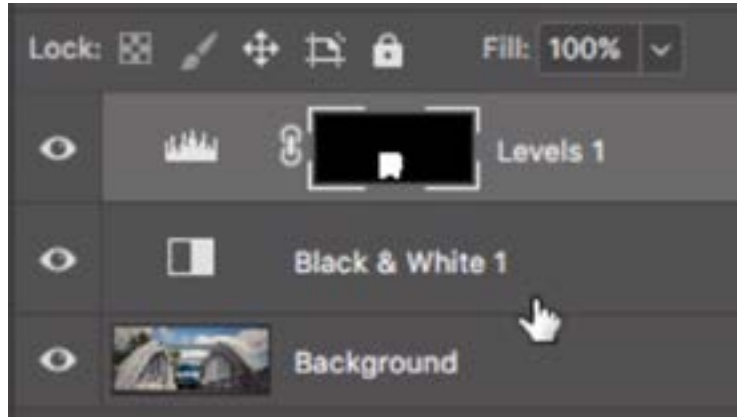


A Black and White adjustment layer was applied to create a tint effect.

I'll start by creating a black and white adjustment layer and turning on the Tint check box in the properties panel to apply a tinted effect. (When you turn the Tint check box on, you'll be able to determine the color of the tint.) I will then throw away the

mask attached to this adjustment layer because I know I'm not going to paint on it. Instead, I will make a selection around the bus, because that is what I want to work on in this example.

Next, I'm going to create an empty adjustment layer, which is essentially an adjustment layer that won't change the look of the picture at all. A Levels adjustment layer will work well for this as it will do nothing to the image unless you touch the sliders, which I'm not going to do. Because there was a selection active when I created the adjustment layer, it was automatically applied to the mask (so everything in the layer is hidden except for the bus).



We deleted the layer mask attached to the Black and White adjustment layer, made a selection around the bus and created an empty adjustment layer at the top of the layer stack.

What I'm going to do is make it so that the white part of the mask is going to poke a hole through the underlying Black and White adjustment layer so we can see the background layer beneath it. To do this, I'll click on the FX icon at the bottom of the Layers panel and choose Blending Options from the pop-up menu.



The Knockout settings within the Blending Options.

In the middle of the Blending Options dialog, you'll see a menu called Knockout. I will choose Deep from this menu, which will tell the layer to poke a hole in all the layers beneath the active layer until it hits a layer called Background. When I click OK, we will be able to see the bus in full color.

Now I'll do a similar thing with the bridge. I'll create a selection around the bridge and then add an empty Levels adjustment layer. The selection will automatically be applied to the mask. I'll once again click on the FX icon, choose Blending Options and set the Knockout menu to Deep.



Here, I am adjusting the opacity of the layer that was created to isolate the bridge. Changing the opacity is changing how transparent of a hole is being created through the Black and White adjustment layer and therefore how much color the bridge will have.

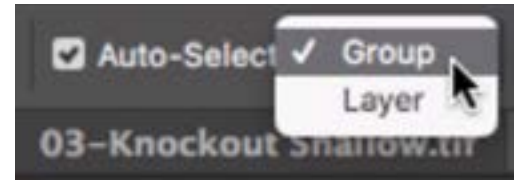
Now I can adjust the opacity of the bridge layer in order to lessen the effect of the Black and White adjustment layer, therefore bringing some color back into it. The opacity slider is determining how much of the underlying adjustments will be “knocked out.” I went through the same process with the trees and ended up with three different layers that allow me to make color adjustments to very specific areas.

Knockout and Layer Groups Now we’re going to incorporate folders with the knockout settings. I will select the Black and White adjustment layer and all of the layers above it and place them in a group, or folder, called Partial Black and White. Then I will add a retouching layer right above the image layer. I’ll run into a problem here, because the layers above (inside the group) are set to Knockout Deep and are therefore knocking a hole in all the layers, all the way down to the background layer. This will also knock a hole in the retouching layer. We can get around this by using the Knockout Shallow option instead of the Knockout Deep option. Knockout Shallow will only knock through the contents of the folder that the layer is contained within. It will stop knocking though things outside of that folder.

I will double-click on the icon to the right of those empty adjustment layers (it looks like two overlapping squares) to bring up the Layer Style dialog again. I will then change the Knockout setting from Deep to Shallow.

Tips and Tricks

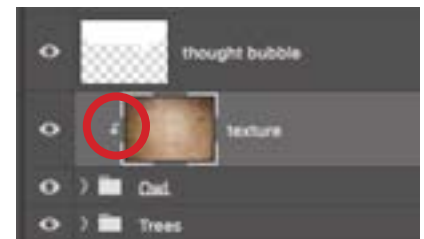
The Auto-Select Check Box When the Move Tool is active, there is an “Auto Select” checkbox available in the Options Bar above the image window. If this check box is turned on, a little menu will be active to the right of it. If you set this menu to Layer, then when you click within your picture, it will select the top-most layer that contains something and make that layer active. You can also hold down the Shift key to select more than one layer. If you set the menu to Group, then if the layer happens to be contained within a group, the entire group will be selected and you can move all of its contents together.



The Auto-Select settings in the Options Bar

Note that there is a keyboard shortcut you can use to temporarily access the Auto-Select feature and that is by holding down the Option key while clicking in your document. When you let go of the Option key, the feature will automatically be turned off again.

Groups and Clipping Masks If you have a layer that’s making a change to your image in some way, you can tell that layer to only affect the contents of a group by creating a clipping mask. Place the layer directly above the group in the Layers panel. Then go to the Layer menu and choose Create Clipping Mask. What a Clipping Mask does is make the layer you’re currently working on only show up where there is information in the layer (or group) directly below. A little down pointing arrow will appear to the left of the layer thumbnail indicating that the layer is clipped to what’s beneath it.



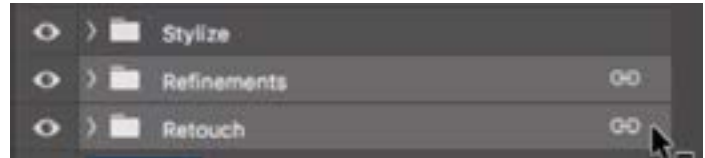
This layer is clipped to the group beneath it, as the little down-pointing arrow indicates.

Merge Group You can combine all the layers that are contained within a folder and turn them into one single layer by using the Merge Group command, which can be accessed by choosing Layer > Merge Group or by using the keyboard shortcut Command+E (Ctrl+E on Win).

Working Efficiently with Groups If you have a really complex document, you may end up with groups inside groups inside groups. Clicking on the little disclosure triangle to the left of the group folder icon will expand the group (or collapse it if it's already expanded). If you would like to expand all of the groups inside of a certain group, then hold Option key (Alt on Win) while clicking on that triangle.

Moving Groups and Layers Together

If you need to move more than one group (or layers) at a time, select the groups (or groups and layers) in the Layers panel and then click on the little link icon at the bottom of the panel. When you do this, a little link icon will appear to the right of each of the selected layers and any time you move one of them, all of the linked groups and/or layers will move together.



The little link icons to the right of the group names indicate that the groups are linked together. Moving one will move all of the linked layers/groups.