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Layer Mask Tips & Tricks

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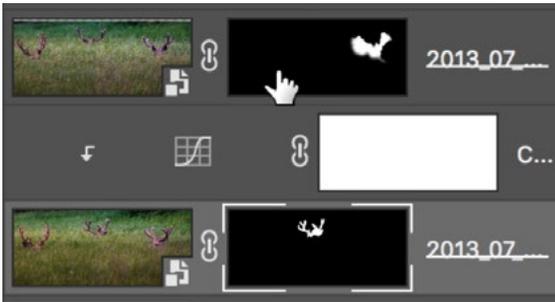
There is so much to learn about layer masks, and many of the most useful things are shorter tips and tricks, rather than in-depth techniques. Those are what I am going to cover in this lesson.

Creating a new mask filled with black When you create a layer mask, the entire mask will be white by default. A perfectly white mask will not hide any of the layer that it's attached to. If you would like the mask to be completely black when you add it to a layer, then hold down the Option key (Alt on Win) while clicking on the New Layer Mask icon at the bottom of the Layers panel.

Turning selections into masks If you have a selection active when you add a layer mask, it will keep the selected area and mask the rest of the layer. In other words, the mask will be white in the area that is selected and black in the areas that are not selected. We can change that behavior by holding down the Option key (Alt on Win) while creating the layer mask. If you do this, the opposite will happen. The selected area will be hidden (that part of the mask will be black) and the rest of the area will be visible (those parts of the mask will be white).

Copying a mask from one layer to another Let's say that you have carefully fine-tuned a layer mask on one layer and you would like to use that same mask and apply it to another layer's mask. To do this, click on the mask and drag it to the layer you'd like it to be applied to. This will remove the mask from one layer and apply it to another. If you'd like to copy the mask instead of move it (so that both layers end up with the same mask), then hold down the Option key (Alt on Win) while dragging the mask from one layer to another.

Disabling and re-enabling masks You can temporarily disable a layer mask by holding down the Shift key and clicking the thumbnail for the layer mask. You will see a red X appear over the thumbnail for the mask indicating that it's been disabled. To re-enable the mask, simply do the same thing: hold down the Shift key and click on the mask's thumbnail.



Here, we held down the Option key and clicked on the mask thumbnail in order to view the contents of the mask in the main image window.



View the contents of a mask If you would like to view the full contents of a layer mask, hold down the Option key (Alt on Win) and click on the thumbnail for the layer mask. This will display the black and white layer mask right in your image window so that you can inspect it and fine-tune it. To get out of this view, hold down the Option key (Alt on Win) and click on the mask's thumbnail again.

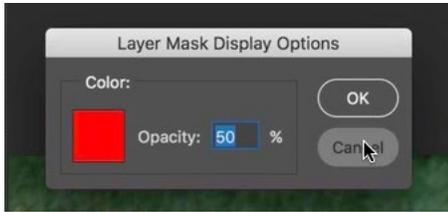
Mask overlay When you view the contents of a layer mask, you are seeing the black and white mask, but not the image. If you would like to see both the image and the mask at the same time,



If the active layer has a mask attached to it, you can hit the backslash key (\) to get an overlay of the mask on your image.

make sure the layer with the mask is active and then hit the backslash key (\). This will show the mask as a red overlay on top of your image. This will allow you to see what is happening with the image that's being masked and will allow you to better fine-tune the mask. If you paint with black, you'll be adding to the mask and if you paint with white, you'll be subtracting from the mask, and removing the red overlay.

Mask properties If you double-click on the thumbnail for a mask, you may get a pop-up dialog that asks you what you would like that command to do. If you choose “View Properties,” the Properties panel will appear for that mask and



You can choose the color and opacity of the mask overlay by choosing Mask Options from the menu in the top corner of the Properties panel.

this panel includes mask settings such as Density and Feather. If you click on the little menu in the top right of the Properties panel, a menu will appear and you can choose Mask Options. In the Mask Options dialog, you can specify what it will look like when you overlay the mask on top of the picture. By default, the overlay color is red, but you can change it to whatever you want and you can adjust the opacity as well.

Switch between the layer and the mask Sometimes, I need to quickly switch between working on the mask and working on the layer that it’s attached to. You can manually do this by clicking on the thumbnails of the layer and the layer mask. You’ll know which is active because little brackets will appear around the thumbnail. To quickly do this using keyboard shortcuts, hold down the Command key (Ctrl on Win) and type the number 2 to activate the layer or hit the backslash key to activate the mask.



The little brackets indicate whether the layer is active or the mask is active.

Copy an inverted version of a mask We mentioned before that you can copy a mask from one layer to another by holding down the Option key and dragging the mask thumbnail between layers. You can also copy an inverted version of the mask by holding down both the Option key (Alt on Win) and the Shift key at the same time while dragging the mask from one layer to another.



We copied an inverted version of a mask from one layer to another by holding down the Option and Shift keys together.

Pasting content into a mask There are some instances where you might want to copy the contents of a channel and paste it into your layer mask. In the example here, I want to remove the background in this tree image. To do that, I will open the Channels panel and choose the channel that contains the most contrast. This is the blue channel. I will select the contents of that channel by going to the main menu and choosing Select > All and then Edit > Copy.



In this image, the blue channel created the most separation between the trees (what we want to isolate) and the background (the sky). A selection was made of the blue channel.

Next, I'll go back to the Layers panel and add a layer mask to the image layer. I want to paste what I copied from the blue channel into the layer mask, but in order to paste information into a mask, it must be visible in the main image window. You can make the mask visible by showing it as an overlay (by using the back-slash key) or by making the mask visible by holding the Option key (Alt on Win) and clicking on the mask thumbnail.

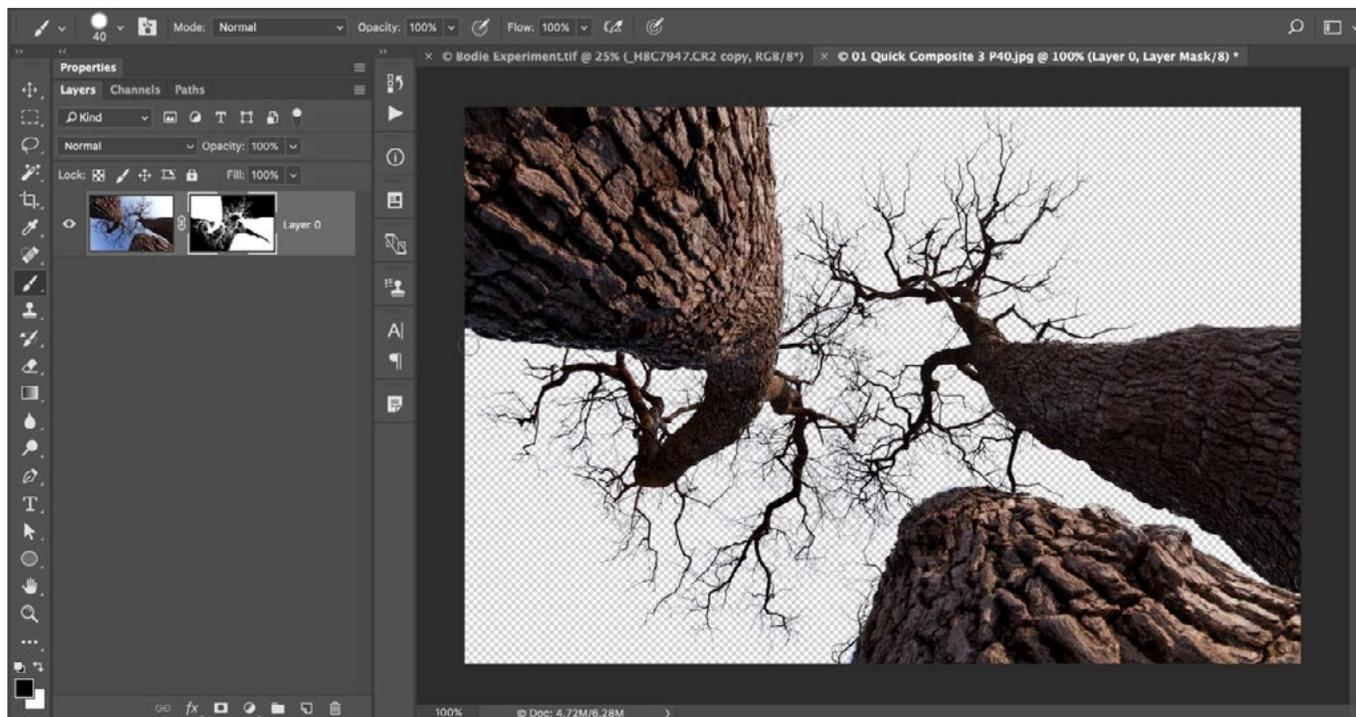


We made the layer mask visible and then pasted the contents of the blue channel into the mask.

In this example, we held down the Option key and clicked on the mask thumbnail. With the mask visible, we can now paste (Edit > Paste) the information into the mask.

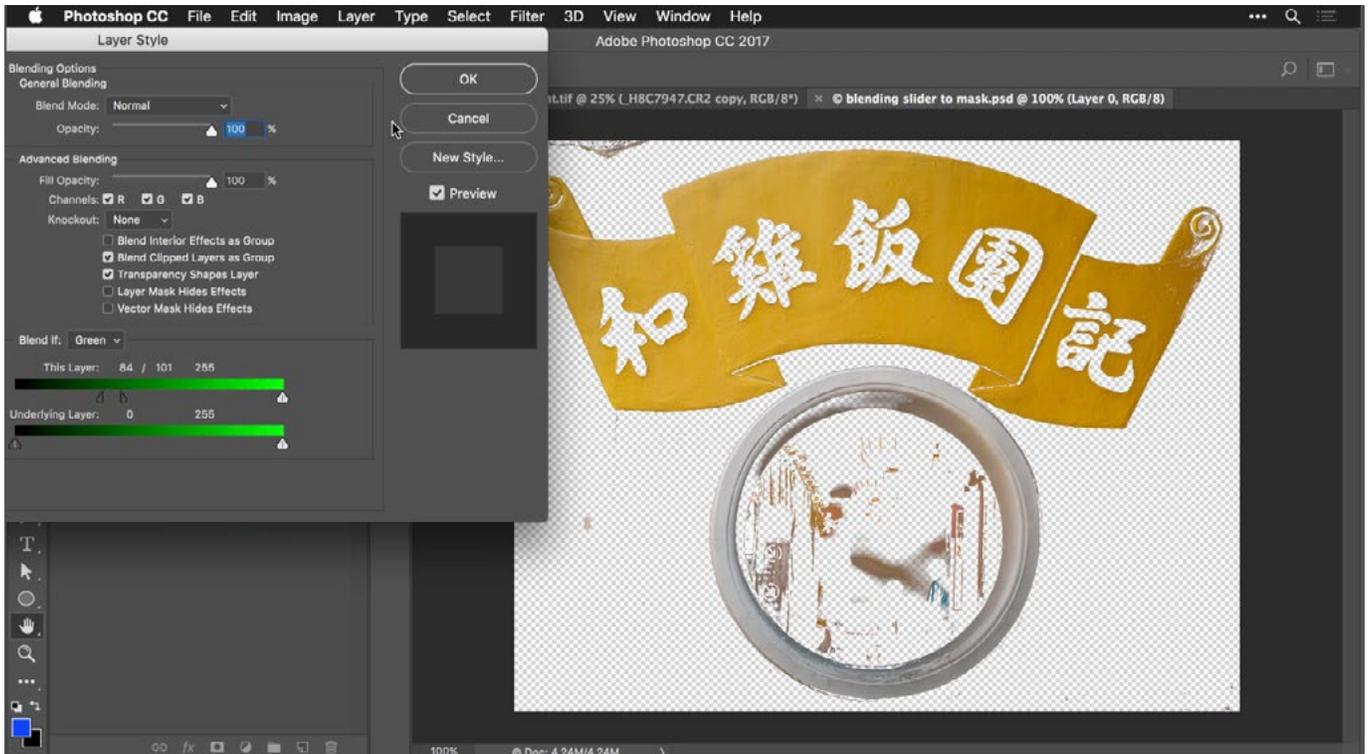
Because I want to separate the trees from the background, I will use a Levels adjustment to try and force the sky areas to white and the tree areas to black. Finally, I'll use the Brush Tool to further clean up the mask.

At this point, the mask is white where the sky is and black where the trees are. I want to hide the sky area, so I will invert the mask by using the shortcut Command+I (Ctrl+I on Win). Then, I'll Option+click on the mask's thumbnail again so that we are no longer viewing the mask in the image window.



After fine-tuning and inverting the mask, we Option+clicked on the layer mask thumbnail again to view the results on the image.

Converting results of the Blending sliders to a layer mask If you use the Blend If sliders within the Layer Styles dialog to try and isolate part of your image, there is a way to convert those results into a layer mask that can be further edited. Here is one way to go about doing that. I'll first click through the different channels to see where the thing I'm trying to isolate separates the most from its surroundings. In the example here, I want to isolate the banner and the green channel shows the most separation between the banner and the wall. I'm not going to do anything in the Channels panel, however. I'll go back to the Layers panel, click on the FX icon at the bottom of the panel and choose Blending Options. The Layer



The Blend If sliders are being used (With the Blend if menu set to Green) to hide the darker parts of the green channel.

Styles dialog will appear and the Blend If settings can be found near the bottom. There is a channel dropdown menu and I'm going to choose the green channel. Then, I will drag the left slider under the "This Layer" gradient to the right, hiding the dark portions of the selected channel. I'll work with the slider until the banner becomes as isolated as possible and then I'll click OK. Now, in order to fine-tune the results, I'd need to be working on a layer mask. I need to convert the results of the Blend If sliders to a layer mask.

I'll create a new, empty layer beneath the image layer and then duplicate the image layer. Next, I want to merge the empty layer with the image layer that's directly above it so I will activate the image layer and go to the main menu and choose Layer > Merge Down. This will make the results of the blending sliders permanent instead of an adjustable effect.



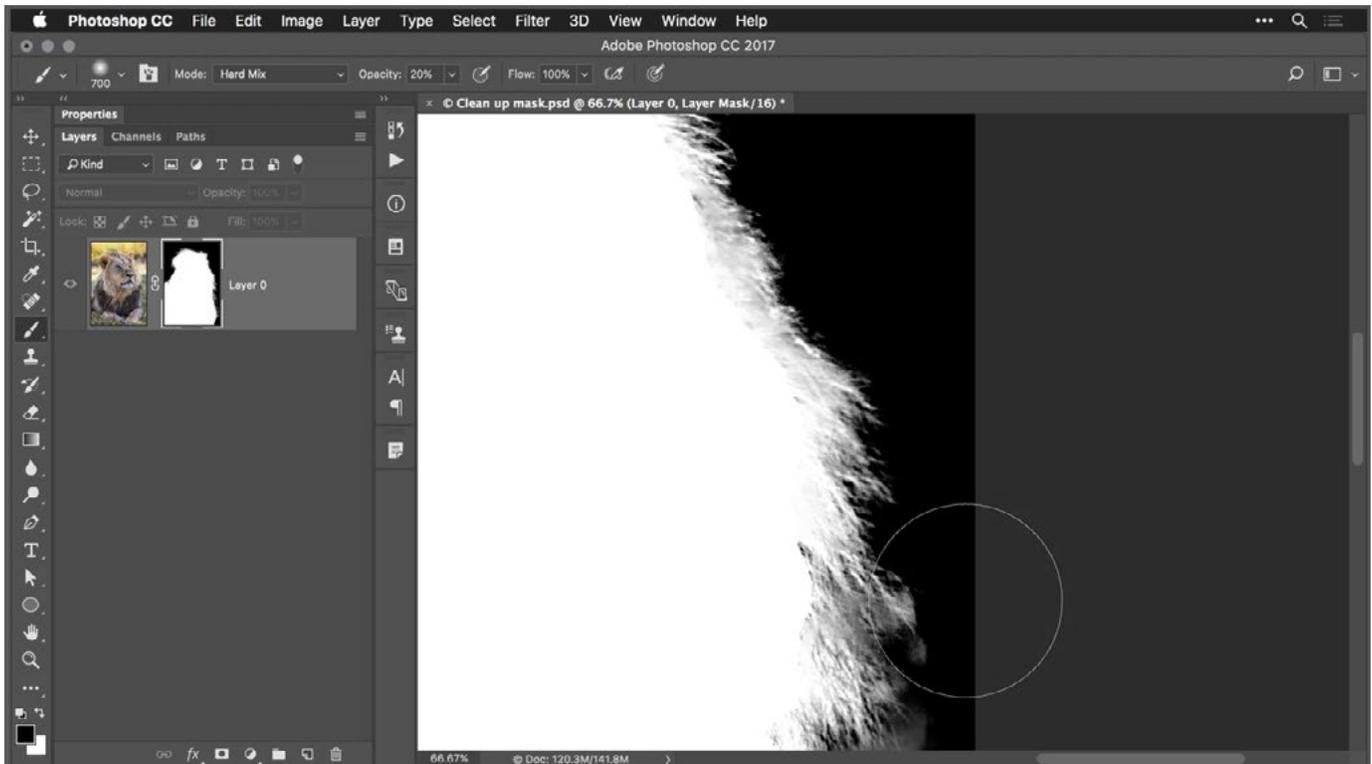
Left: An empty layer was placed at the bottom of the layer stack and a duplicate of the image layer was placed above it. Right: The bottom two layers were merged, locking in the effect.

To convert that into a layer mask, I'll first activate the top image layer, click back on the FX, choose Blending Options again and then set the Blend If sliders back to their default positions. I'll click OK. Now, I need to load the visible parts of the bottom layer as a selection by holding down the Command key (Ctrl on Win) and clicking within the thumbnail for that bottom layer. Making sure the top layer is active, I will click on the Layer Mask icon at the bottom of the Layers panel. Because there was a selection active, it was automatically applied to the mask. Finally, I can throw away the bottom layer. I can now fine-tune the mask, better isolating the banner.



The results of the Blend If sliders have successfully been transferred to a layer mask that we can fine-tune and adjust.

Working on a mask with Brush Tool blending modes If you need to adjust a complex mask that is working with fine details like hair or fuzz, it can be difficult to use the Brush Tool in order to perfectly mask the details. Here's how we can change the blending mode of the Brush Tool in order to help us mask out the background while keeping the fine details we want. First, we'll make sure that we're viewing the mask so we'll hold down the Option key (Alt on Win) and click on the thumbnail for the mask. Then we will activate the Brush Tool, select a soft brush and then set the Mode menu in the Options bar to Hard Mix. This mode



Here, we are painting on the mask using a soft-edged brush set to the **Hard Mix** blending mode to clean up the messy parts of the mask where the lion's fur meets the background.

protects the areas that are pure white so that they won't be affected by painting with black. With the brush set to this mode, I can paint with black over the edge of this furry subject (a lion) and the areas that are pure white will remain while the grayish messy area will be changed to black. Note that if the result is too extreme, as it was in this case, you may have to lower the Opacity setting, which can also be found in the Options Bar. If we switch to painting with white, the Hard Mix blending mode will protect the areas that are pure black, so they will not be affected as you paint.

Masks & layer styles If you ever work with a layer that has layer styles attached to it, those layer styles will be affected by a layer mask. It will think that the shape of the layer is different so it will recalculate the layer styles, changing their appearance. That may not be what you want. If you don't want this to happen, you will have to click on the FX icon at the bottom of the Layers panel and choose Blending Options. In the Blending Options dialog, you will find a "Layer Mask Hides Effects" check box. Turning this on will make it so the appearance of the layer styles don't change when you add a layer mask.

Linking and unlinking the image from the mask After adding a layer mask to an image layer, you can move the layer around and the mask will move with it. But what if that's not you want? There are some instances where you'll want to move just the mask, or just the image within that mask. In this example, I masked the image layer so that it looks as if it appears on the iPad screen. When I went to re-position and scale the image within that mask, however, the mask moved as well. This is not what I wanted.

If you want to be able to scale or move the picture separately from the layer mask, you need to unlink the mask from the layer and you can do this by clicking on the little link icon between the image thumbnail and the mask thumbnail in the Layers panel. Then you can move and/or scale the image and the mask separately from one another. You just need to make sure that the correct thumbnail is selected in the Layers panel. If you want to move the mask, make sure that the mask is selected (it will have brackets around its thumbnail). If you want to move the image, make sure the image is selected.



Above: The image layer was masked to appear as if it's on the iPad screen. Right: To move the image and the mask separately from each other, you need to unlink the two by clicking on the little link icon.

