



Wish I Knew: Layers

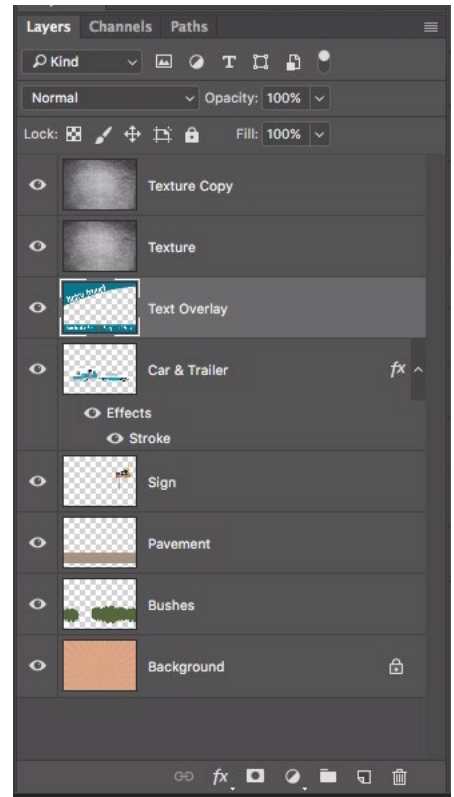
Wish I Knew: Layers

In this “Wish I Knew” series, I am covering some of the things I wish I knew when I was learning different aspects of Photoshop. In this lesson, we’re going to focus on some of the foundational concepts involving layers.

The background “layer”

The background is not actually considered a layer, so if your document only contains the background in the Layers panel, the document is not said to contain layers. With a regular layer, you can use the Move Tool to reposition it, you can move all or parts of it outside of the document edges, you can change the stacking order, etc. These things are not true with the background. The background can also not contain areas that are transparent. If you tried to use the Eraser Tool on the background layer, the area will be filled with the background color instead of being erased.

The reason the background has so many limitations is because it has the same properties as most file formats that do not support layers. For example, a jpg file can not contain any areas that are transparent, it can not contain information that extends beyond the document borders, etc. If your document does not contain layers (meaning it only contains the background), you will not lose anything when you save it as a jpg (or other file format that doesn’t support layers).



The background layer is not actually considered a layer in Photoshop, as it has many limitations that normal layers don’t have. It will always be at the bottom of the layer stack.

Flatten vs. Merge Visible

If you have a multi-layered document, you can merge everything down to one background layer by going to the Layer menu and choosing Flatten Image. In that Layer menu, there is also the option to Merge Visible. At first glance, this might

seem to do the same thing as the Flatten Image command, but there are some important differences. When you flatten your document, you will end up with a single background layer. Any layers that are hidden will be discarded and any areas of transparency will be filled with the background color. (The swatches for the foreground and background colors can be found at the bottom of the Tool Bar.) Additionally, any information that is contained outside the bounds of your document will be discarded as well.



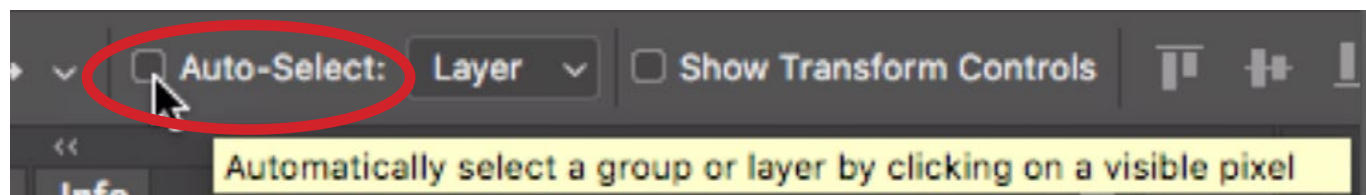
The foreground and background swatches can be found at the bottom of the Tool Bar.

The Merge Visible command will not act in the same way as the Flatten Image command. If you have the visibility turned off for one or more layers, those layers will not be merged together. They will remain separate from the newly-merged layer. Also, transparency is maintained and the merged layer is a regular layer (not a background layer).

Auto-Select Layers

Auto-Select Layers is a feature that can be turned on or off when the Move Tool is active. With the Move Tool active, you can find the setting on the left side of the Options Bar. It will appear either as an icon or as an “Auto-Select” check box. In earlier versions of Photoshop, this setting was turned off by default. In the current version, it’s turned on by default. You will have to inspect the setting to see if yours is turned off or on.

When the Auto-Select feature is turned off and you use the Move Tool to reposition something in your document, you will be moving the content of the layer that is active in your Layers panel (regardless of whether or not the content is directly beneath your cursor as you move it).



The Auto-Select feature will be represented as a check box or an icon in the Options Bar.

When you have the Auto-Select feature turned on, it will pay attention to whatever is directly beneath your mouse and automatically select the top-most layer that contains something under your mouse, changing which layer is active in the Layers panel. I generally keep Auto-Select turned off because there is a keyboard shortcut that will temporarily activate the feature. As you're using the Move Tool, you can hold down the Command key (Ctrl on Win) and the Auto-Select checkbox will be turned on for as long as you're holding the key down. Once you release the key, the feature will be turned off again. (If you have the Auto-Select Feature turned on, then holding down the Command key will temporarily turn it off.) If you'd like to select more than one layer while using the Auto-Select feature, you can add the Shift key (along with the Command key) after targeting your first layer in order to activate additional layers.

There is one instance where the Auto-Select feature will not work in the way that you want it to, and that is when you have a layer that fills the entire document positioned at the top of the layer stack. It may be filled with a texture, gradient, etc. but it will always be the layer that is selected when the Auto-Select feature is turned on. To get around this, turn off the visibility of that top layer or layers while you work on your document. Turn them on again when you're done.



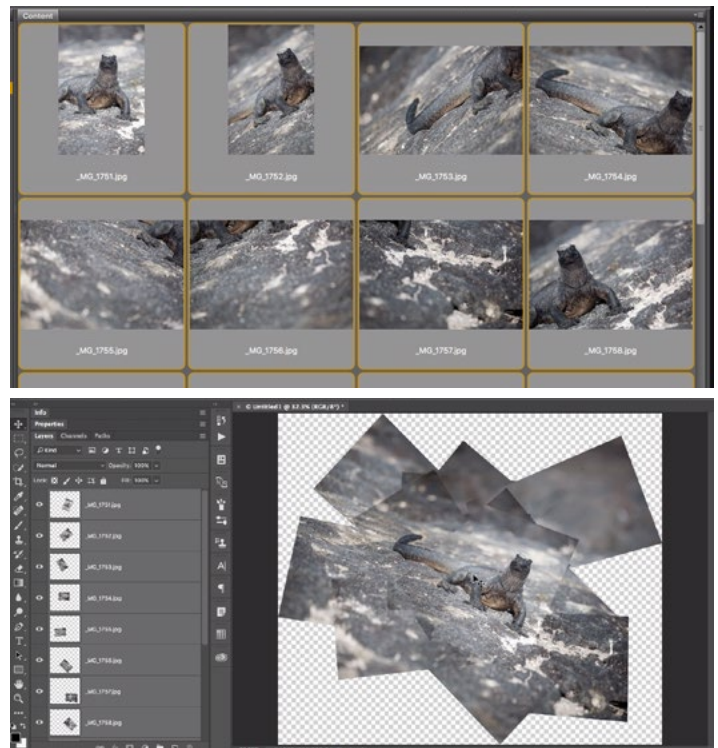
In this instance, the Auto-Select feature won't work properly if we try to select one of the bottom or middle layers. That's because there is a texture overlay layer that takes up the entire canvas and is located at the top of the layer stack.

Viewing one layer at a time

After creating a more complex, multi-layered document, you may want to temporarily view the contents of only one layer. For example, when I want to see before-and-after views of my retouched image, I will turn off the visibility of all layers except the background layer. To turn off the visibility of a layer, you would click on the eyeball icon to the left of the layer thumbnail in the Layers panel. If you have many layers, however, it could be cumbersome (or simply annoying) to click on each eyeball to toggle the visibility. Instead, hold down the Option key (Alt on Win) and click on the eyeball icon for the layer you want to see. When you do this, the visibility will be turned off for all the layers except that one.

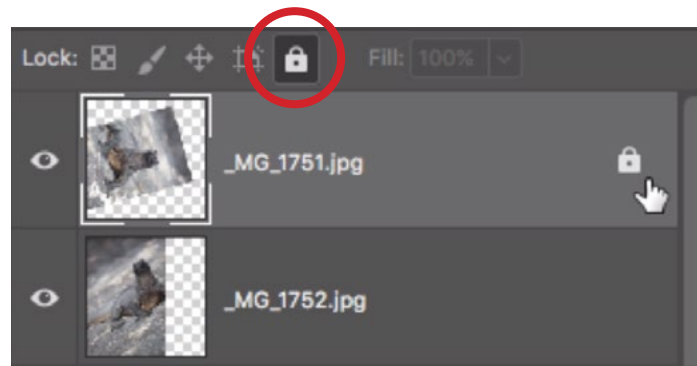
Auto-Align layers

Photoshop's Auto-align Layers feature will help you to perfectly align a series of images that were shot together. To start, you would select all of the images in Bridge and then go to the main menu and choose Tools > Photoshop > Load Files into Photoshop Layers. All of the images will be stacked as separate layers in a single Photoshop document. Then you would activate all of the layers (Select > All) and choose Edit > Auto-Align Layers. In the dialog box that appears, you can leave the default settings and click OK. Photoshop will compare the contents of all the layers and attempt to line everything up.



Here, we used the Auto-Align Layers command to align all of the images selected in Bridge.

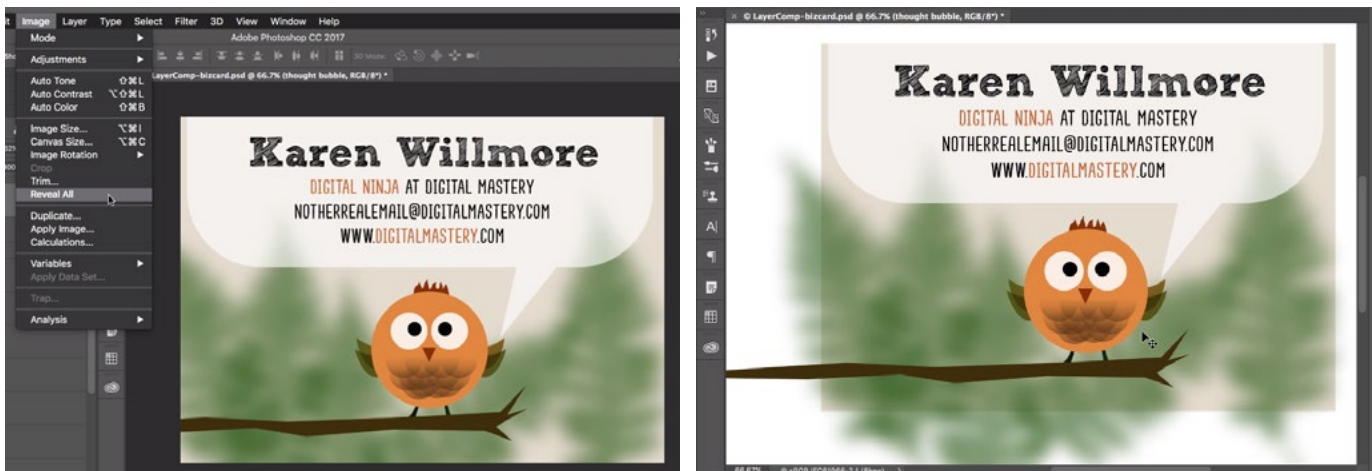
When Photoshop aligns the layers, it will choose a starting, base layer and line all of the other layers up to that layer. Know that you can specify which image should be the starting/base layer. Before selecting/activating all of the layers to align, activate the layer you would like to serve as the starting point and click on the little lock symbol at the top of the Layers panel. This will lock the layer so that Photoshop can't make any changes to it. It will be forced to align all of the other, unlocked layers to this locked layer.



To specify which layer we'd like to serve as the base layer (the one that all the other layers are aligned to), we activated the desired layer and then clicked on the lock icon at the top of the Layers panel.

Reveal All

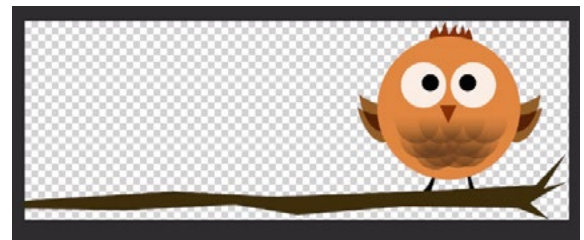
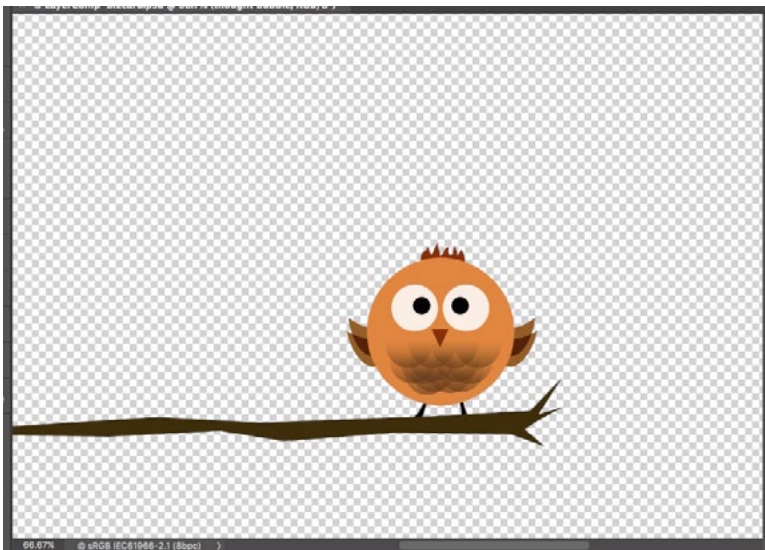
Often times, there will be content in your layers that extends beyond the bounds of the document. You can tell Photoshop to extend the bounds of the document to include all of this hidden content. To do this, go to the main menu and choose Image > Reveal All.



At left, we are choosing to Reveal All from the Image menu. At right, you can see that the canvas expanded to include all of the contents of all of the layers.

Trim

The Trim command will somewhat do the opposite of what the Reveal All command does. If the pixel content in your document does not take up the entire canvas, the Trim command will crop the document to create the smallest possible result that still contains all the content of your visible layers. You can access the command by going to the Image menu and choosing Trim. A dialog will appear and if you choose the Transparent Pixels setting, Photoshop will crop away as much of the transparent area as possible without cutting into the content of your layers.



At left, we have a document that contains a lot of transparency. We used the Trim command, set to trim transparent pixels, to achieve the crop shown above.

Copy Merged

You may end up with an object in your document that is made up of several layers. For example, the owl in the lesson video is made up of many layers. Because of this, it could be frustrating to try and move the owl as a whole. I want to copy the owl and paste him into a separate document. We can make a selection around the owl and then choose Edit > Copy, but it will only copy the content that's on the active layer (which will only be one piece of the owl). In order to copy the entire owl, we'll instead choose Edit > Copy Merged. This will copy everything contained inside the active selection, regardless of how many layers there are. Then, we can open another document and choose Edit > Paste and the entire owl will be pasted in the document.