PS/LR Layout Automation

PS/LR Layout Automation

In this lesson, we're going to use a variety of techniques to create a Photoshop action that we can use in a Lightroom export preset to automate the creation of a special photo layout.

Even if you don't need to create a photo layout (or template) like this, the lesson will give you a good idea of how I use many Photoshop features for more than one purpose.


We're going to create an action that will automate the creation of a layout like this.

## Create an Export Preset in Lightroom (Timestamp 1:47)

We're going to start in Lightroom and learn how to best save a set of images so that Photoshop will be able to utilize them layer. We'll create an Export Preset for that. We'll click on the File menu and choose Export. The Export dialog will appear and this is where we'll create a new Export Preset. This dialog contains several categories of settings and here are the one we'll use:

Export Location: This is the hard drive location where the files will be saved after they've been exported. We'll choose a location that is obvious and easy to remember. (In the video example, I used the Desktop.) We'll turn on the "Put in Subfolder" check box and give the Subfolder a name. You can also specify what happens to the files that are already located in the specified location and I will set this "Existing Files" menu to Overwrite Without Warning. I am using this option because I want to create a "Best of the Week" layout and I am fine with the previous week's images being discarded.
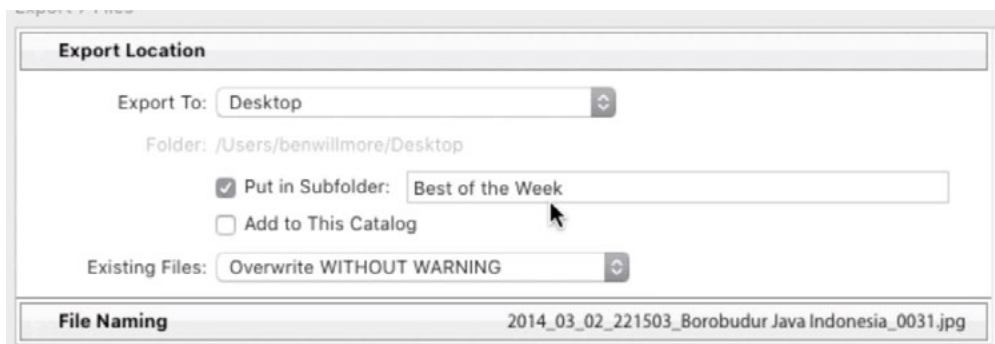
In the Export Dialog, we chose to Export To the Desktop. We turned on the "Put In Subfolder" check box and are naming the new subfolder "Best of the Week."

File Naming: In this category, we do not want to use the original file names. We want to specify a new name because the action that we're going to create in Photoshop is going to use the name of the file. If the file names are not consistent, the action will not work. We'll click on the "Rename To" menu and choose Edit. A Filename Template Editor box will appear and here we can customize the names.
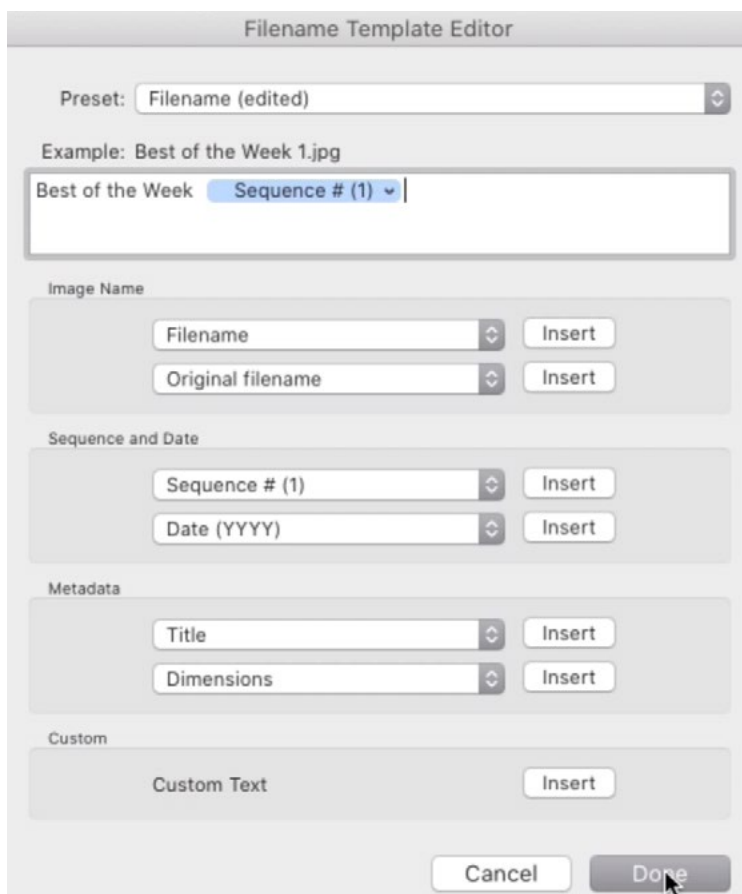

Here, we are editing the file names of the exported images. They MUST be specific and in sequential order.

We'll delete any existing file name parameters from the text field and we'll type in the custom name. In the video, I am naming the files "Best of the Week ". Then, we'll want to have sequence numbers at the end of each file name, so we'll set the Sequence menu to "Sequence # (1)" and then click the Insert button. You'll see this sequence parameter added to the file name field.

NOTE: I chose "Sequence # (1)" because I know that I'm only using six images. Therefore, I only need single digits. If you are using more images, you will need to use a sequence option that will allow for the appropriate amount of digits. We'll click the Done button to return to the main Export dialog.

File Settings: We'll set the Image format to JPEG with a Quality setting of 100. The Color Space is a personal preference. I am using Adobe RGB.

Image Sizing: This is where I'm going to use some special settings. When I travel, I don't always have the hard drive that contains my images with me. Therefore, I use Smart Previews. Lightroom allows you to export Smart Previews up to a particular size, even when the hard drive that contains the pictures is not connected to the computer. That size is 2,560 pixels in width and height. We'll enter this number into both the Width and Height fields and make sure the units menu is set to Pixels. The Resolution setting doesn't matter as much, but we'll use 240 pixels per inch here.
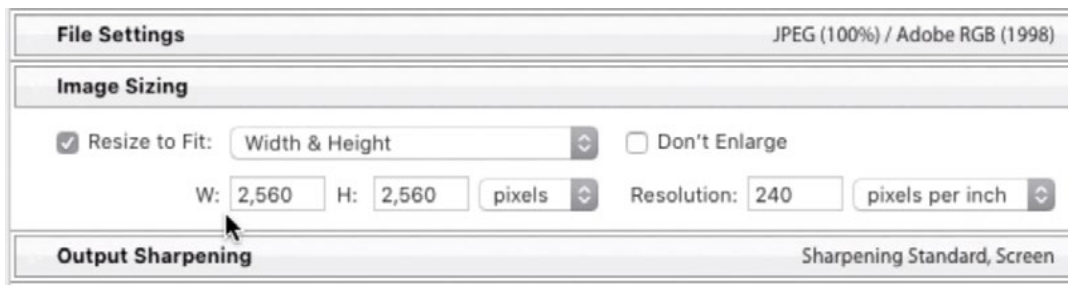
We're limiting the Image Size to 2,560 pixels in width and height.

Output Sharpening: This will depend on whether the image layout is going to be something you print or use online.

Post-Processing: I'll make sure the "After Export" menu is set to Do Nothing.

Now we need to save these settings as a new Export Preset. We'll click on the Add button at the bottom of the preset list on the left side of the dialog. We'll be prompted to name the preset and then click Create. In the video example, I named the preset "Best of the Week."


We're saving the export settings as a new preset.

Now that we've created the preset, we can actually click the Cancel or Done button at the bottom of the dialog. This will not undo the preset creation. It just means that we don't want to export any images at this time.

Export Images (9:03)

Next, we're going to export some images using that preset. We'll select our images in Lightroom's Library Module (In the video, we chose six.), we'll click on the File menu and choose Export with Preset. A preset menu will appear and we'll choose the preset we just created. In the video example, that's the "Best of the Week" preset. The exported images will automatically appear in the hard drive location that was specified in the preset. In the video example, that's the desktop, so we end up with our "Best of the Week" folder of six images on the desktop.

## Create Photoshop Action (9:46)

Now we're going to move on to Photoshop. Here, we're going to create an action that creates a brand new file and then populates that file with the pictures we just exported. We'll go to Photoshop's main interface with no document open. If the Actions panel is not already visible on the interface, we'll click on the Window menu and choose Actions. I like to organize my actions in folders, so I'll click on the New Folder icon at the bottom of the Actions panel to create a new folder and name it "Best of the Week." With that folder active, we'll create a new action inside that folder by clicking on the New icon at the bottom of the Actions panel. The New Action dialog box will appear and here we'll name the folder (I named mine "Best of the Week") and then click the Record button. You will see that the red Record icon will light up at the bottom of the Actions panel to indicate that we're recording.
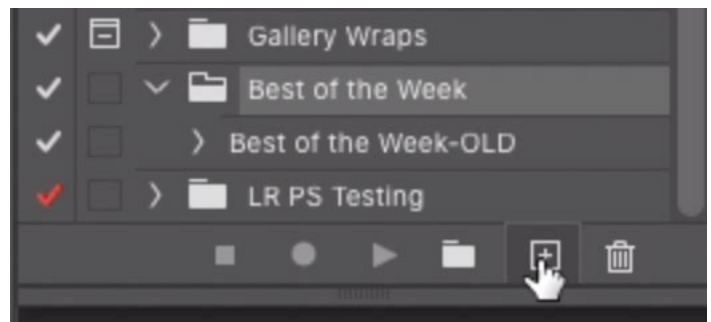
In the Actions Panel, we created a folder in which to place the action. Now, we are clicking on the New icon in order to create a new action within that folder.

Create new document At this point, we need to be very careful because every-thing we do that has the potential of changing an image will be recorded in this action. We'll click on the File menu and choose "New" to create a new document. When the New Document window appears, do NOT simply use the last-used set-tings and click ok. You'll need to manually tell Photoshop what the document size should be so that it's recorded in the action. In the video example, I clicked on the Photo preset category and chose the preset that sizes the document at 7 x 5 inches @300 ppi. Then click the Create button and the new document will appear.

Create pattern background We're going to create a background for our photo layout by clicking on the Adjustment Layer icon at the bottom of the Layers Panel and choosing "Pattern" from the pop-up menu. A new Pattern Fill layer will appear and the Pattern Fill dialog will open. Here, we can use the menu to choose a pattern that we'd like to use as the back-ground. Note that you can use the little side menu of the pattern picker to access more categories of patterns. In the video exam-ple, we choose a tree pattern and then clicked OK.
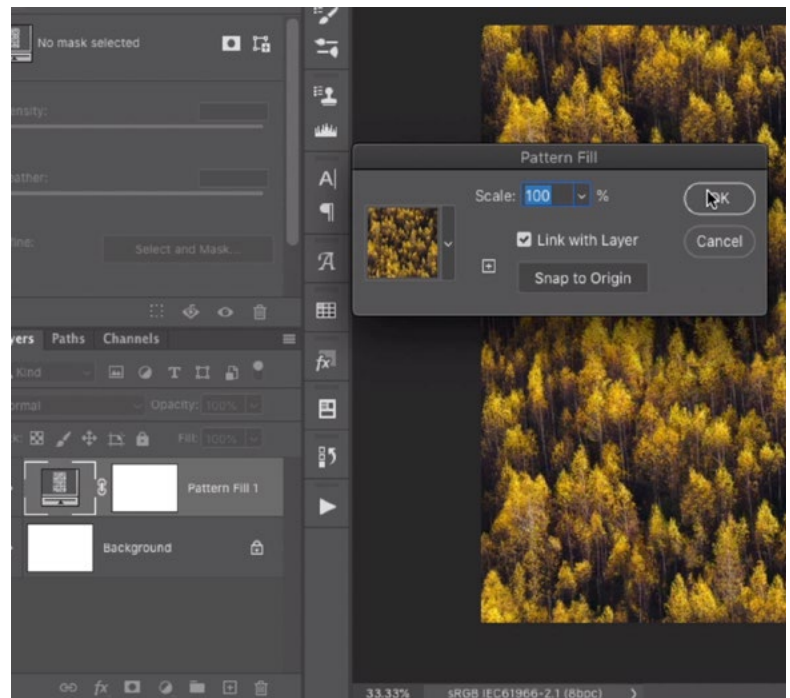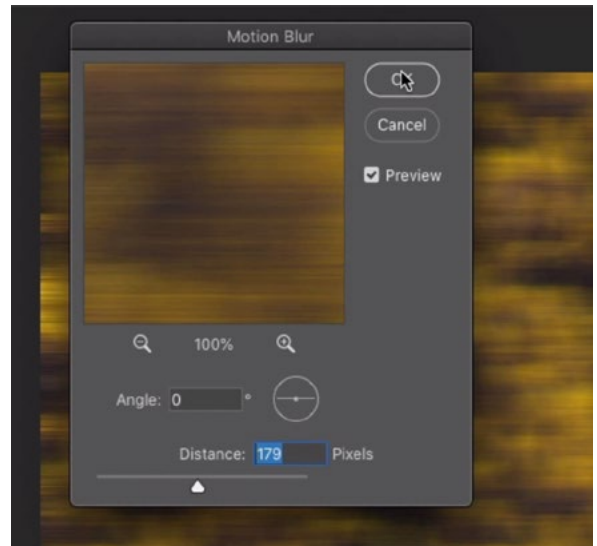

A Pattern Fill layer is being created to serve as the background for the image layout.

Optimize Layers Panel Whenever I create actions, I always like to optimize my Layers Panel. Since I know that I'm not going to need the layer mask that is at-tached to the Pattern Fill layer, I will click and drag that mask to the trash can icon at the bottom of the panel in order to discard it. We also don't need the back-ground layer so I'll drag that to the trash as well. Now I only have the Pattern Fill layer. I'll double-click on its name and rename it to "Pattern Background."
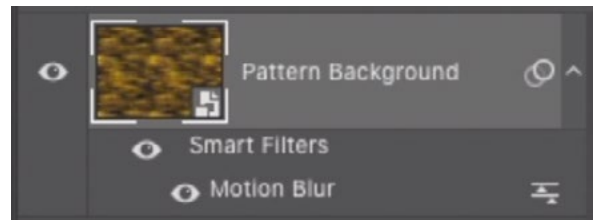
Blur the background At this point, I think that the chosen pattern has too much detail as a background and it will distract the attention away from the images. We want to lessen that detail a bit. We'll first click on the Filter menu and choose "Convert for Smart Filters." By applying a filter as a Smart Filter (to a Smart Object layer), we will be able to go back and change the filter settings at a later time.

The pattern layer was converted to a Smart Object and we are now applying the Motion Blur filter to this layer.

We'll click back on the Filter menu and choose Blur > Motion Blur. The Motion Blur dialog will appear, containing some settings. We'll move the Distance slider up until the background looks more simplified and we can't really tell that it's trees. We'll click OK to apply the filter. The Motion Blur Smart Filter will appear beneath the Pattern Background layer in the Layers Panel. Again, I will simplify the Layers Panel by dragging the filter's layer mask into the trash. (I know I'm not going to use it later.)


The Motion Blur was applied to the layer as a Smart Filter and we discarded the layer mask because we don't need it.

Create the layout Now we're going to create the layout in which the photos will be placed. In the video example, I am creating the layout in which to place six images, so I will create six boxes. We don't want to simply drag out shapes, however. We want the shapes to be evenly sized and spaced. To accomplish that, we'll click on the View menu at the top of the screen and we'll choose "New Guide Layout." The New Guide Layout dialog box will appear and some default settings will be applied. We're going to use the settings to set up the guides to create three images horizontally and two images vertically (to create six image frames).

We'll enter 3 for the number of columns and 2 for the number of rows. We'll make sure the Margin check box is turned on so that we have access to the margin settings. These are the settings that will give us space around the four edges of the frame. To use these settings, type in a number to serve as a starting point and then use the up and down arrow keys to make the numbers larger or smaller. You can also hold the Shift key to move the numbers in higher increments. You can visually see the effect on the guides in the document window.

I want the top of the document to contain some room for text, so I'll enter a higher number for the Top margin. In the video example, I used 230 px. I set the Left, Right and Bottom margins to 60 px.

We'll use the Gutter settings to determine how much space should appear between the rows and columns. Again, you can type in a number as a starting point and then use the arrow keys to change the number while you visually watch the effect on the guides. In the video, I set the gutters to 60 and clicked OK to exit the New Guide Layout dialog.
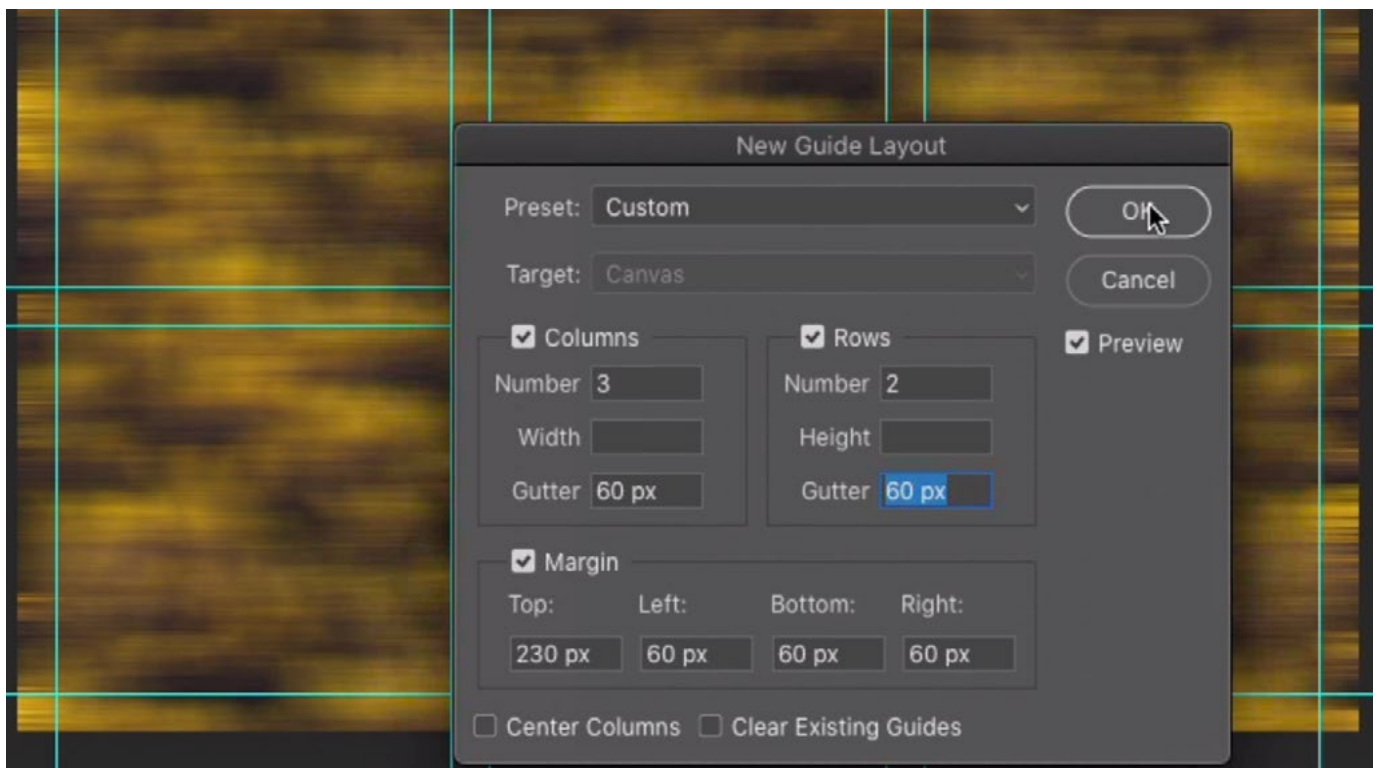

The New Guide Layout command is being used to create very specific guides that will define the layout.

Add Frames We now need to define the areas where the images should appear. We'll do that with the Frame Tool, which can be found in the Toolbar on the left side of the interface. The Frame Tool allows us to insert placeholder rectangles. With the Frame Tool active, we'll drag out six frames within the rectangles that we created with the guides. The tool will snap to the edges of the guides, helping us create perfectly even rectangles.
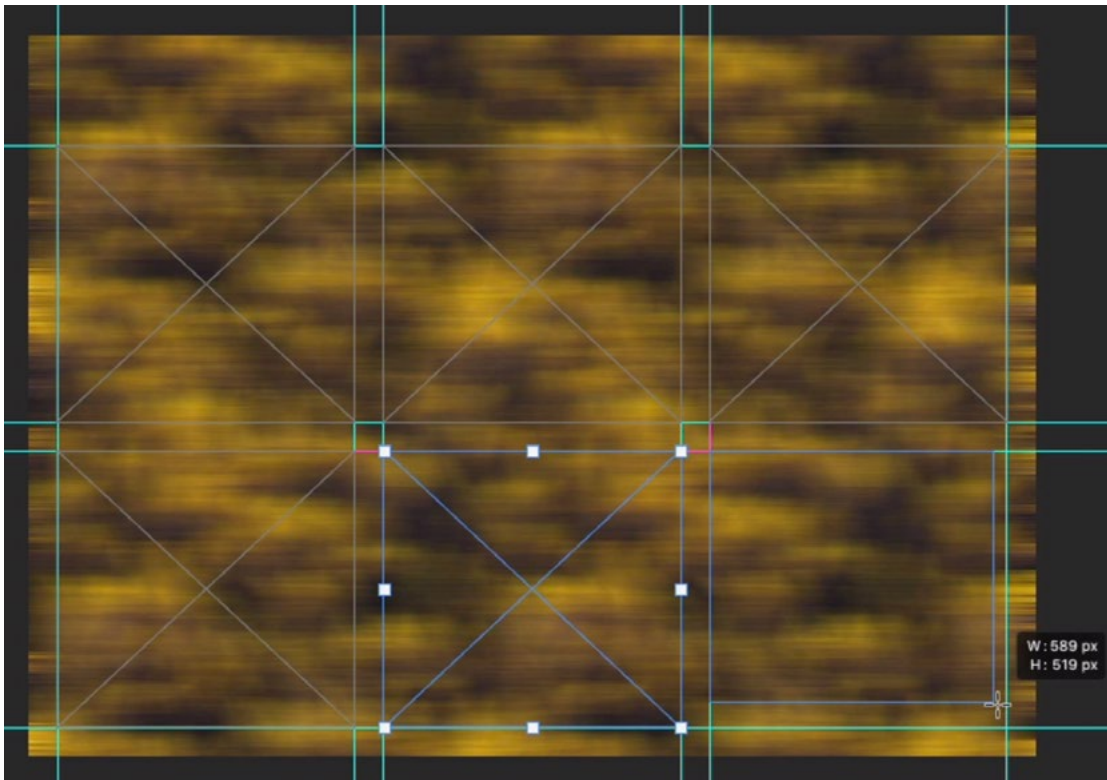
The Frame Tool is being used to drag out boxes inside the guides.

Insert Images It's time to place images inside the frames, but we need to be careful when doing this, because we're still recording the action. The action needs to know which frame should be active. We'll click on Frame 1 within the Layers Panel to make that first frame active. Then we'll go to the location where we exported the images from Lightroom. In the video, that's a folder that was created on the desktop. We'll open the folder and drag the first image directly into that first frame in Photoshop. The image will scale down automatically so that the width or height is sized to perfectly fit the frame.
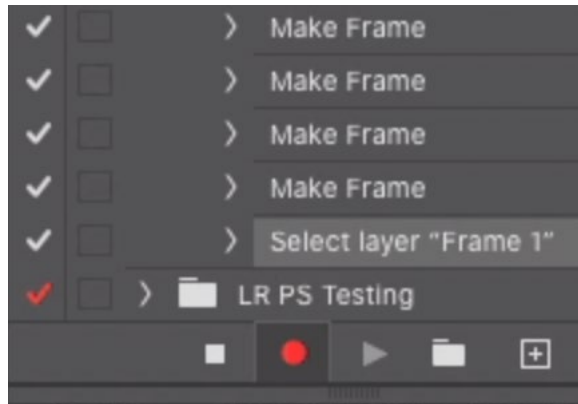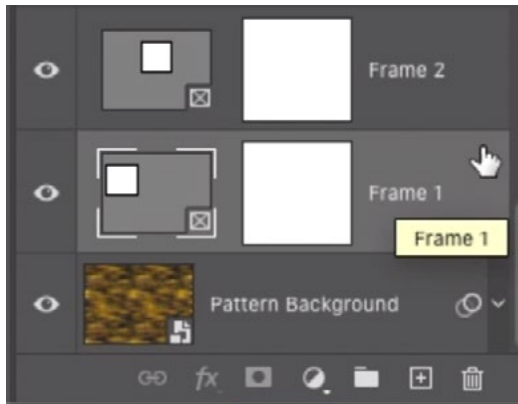
We clicked on the first frame to make it active and you can see that it was recorded in the action.

We'll click on the second frame in the Layers Panel to make it active. We'll go back to the image folder and drag the second image into this second frame. We'll repeat this process with all six images, making sure to go in order and to activate each frame before dragging the image into it.

After all images have been placed, we can remove the guides by clicking on the View menu and choosing Clear Guides.
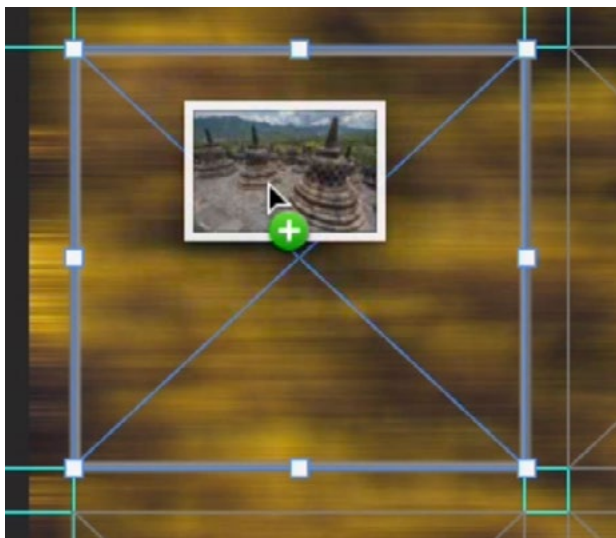
The images are being dragged from the folder on the hard drive, directly into the photo frames.

Create layer group and add a Drop Shadow We can create a drop shadow behind the images to create a little more separation from the background, but we'll need to do this in a special way because layer styles do not work properly on frame layers. To get around this, we'll select all of the frame layers in the Layers Panel and we'll click on the Folder icon at the bottom of the panel. This will place all of the layers into a folder, or group. With the group active, you can apply a layer style and it will collectively apply the style to everything that's inside the folder.

We'll make sure the group is active and we'll click on the FX icon at the bottom of the Layers Panel and choose Drop Shadow from the pop-up menu. We'll use the Drop Shadow settings to adjust the size, opacity and distance of the shadow, looking at the preview in the main image window. When we're happy with the result, we'll click OK to exit the Layer Style dialog.
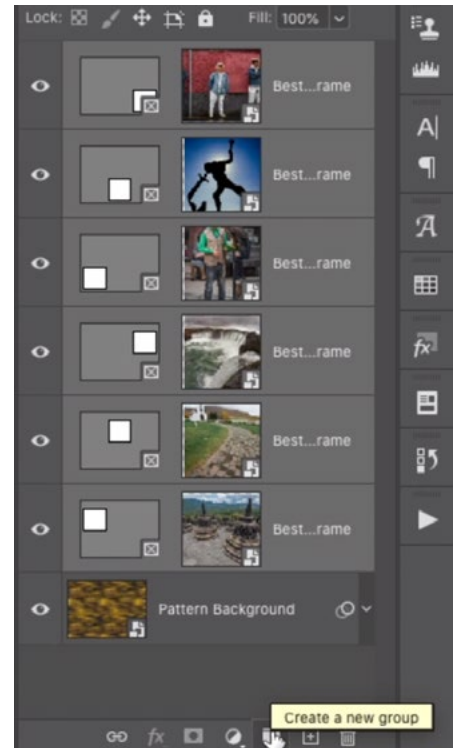
All of the layers are selected and we are clicking the New Folder icon to place them inside a layer group.

Add Text Now we're going to add some text to the layout. Before adding a new layer, we're going to click on the Select menu and choose Deselect Layers. (Because we're recording an action, it's best to create a new layer when there are no layers active already.)


The foreground color is being set to determine the color of the text.

We'll activate the Text Tool, which can be found in the Toolbar on the left side of the screen. The Text Tool is going to apply the foreground color to the text and it's important that we manually set the foreground color so that it's recorded in the action. If we didn't do this, the action will use whatever foreground color is active at the time. We'll click on the foreground color swatch and use the Color Picker to select a color. We'll click OK to close the Color Picker.

We'll make sure that the center justification icon is active in the Options Bar and we'll click in the top center area of the image. This will insert some highlighted placeholder text. We'll type in our new next and we'll use the font and size settings in the Options Bar to specify what the text should look like. It's important to manually use these settings so that the font, style, size etc. is recorded in the action.

The text should be centered in the document so we'll activate the Move Tool. Because only one layer is active, the alignment icons in the Options Bar are grayed out. We can get around this by clicking on the Select menu and choosing All. This will create a selection of the entire document. Whenever there is a selection active, the alignment icons will appear and they will align the current layer with the selection. We'll click the align center icon to center the text. We'll click on the Select menu again and choose Deselect.
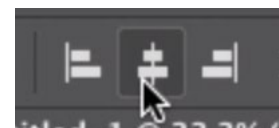
The Align Centers icon

I like to add a drop shadow to the text as well, so with the Type layer active, we'll click on the FX icon at the bottom of the Layers Panel and choose Drop Shadow from the pop-up menu. The Layer Style dialog will appear and we'll set the drop shadow settings and then click OK.
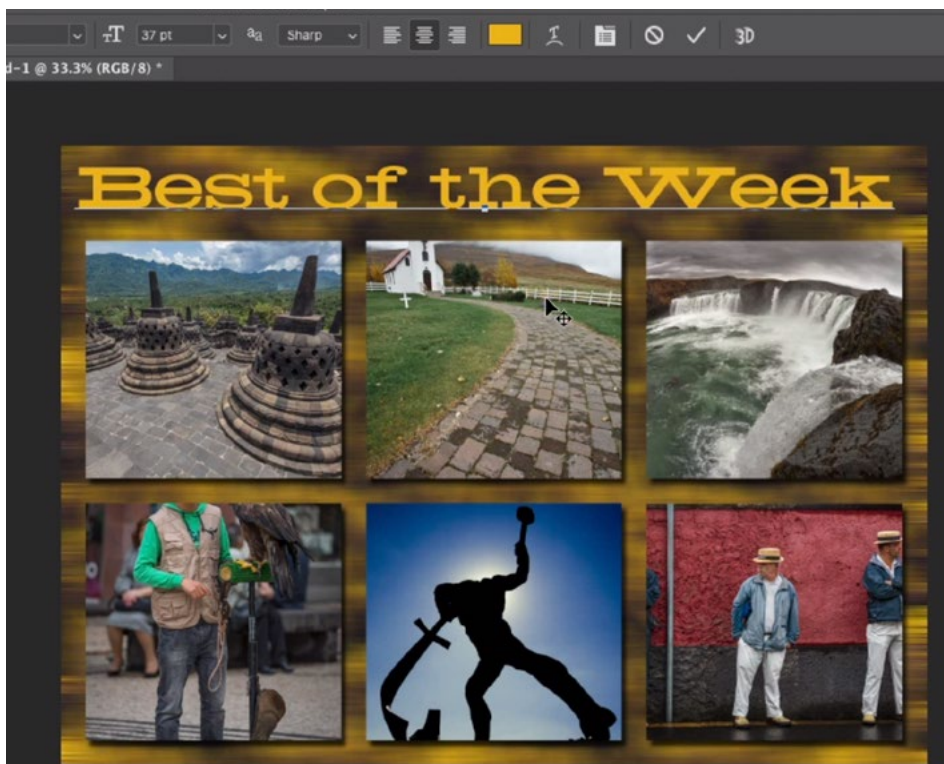

The Text Tool is being used to add text and we're using the settings in the Options Bar to specify the size, font, etc. All of these things will be recorded in the action.

Stop recording and test action We'll now open the Actions Panel again and click on the Stop button at the bottom of the panel. This will stop recording the action. We could test the action by first closing the document (because the action started with no active document), then opening the Actions Panel in Photoshop's main interface, clicking on the name of the action and then clicking the Play button.

Adjusting the Results (29:01)

The action was created so that the background pattern is a smart object. This means that we can change it after running the action if we'd like the background to be different. We would double-click on the Pattern Background layer and it will open in a separate Photoshop document window (because it's a Smart Object). Here, we could click on the thumbnail in the Layers Panel to call up the pattern picker, choose a different pattern and then click ok. When we save and close this document, the smart object layer will update in the original layout document. The smart filter will be reapplied so that the motion blur is applied to the new pattern.

We can also use the Move Tool to re-position the images within their individual frames. If the Auto-Select setting (in the Options Bar) is turned off, you can hold down the Command key (Ctrl on Win) and click on one of the image boxes to make it active. We'll double-click on the image to make it active. We can then reposition the content. (If you did not double-click to first make the image active, then the frame would move along with the image and that's not what we want.)
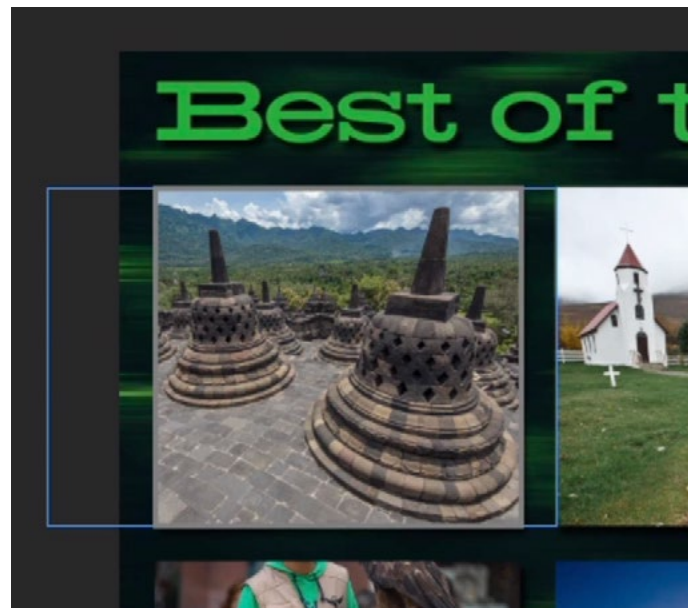
With the Move Tool active, we activated the frame layer and double-clicked on the image so that we could drag it around inside the frame.

Using the Action (31:50)

After using the action to create a layout, you can discard that resulting file, as well as the folder of images that was exported from Lightroom, because the action will not need any of that in order to work again.

The next time you want to create a layout, select the images in Lightroom's Library Module and export them using the Export preset we created early in the lesson. This will place the new folder of images on your hard drive. Then, open Photoshop and run the action. It will automatically find the folder and use the included images to create the layout.