Selection-Producing Actions

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This lesson is going to focus on actions. I have created some actions for you, so even if you have no interest in building your own actions, you'll be able to apply these and do interesting things with your images. All of these actions are designed to make a selection of a particular area or to remove the background on something.

In order to load and use actions, you will need to have the Actions Panel open in Photoshop. If it's not already open, you can access it by clicking on the Window menu and choosing "Actions." The panel will contain a list of all the actions that are loaded in Photoshop.

Loading the Actions into Photoshop

The actions included with this lesson are contained within a folder called "Ben's Selections." When you download the actions from the lesson page, they will be compressed into a zipped file. You will need to double-click on this zipped file in order to "unzip" the file and see its contents. Once unzipped/uncompressed, the file name will end with ".atn." To load the actions into Photoshop, you can usually simply double-click on the file. Photoshop will come to the forefront on your screen, indicating that the actions were successfully loaded.

If, for some reason, the actions do not load by double-clicking on the file, then you can load them manually. To do this, open the Actions Panel in Photoshop and click on the little menu in the top right corner of the panel. From this menu, choose the "Load Actions" option. You'll be prompted to navigate your hard drive to the location where the actions file is stored. Be sure that you choose the file that has been unzipped.
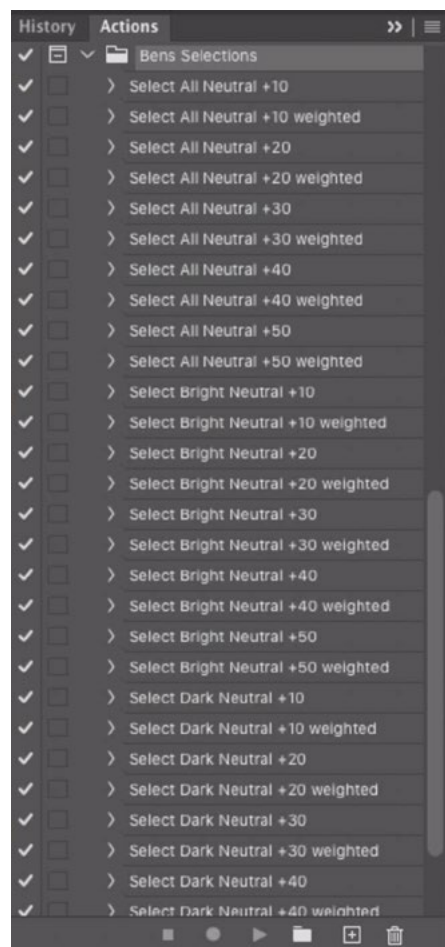

The Actions Panel is expanded to show "Bens Selections" actions.
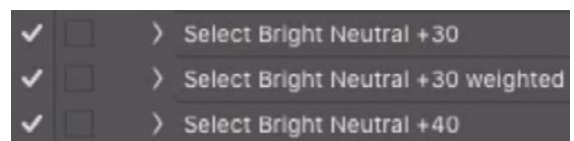
What the Actions Do

When you expand the "Bens Selections" folder within the Actions Panel, you will see all of the actions contained inside. Let's look at what the actions do.

Select Neutral Actions All of the actions that have the word "Neutral" in the name are designed for selecting neutral areas within your image. These are areas that contain no hint of color. By isolating these neutral areas, you can create some interesting effects with your images. You could shift the neutral areas while leaving the colored areas untouched. You could also do the opposite, shifting the colored areas while leaving the neutral areas untouched. To do this, you would first need to invert the selection by clicking on the Select menu and choosing "Inverse."

All Neutral The actions with "All Neutral" in the name will create selections that target the full brightness range, all the way from white to black

> Select All Neutral +10
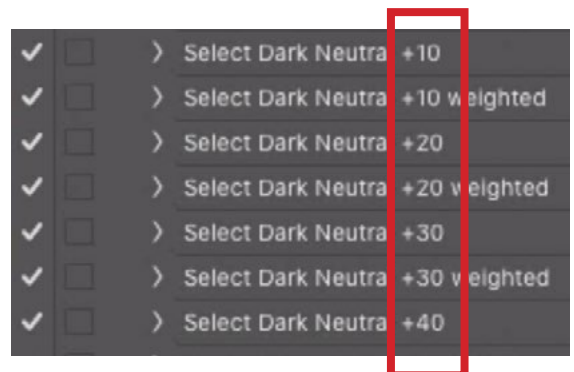> Select All Neutral +10 weighted
> Select All Neutral +20
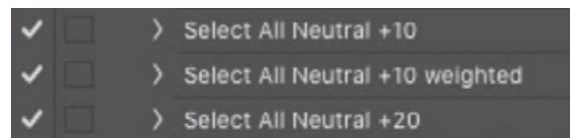
Select Bright Neutral The actions with "Select Bright Neutral" in the name will ignore the dark parts of the picture, only selecting the bright, neutral areas.

> Select Bright Neutral +30
> Select Bright Neutral +30 weighted
> Select Bright Neutral +40

Select Dark Neutral The actions with "Select Dark Neutral" in the name will create selections of the dark, neutral areas in the image, ignoring the bright parts of the picture.

> Select Dark Neutral +10
> Select Dark Neutral +10 weighted
> Select Dark Neutral +20
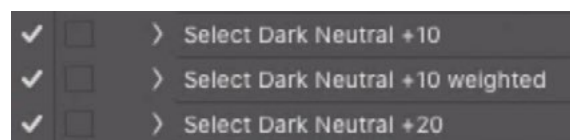
Number variations All of the action names contain a number at the end. This number determines how much the selection is going to deviate from the areas that are truly neutral. If the selection did not deviate at all from the neutral areas, the selection would be crude in that it would not be smooth. The transition be-

> Select Dark Neutra +10
> Select Dark Neutra +10 weighted
> Select Dark Neutra +20
> Select Dark Neutra +20 weighted
> Select Dark Neutra +30
> Select Dark Neutra +30 weighted
> Select Dark Neutra +40

tween the selected areas and unselected areas would be abrupt and unnatural. By allowing a small amount of color to be selected, the transition will become smoother. The higher the number, the more you will be expanding the selection, allowing the action to deviate more and more from the neutral tones. The smallest number is +10 and the highest number is +50.

Weighted Some of the actions have the word "weighted" in the name. These actions will adjust the image before making the selection to make mellow colors even mellower. Therefore, these actions will select a wider range of tones.

Running an Action

To run one of these actions on the active image, open the Actions Panel and click on the action you would like to run. This will make it active. Then, click the triangular Play button at

the bottom of the Actions Panel. The action will run and you will end up with a "marching ants" selection of the neutral tones in the image.
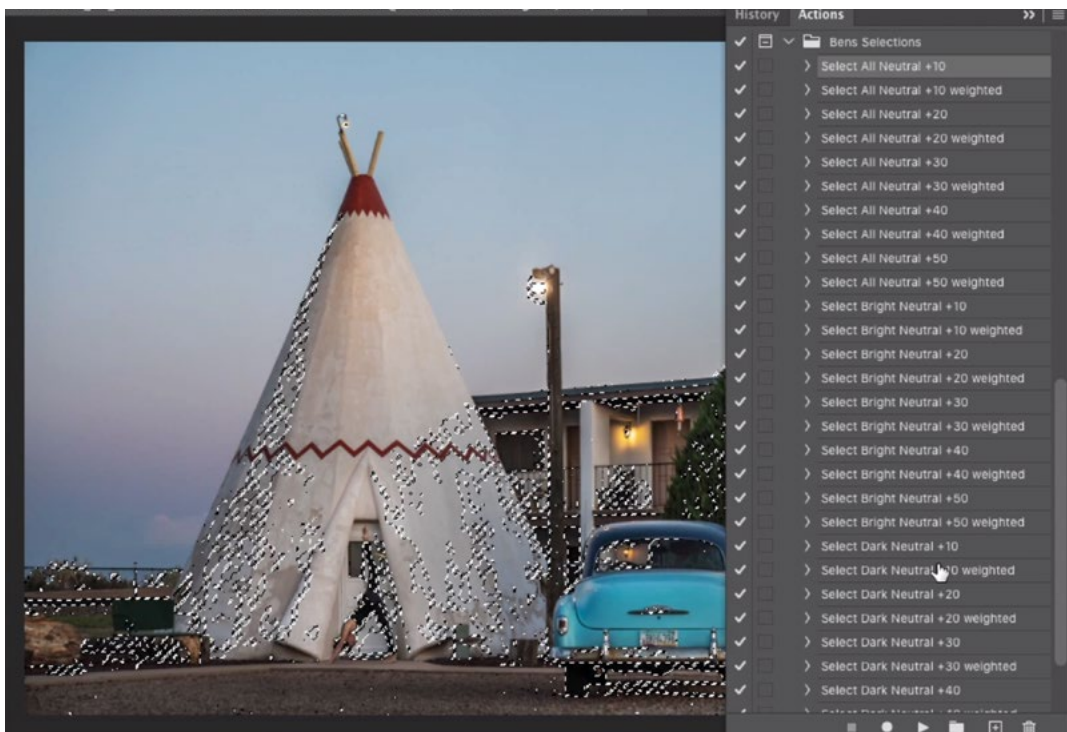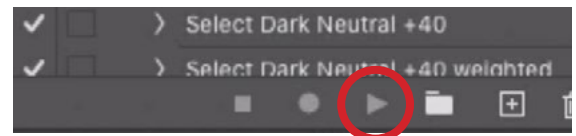
After running one of the actions, you'll be left with a "marching ants" selection around the targeted neutral area.

Using the Selection to Make an Adjustment

After you have used an action to create a selection, you can use that selection to create any kind of adjustment you'd like. Click on the Adjustment Layer icon at the bottom of the Layers Panel and choose the desired adjustment. Let's say you choose a Curves adjustment (my favorite type of adjustment). The selection will automatically be applied to the adjustment layer's mask. Everything that was selected will be the white part of the mask. The white areas are the parts that will be visible, which means that they're the areas that the adjustment will visibly affect.

When you make changes using the settings in the Properties Panel, those changes will only be reflected in those neutral areas that were selected. If the edges of the selection were too harsh and the effect looks blotchy, then you will need to re-create the selection using one of the actions with a higher tolerance number at the end of the name.

After applying an adjustment layer, you can get a direct view of what areas are being isolated by the layer mask. Hold down the Option key (Alt on Win) and click on the layer mask thumbnail to see a black and white view of the layer mask directly in the image window. In this view, the black areas are not being changed at all by the adjustment layer. The white areas are the parts where the adjustment is visible.

Special Logo Actions

There are also two special actions at the bottom of the list. These are designed to create selections of logos, graphics and signatures that you might have scanned.

Pop Black Logo off White Background This action will assume that what you want to keep is black and everything else is white. When you run this action, it will pause when the Levels adjustment dialog box appears. This will allow you to manually adjust the Levels sliders to refine the selection. You'll need to do this when the preview is not perfectly black and white. The logo or signature should be perfectly white and everything else should be perfectly black. If that's not the case, you can use the sliders directly beneath the Levels bar chart. If the background is not

perfectly black, drag the black slider to the right until it becomes black. If the logo is not perfectly white, drag the white slider to the left until it becomes white. Click OK when you're done and the action will complete. When the action is done, it will have removed the background by using a layer mask to only reveal the logo (or signature).
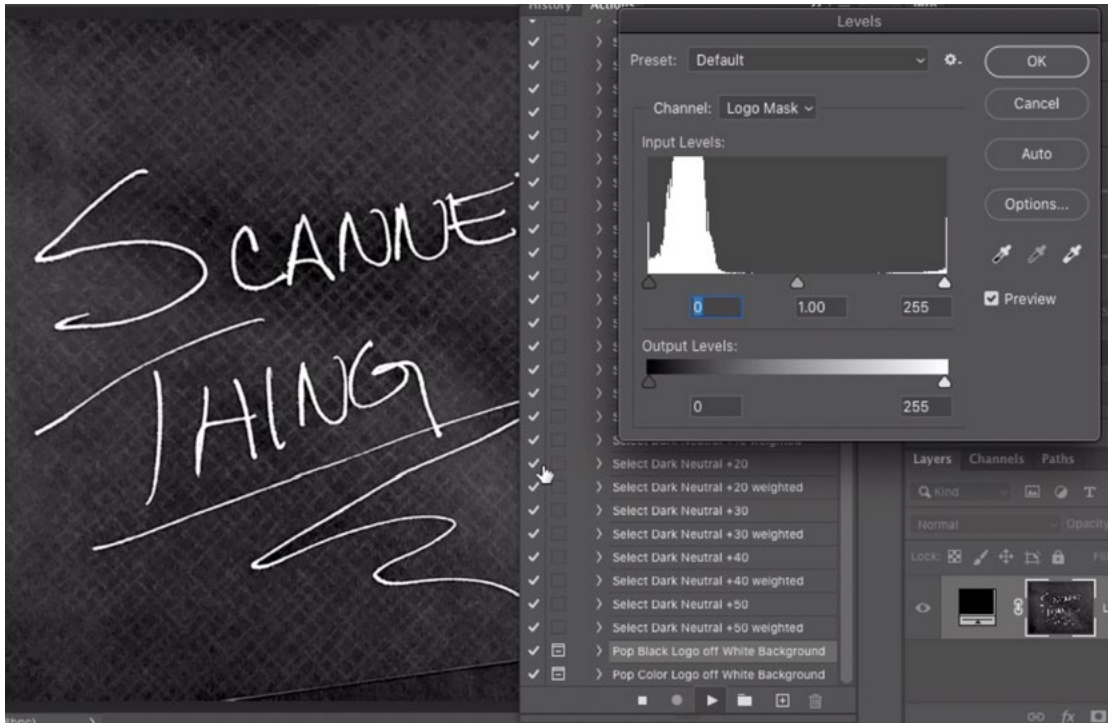
The action pauses when the Levels dialog is open. You can see that the background is not perfectly black, and the Levels sliders can be used to fix this.
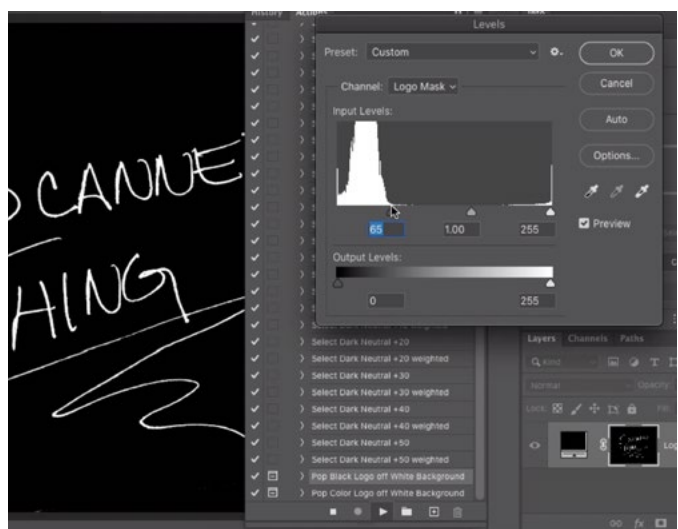
The black Levels slider is being moved to the right, forcing more parts of the mask to black.
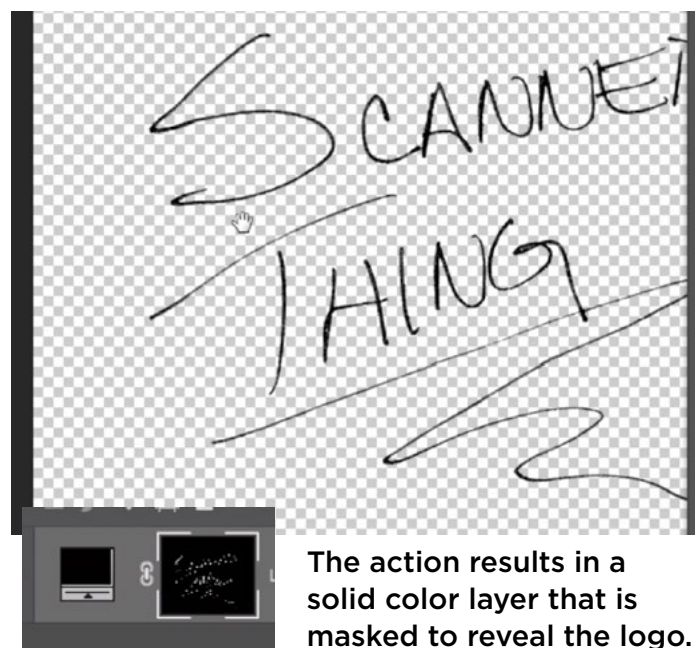
The action results in a solid color layer that is masked to reveal the logo.

Pop Color Logo off White Background This action is similar to the previous action, but it allows you to make selections of logos or graphics that contain color. Note that this action will not do a good job with complex color logos that contain shadows, shading or dimension. It's best for simple logos, where the various colors don't bump up against each other too much.

When you play this action, it will again pause with the Levels dialog open. This just gives you the opportunity to refine the selection and will be mainly be useful when the image was scanned in and the selection has jagged edges. If the selection looks ok, you can just click the OK button to exit the Levels dialog.
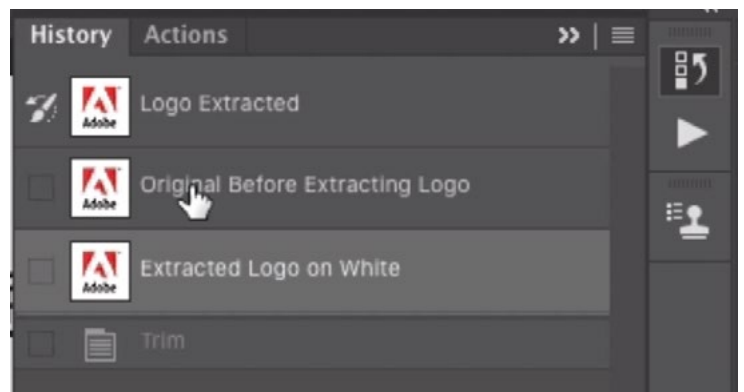
After the action has completed, the background will be removed by the use of a layer mask that is attached to the image layer. The action also creates a few Snapshots, which can be found within the History panel. Snapshots allow you to revert an image to an earlier state of the document. The "Logo Extracted" snapshot is the result that you'll have ended up with, where the layer is masked to extract the logo. The "Original Before Extracting Logo" snapshot will revert the document to show the original image.

The action completed and the layer mask is being used to isolate the logo and hide the background.

The "Extracted Logo on White" snapshot has the extracted logo with a white solid color layer beneath it. This will allow you to compare the extracted logo to the original image so that you can inspect the edges.

The action also creates a few History states that provide different versions of the result.

The "Trim" step that you'll see in the History Panel will trim the image so that there is no extra space around the edges of the logo.