

Layers Part 2 Layer Masks

Now that we're comfortable using layers, let's put them to use. Let's explore Layer Masks.

A Layer Mask allows you to see through certain parts of a layer to view the layer below. Sounds very confusing, it is for a while.

Let's demonstrate how this works.

Add a new Layer in Photoshop File New, make it US Paper and 8 1/2 by 11, 300m DPI and 16 bits and make it Green in color. The Layer is locked and is named Background, let's unlock the Layer by holding the Alt/Option Key and clicking on the lock and then change it's name to 'Bottom'.

Let's add another layer using ⌘+J, this is also green and named Bottom Copy, let's change it's color by using ⌘+A to select all, the Edit>Fill and click on Color, then double click on color again and you'll get a color display, choose Red and click OK Twice. Now change the layer name to Top. Use ⌘+D to Deselect the marching ants.

We can use the Eraser Tool to cut holes in the top Layer to see parts of the bottom layer, but this is destructive and will permanently damage the image.

Let me introduce Layer Masks, a layer mask will allow you to select areas of an image that can be masked out allowing you to look through an upper layer and see the layer below.

Well, the best way to learn and use layer masks is to use them to demonstrate how they can be useful in our workflow.

So, let's go back to our Photoshop image with 2 layers, Top & Bottom.

With the Top Layer highlighted, click on the Add Layer Mask Icon, it looks like a Front Loading Washing Machine. This will add a Layer Mask to the right of the thumbnail. Notice that the Mask is a solid white in color, this means that the mask reveals the layer it's attached to.

To demonstrate how the Mask works, let's paint with black on the Mask. Make sure the foreground color is Black click the 'x' key to alternate between foreground and background colors, if the colors are not White and Black, click the 'D' key to set the default foreground and background colors. Just make sure the foreground is black.

Select the Paint Brush from the toolbar (B), set the brush size to 150 px, the Hardness to 50% and the Opacity to 100%.

Now paint with black on the top layer. As you paint portions of the bottom layer are revealed.

This can be really useful in many applications and there are several ways to select what areas reveal and what areas conceal, the rule of thumb is that White Reveals and Black Conceals.