Photoshop Version 21.1.3

Layer Masks

Masks are attached to layers and appear to the right of the layer.

There are two types of layers that you can use masks on. These are pixel layers (normally photos, solid colour layers or blank layers we have painted on) or adjustment layers (layers that adjust colours / brightness, etc).

Masks are often associated with selections and to understand selections understanding masks is very important but masks have other functions for example using a brush to edit the extent of an adjustment.

An important part of masks is that it enables changes to be made to an individual action. If for example you made a specific change directly to the photo, then carried out many more changes and then noticed an error on the specific change you could possibly undo all the way back losing your subsequent changes, but with a layer and mask you can target just the specific change without affecting the other changes.

To create a mask, make sure you are on the layer that you want the mask to be associated with, click on the "Mask" icon on the bottom row, which is called Add Vector Mask. It's the white square with the black circle in the centre and the mask will appear to the right of the layer.

If you select an adjustment from the Adjustments panel or by clicking on the Adjustment layer icon on the bottom right when the layer opens a mask appears to the right automatically.

The mask that's created in either way is always white.

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To delete a layer mask, right click on it and select delete.

Masks are how we make things visible or invisible on a layer. You can do the equivalent of cutting out holes in a layer as you would with a paper layer. To do this you use the brush tool painting in black normally on a white layer mask or white on a black layer mask. Press Ctrl + I to invert the mask from white to black. Press Ctrl + I again to switch back. Invert is also accessible in the mask properties panel accessed by double clicking on it.

To hide things on the working layer and reveal the layer below, select the mask to ensure the correct layer mask is selected and a white boarder will be around the mask thumbnail.

Normally you use a black brush to reveal things in the layer below (i.e. cut a hole). The white area of the mask remains solid so you cannot see through it.

There are three very common issues why things aren't working correctly. One is still having the layer thumbnail selected and not selecting the mask (i.e. the layer itself is selected and has the white frame around it) and you will then paint directly on the photo with either black or white paint (just press Ctrl Z to undo). If you have the mask selected and are wondering why your changes aren't working, it could be you are using the wrong colour brush or another issue is if you have Caps Lock on you will lose your brush and only see a cross curser. I have done all three many times.

The phrase "Black reveals / White conceals" is often used to describe this. However, this phrase applies to the layer the mask is associated with NOT layers below. Therefore, the better way to remember this is "White reveals its own layer" / "Black conceals its own layer". (i.e. White makes the working layer visible, black makes the working layer invisible).

You don't really have to remember this as there are only two options to brush with, black or white, try black and if it doesn't work you only have one other choice and that's white.

Depending on what you want to do and to reduce the amount of brushing you can "Invert" the mask itself so if its white, select the mask and press Ctrl I and the mask will turn black and the current layer would be hidden and the layer below would be fully visible. Then you would use a white brush to bring back some of the current layer and hide the layer below.

If you take a black brush and pain on a white mask this will make the current layer invisible and thus expose the layer below. If white is set as the foreground colour click on the two bent arrows or press X on the keyboard and the white and black will swap around. If another colour is shown as the foreground just click on the two smaller black/white squares to the left of the larger black and white squares or press D on the keyboard.

Select a Brush Tool from the tool menu on the left. Select a soft edge brush and size as appropriate on the options bar. The square bracket "]" makes the brush larger and the "[" makes the brush smaller.

You can adjust the opacity and flow of the brush as required using the adjustment sliders on the top row above the image. As you reduce the opacity the brush will become a shade of grey and it only partially exposes the layer below.

This partial masking on photo (pixel) layers is called exposure blending as you blend the pixels from both layers. Therefore, if you had a red layer above a blue layer and used a 50% opacity black brush on a white mask you would get a magenta or purple colour.

If, on a white mask, you go too far with the black brush, change the brush to white and paint over the black brush marks, this will remove the black brush marks and reveal the change again. Do the opposite if working on a black mask.

You can reduce the opacity and flow of the brush to reduce the effect and blend it in.

To see the image without the mask affects being visible, Shift click on the mask and a red cross will appear on the mask so it's no longer visible. Shift click again to bring the mask back. You can also open the mask properties and click on the eye icon to do the same thing.

If you hold down Alt and click on the mask you can see what the mask looks like on the main viewing screen. Alt click again to go back to the normal view.

To copy a mask to another layer, Alt click on the mask to be copied and without releasing the mouse drag it to where to where you want it to go. This duplicates the mask.

You can also use selections to create a mask and depending on what you want to do the mask can have the subject shown in white (so its visible on this layer) or in black (so it's not visible on this layer).

If you want something to partially show through you can reduce the layer opacity using the slider on the right of the layer or for specific areas use a reduced opacity brush (with the mask selected). 50% Opacity with a black brush is like painting with grey and on a layer mask this is semi opaque.

With whatever % Opacity is selected one brush stoke will be a semi-transparent and this will increase on each brush stroke until it become fully black and the layer below is fully visible.

You can be very accurate with brushing if you zoom in and select a hard-edged brush of a suitable size it allows you to get very close to edges up to a pixel level if required. Then you may go over other areas with a softer brush to blend in go over your hard edge brush marks if they are visible.

To get a mask back to white, select the mask and you can paint over with a white brush but a quicker way is to go to the Edit menu, select Fill and in the pop-up, menu select white (it's usually the default) and click ok.

To get a smooth transition you can use the Gradient Tool. Using the black and white gradient (this is usually the default) and linear (the box to the left next to the gradient colour picker). With the Gradient tool and the Mask selected click and drag on photo and it will place a black to white gradient on the mask. To keep the drag line straight hold down the Shift Key.

It drags from Black to white, so start where you want the black to be (i.e. where you want the photo below to be exposed on a white mask)

Long drag lines give a wide transition, short drag lines give a narrow transition. You can keep dragging, varying the length of the drag line until you get the transition you require.

You can then always use the brush to deal with any areas that haven't worked out as you wanted. It's often a good way to achieve the best transition by using both the gradient tool and the brush tool together.

The mask is linked to the layer and you can see a chain link symbol between the layer thumbnail and this indicated the layer mask is linked to the layer.

Most of the time you want them to move together so having them linked is what you want. To break the link so they don't move together just click on the link symbol between the layer thumbnail and the mask. This might be useful if you had brushed along a horizon in a sky change but wanted to pull down the sky layer with the move tool to reveal a higher area of sky.

You can also select the mask and move the mask with the move tool. To re-link them just click in the space between the layer thumbnail and the mask and the link symbol will reappear.

A mask also has properties and the main mask properties panel can be opened by double clicking on the selected mask thumbnail itself.

Selecting the mask and clicking on the properties icon to the left of the histogram opens the small properties menu.

The Layer Style menu is opened by double clicking on the layer image thumbnail.