

Using Photoshop® Digital Picture Enhancements Adjustment Layers Part 1

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What in the world are these “layers” and “masking” all about? The power of Photoshop® is in its ability to handle layers.

The major advantage to the layer approach allows you to make changes to one part of the image at a time. If you are not happy with it you can change it without affecting the rest of the image. Reference the video: (photoshop-101-part-9-of-9-using-adjustment-layers-for-local-targeted-corrections)

<http://www.msjphotography.com/index.php/2008/09/video-tutorial-photoshop-101-part-9-of-9-using-adjustment-layers-for-local-targeted-corrections/>. Mark Johnson, in the referenced video (which I strongly recommend you view), likens the layers to a multistory glass building being viewed from above as seen by an eagle flying over it. You (the eagle) see the top floor first and the other floors beneath. If there is something on one floor of the building it obscures the area/floor below. To look through something (remove the affect of an object on a floor) you need to make it transparent. This is done with a mask. To affect brightness one can turn on a light on a single floor or a multitude of floors. To affect contrast one can turn on a lamp in a corner of a room. These lighting changes can be different on each floor. We can add colored filters to our lights to affect hue and saturation. These major adjustments; brightness, contrast, hue & saturation are the main adjustments and adjustment layers that you will be using in Photoshop®.

All adjustment layers of Photoshop® work similarly in all versions (including Elements and CS) and all contain an attached (linked) mask. The major photographic adjustments involve brightness (or darkness) and contrast and color correction (or color saturation). All of these adjustments will generate their own new layer and you can have multiple versions of each. In addition to providing controlled changes to separate parts of the image, the use of adjustment layers requires far less memory than working on a layer with pixels (picture information). Each time you duplicate a pixel layer (with pixels) it costs you memory (both memory while running the software and memory while storing it on your hard drive).

Using adjustment layers is non-destructive. That is; it is not pixels that are changed permanently by the process you employed. It is instead, a set of instructions that Photoshop uses to operate on the layers below. The original image pixels at the bottom layer are not altered at all. As a result you can return to any adjustment layer and make changes without having to throw away the work you did on the original pixel layer (since you didn't do anything to it). The powerful adjustment layers that you should make part of your workflow are; “Levels”, “Curves”, “Hue & Saturation”. These will do most of your photographic adjustments. Levels and Curves (a more powerful version of Levels) provide ability to adjust exposure (brightness), contrast and color balance. The Hue and Saturation adjustment layer focuses on color adjustments and color saturation. Providing

zero saturation will remove all color and leave you with black and white. In this way you can convert color to black and white.

The mask linked to each adjustment layer allows you to prevent the adjustment from affecting parts of the image. You accomplish this by activating the mask in the layers pallet by clicking on the mask rectangle. It is usually active upon clicking OK in the adjustment layer window (when you finish your adjustments). A border is highlighted around the mask to indicate it is active. Set the foreground and background colors to the default Black and White by pressing the letter “d” on the keyboard. Make the foreground Black by pressing the letter “x” to toggle it, or left clicking the little double arrow in the upper right hand corner of the foreground/background tool icon. Choose a brush tool or press “b” and paint on the mask by holding the left mouse key down while dragging the mouse over the area you want to mask. The thing to remember is; white reveals and black hides the affect of the adjustment layer being worked on. If you make a mistake just toggle the color and paint over it with the opposite color. By changing the brush opacity you can paint with shades of gray which will permit partial transparency. This allows you to “fine-tune” the adjustment.

Watch for a future article discussing how to use these adjustment layers.