

Masking FAQs

What is a layer mask?

A layer mask is a gray-scale image that is used to control effects applied to a layer. A layer mask controls only the layer with which it is associated. It does not affect underlying layers. A layer mask has the same dimensions as the layer it controls.

How does a gray-scale image act as a mask?

White allows full effect or visibility respectively for adjustment layers or pixel-containing layers respectively. Black prevents the effect of an adjustment layer or renders the pixels transparent of a pixel-containing layer. Shades of gray have intermediate effects. Remember: white areas in a mask reveal the information on the layer; black areas conceal that information.

What are layer masks used for?

Layer masks are extremely versatile tools for selectively controlling effects. For example, they are used to control contrast, color hue and saturation, and sharpening. They are essential for compositing. Furthermore, they are flexible, non-destructive and editable.

How is a mask created?

A Mask can be created in several ways:

1. A mask can be created from any of the selection tools
2. A mask can be created from an existing channel
3. A mask can be creating from a synthesized channel
4. A mask can be created by using a drawing or painting tool on a channel.

The choice of method depends on the desired effect.

How can a selection be converted into a mask?

The answer depends on the nature of the layer which is destined to hold the mask.

For adjustment layers: load the selection (if is not already loaded). Then create the adjustment layer. The layer mask will now contain the gray-scale rendering of the selection.

For image layers (layers with pixels): After creating the image layer load the selection and press the add layer mask button at the bottom of the layers palette.

How do I make a selection?

A selection may be made using any of the selection tools (e.g., lasso, magic wand, etc.) or from the Select>Color Range menu item. Selections may also be made by loading an alpha-channel. Thus, any operation that can be made that result in an alpha channel can be converted into a selection.

How do I save a selection?

Navigate to the bottom of the channels palette and click the save selection button. The selection will now be saved as an alpha channel.

How do I convert a saved selection (alpha channel) into a loaded selection?

Activate the channels palette and ctl (cmd)-click on the alpha channel. The selection will now be loaded and appear as moving dashed lines (“marching ants”). Note: only those parts of the selection that are 50% or more selected (i.e. from mid-gray to white) will be outlined as marching ants.

How do I hide the marching ants in a loaded selection?

Press ctl (cmd)-H. Note that the selection is still active.

How do I deselect a loaded selection?

Press ctl (cmd)-D

How do I use the drawing and painting tools to create a mask?

Make sure the layer you wish to mask is visible and has a layer mask with it. If it does not, then add a layer mask from the Layer menu, choosing either reveal all or hide all will determine whether the layer mask will be filled with white or with black. Now, with layer mask selected in the layer palette (heavy outline around the layer mask thumb-nail), you may paint on the mask.

What is the usual workflow in using masks?

There are basically three approaches:

1. Apply the effect to the layer and then add the mask to control the effect.
2. Load the mask as a selection and then create the effect.
3. Create a layer and then add the selection as a layer mask.