

An Introduction to Layer Masking in Photoshop

By

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Introduction

Layers are the heart of Photoshop and are the essence of flexibility in image editing. Layer masking is an integral part of layers in that they allow parts of a layer to be hidden allowing elements on underlying layers to show through. This tutorial will demonstrate the power of layer masking by creating three text layers, two of which will be hidden by a colour fill layer. By the use of layer masking, elements on the lower layers will be revealed.

Shortcuts

Shortcuts can save a lot of time when working in Photoshop and I believe in using them whenever and wherever possible. Shortcuts can speed up the workflow considerably and, quite often, reduce the need for repetitive and time-consuming visits to the Menu bar.

Each time you visit the Menu bar to carry out a function, check to see if a shortcut is available. If there is, try to memorise it. Using the more common ones will soon become intuitive. The more you use shortcuts the more familiar they will become and Photoshop will become a much smoother and more enjoyable activity. Where shortcuts are available for the actions carried out in this tutorial they will be indicated in brackets.

Both PC and Mac shortcuts will be indicated in the form of 'PC/Mac+relevant keystroke'. The keystrokes that differ between PC and Mac are: PC Ctrl = Mac Cmd; PC Alt = Mac Opt. Shift is common to both platforms. For example, the shortcut to duplicate a layer is Ctrl/Cmd+J. Note that letter keys are not case sensitive. They are indicated in upper case for clarity purposes only.

Method

Step 1. Create a new document in Photoshop. Any size will do. For this example a 15cm x 10cm document was created.

1. From the Menu select File > New (Ctrl/Cmd+N).
2. Enter your dimension requirements and click OK.

The parameters for this document are shown on the right in Fig 1.

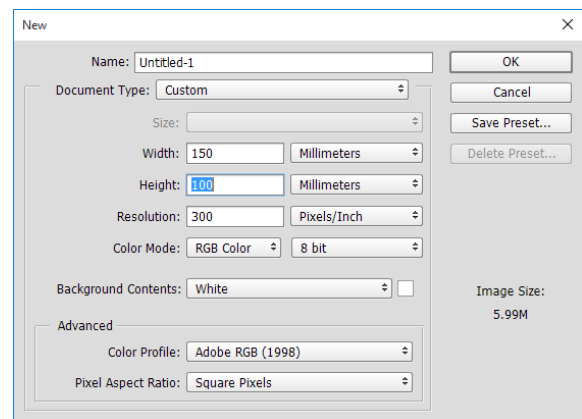


Fig 1

Step 2. Enter some text.

1. Select the Text tool from the Toolbox.
2. Select a font. The example, Fig 2 at the top of the next page, shows Comic Sans MS regular.
3. Select a font size. 48pt was used in the example.
4. Enter some text. The example shows 'Shade' in the lower right of the document. The final result will show 'Sunshine & Shade'. Note that a new Text layer has been created.
5. Click the tick box on the options bar to finalize the text entry.

Note: To edit text, double-click the text layer thumbnail in the layers panel. This will select the text and enable editing. Click the tick box on the options bar to finalize the edit.

The actions in step 2 are shown in Fig 2 on the next page.

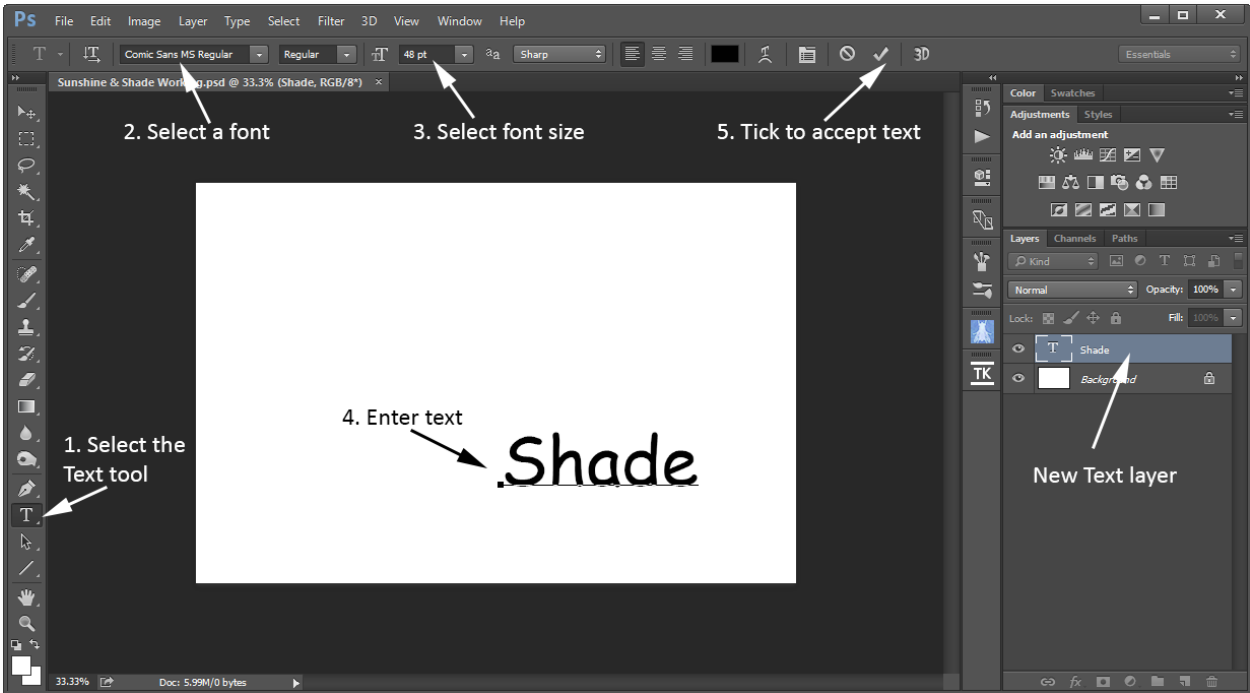


Fig 2

Step 3. Create another text layer. The text tool should still be active.

1. Click somewhere in the centre of your document. Type more text. Here the ampersand has been entered.
 2. Click the tick on the Options bar. The result of step 3 is shown in Fig 3 below.
- Note that a new text layer has been created.

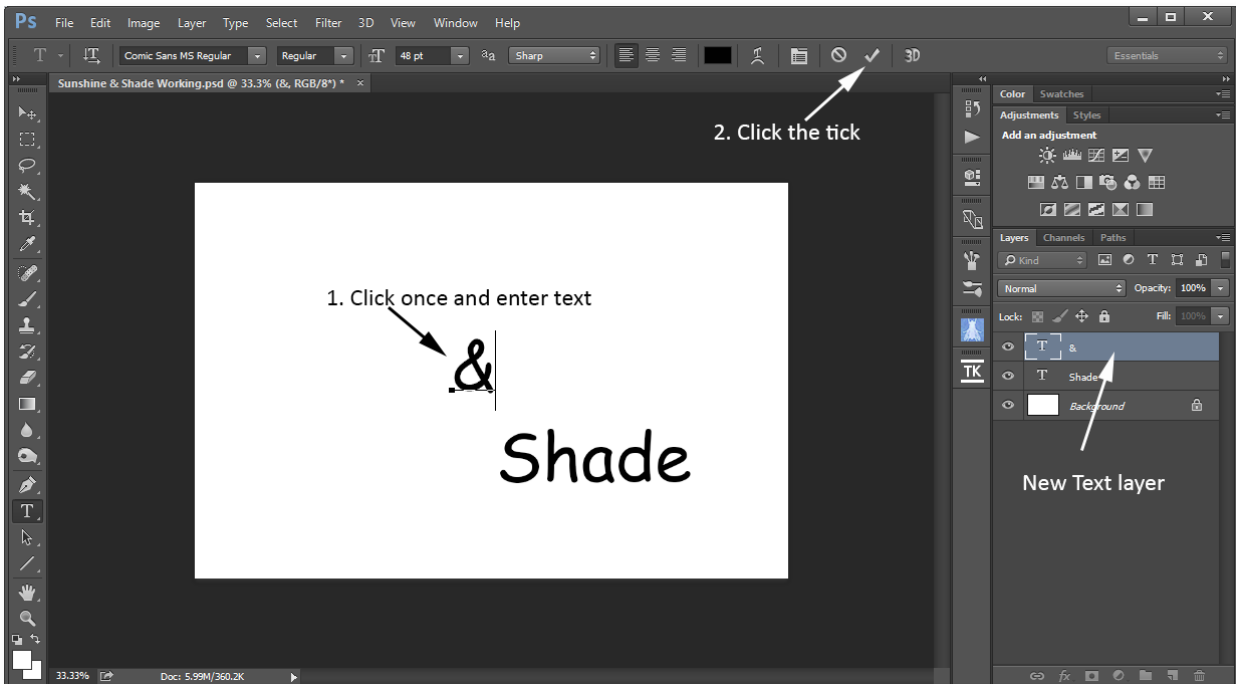


Fig 3

Step 4. Create a new layer and fill it with a colour. The most flexible way to do this is to apply a solid color fill layer using the 'Create an adjustment layer' icon located at the bottom of the layers panel. The adjustment layer icon is the half black–half white circle, outlined in red in Fig 4.



Fig 4

1. Click on the icon and select the top option from the resulting adjustment layer menu – Solid Color.
2. Select a colour from the resulting Color Picker dialog box and click OK.

The reason that this method is recommended for creating a solid fill colour is that an adjustment layer is created. Adjustment layers are, as the name suggests, adjustable. Double-clicking on the layer thumbnail will activate the Color Picker and, if necessary the colour of the fill can be easily changed. Had a new layer been created and then filled with a colour it would have taken more steps to create and changing that colour (if required) would be a slightly longer process too.

Adjustment layers = flexibility and non destructive editing.

The image will now be filled whatever colour you have chosen (blue is the chosen colour for this example) and the text layers will no longer be visible. This is because the blue fill layer is totally covering both the underlying layers. Whatever was on those layers, text or images, would be hidden from view.

Note that the Color Fill adjustment layer has a white square next to the layer thumbnail. This is a layer mask. By default, adjustment layers are applied with a layer mask attached. The layer mask is currently white which means the contents of the layer are totally visible.

In layer masking, white reveals – black conceals.

Step 5. Create another text layer.

1. Select the Text tool from the Toolbox. The previously selected font and options will still be active.
2. Click the little black square located towards the right on the Options Bar as shown in Fig 6, on the right. This will activate the Color Picker dialog box. Pick a bright colour and click OK.
3. Enter some text and click the tick to accept.



Fig 6

The image will now look like Fig 7, shown below.

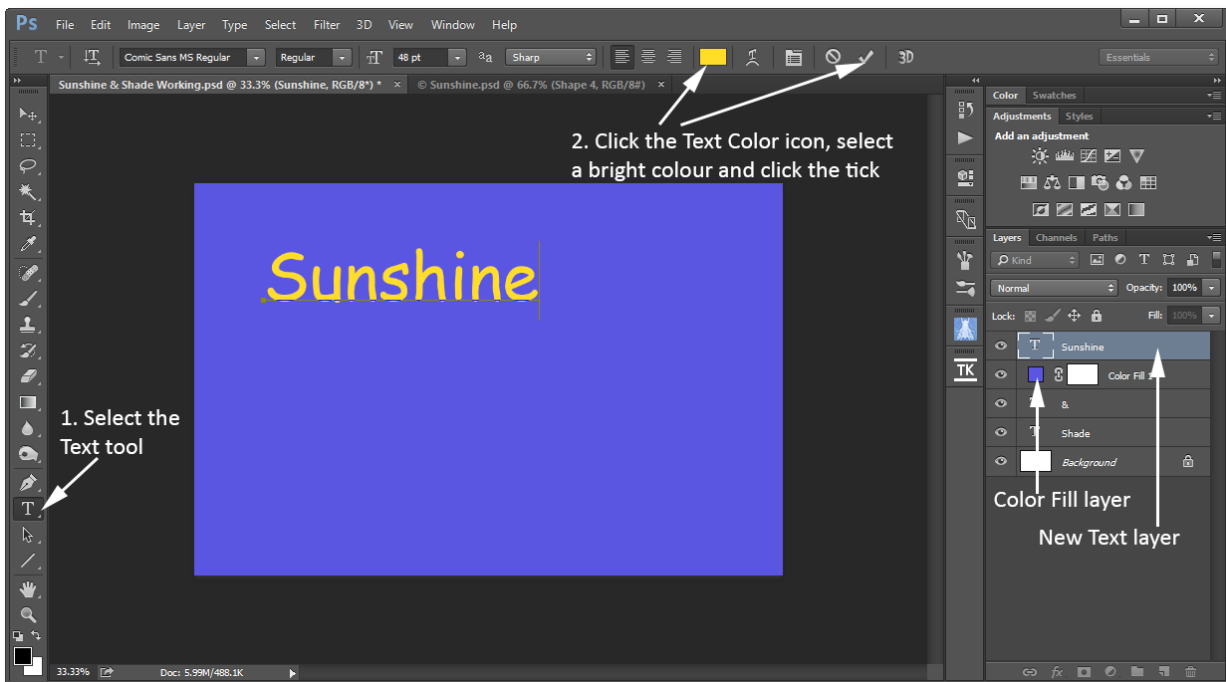


Fig 7

The final step is to paint on the layer mask to reveal the underlying layers. However, before doing that, it is worth explaining why layer masks are used.

Photoshop has an eraser tool, which does exactly what it is designed to do – it erases. The problem with erasing is that, once done, it is not always possible to un-erase. Once the limit of the History states has been exceeded your actions are committed. There is no going back. Layer masking is the way around this limitation. Layer masking is non-destructive and anything that is masked (painted with black) can be unmasked (painted with white) at any time. This non-destructive method is a much preferred way of working.

Step 6. Paint on the layer mask.

1. Ensure the color-filled layer is active. Click on the layer thumbnail to activate it, if necessary.
2. Click on the layer mask attached to the layer. You will notice a frame around the edges to show it is active.

3. Ensure the colours are set to default and black is the foreground colour.
Hit 'D' to set the default colours. 'X' will toggle between black and white.
4. Select the Brush tool from the Toolbar.
5. Set a suitable brush size and hardness from the Brush Options bar.
0% Hardness is the softest brush. 100% Hardness is the hardest brush. Any option in between can, of course, be set by varying the hardness slider. Soft and hard brush settings are shown in Figs 8 and 9 below.

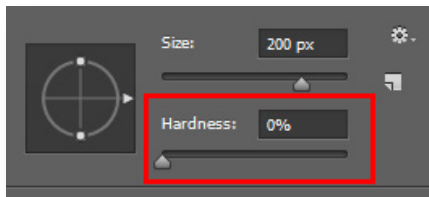


Fig 8

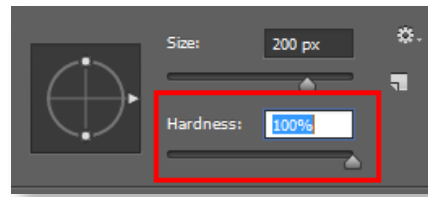


Fig 9

A quicker and more intuitive method of changing the brush size is to use the square bracket ([]) keys. The left bracket key makes the brush smaller; the right bracket key makes the brush bigger. The size can be determined as it increases or decreases. Using the shift key in conjunction with the square bracket keys alters the hardness setting. Shift+[makes the brush softer. Shift+] makes the brush harder.

6. Paint on the layer mask with a hard brush where the second text entry was located. The character will appear as you paint.

7. Change the brush settings to soft and paint over the area where the first word was created.

Note the differences in the edges of the painted areas in Fig 10, below.

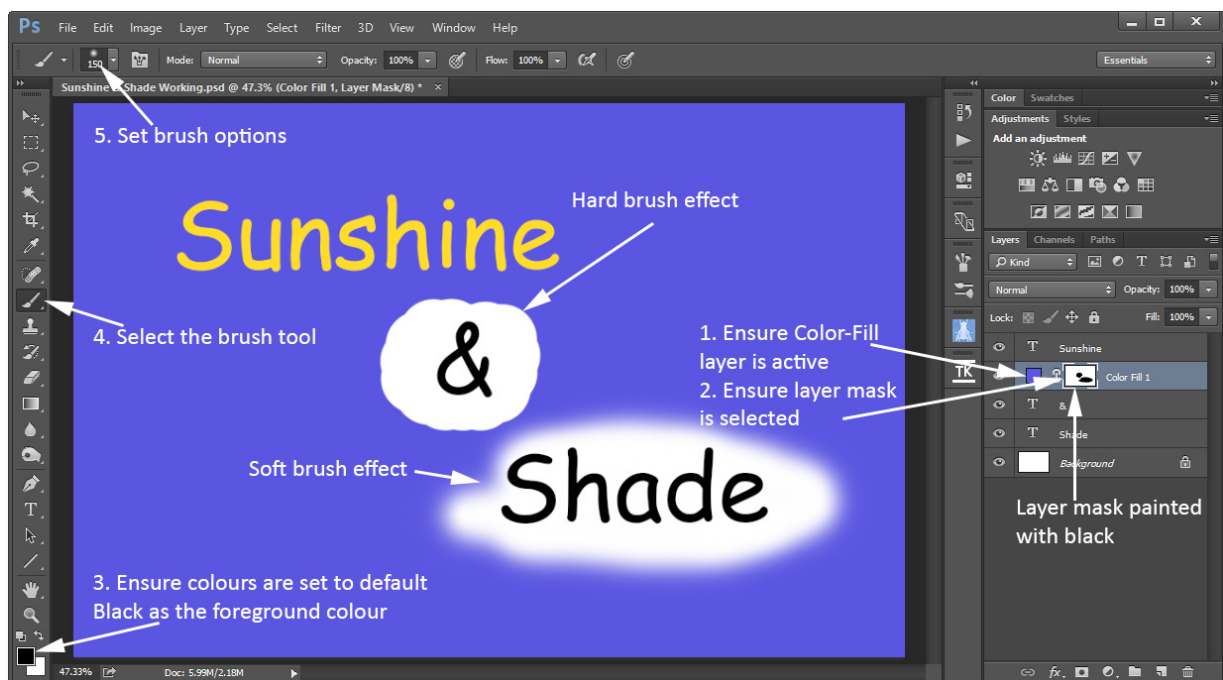


Fig 10

Conclusion

Notice that, where you have painted, both of the underlying text layers and the white background layer show through. The background layer shows because the layers containing text are transparent where there is no text.

Painting with black on a layer mask will hide the contents of the layer. If a mistake is made, painting with white will reveal the content previously painted out.

Painting with a brush at an opacity lower than 100% will partially conceal the contents of the layer. A low opacity will conceal less than a high opacity. This is conducive to blending images together.

Gradients can be applied to masks for gradual transitions. Set the gradient to Foreground to Transparent for darkening skies and foregrounds.

Masks can be attached to ordinary layers by clicking the icon to the left of the adjustment layer icon at the bottom of the Layers panel.