



Photoshop Mastery

Taking Photoshop to the next level

■ BY BEN WILLMORE

Perfecting Masked Adjustment Layers

It's easy to make things look good when zoomed out on an image on your monitor's screen, but printing the same image in a large format will often reveal defects in masks that weren't apparent onscreen. Let's explore methods to ensure a perfect mask every time.

The most versatile way to apply an adjustment is either via the Layer>New Adjustment Layer menu or the Create New Adjustment Layer pop-up menu at the bottom of the Layers palette. The adjustment will then appear as its own layer and you can do the following to control how the adjustment affects your image:

- Toggle the Eye icon on and off to enable or disable the adjustment.
- Lower the Opacity setting in the Layers palette to determine if the adjustment is applied at full strength.
- Paint with black so the adjustment won't apply to certain areas.
- Paint with white to apply the adjustment to an area previously painted over with black.
- Use any tools, adjustments, or filters that are available to grayscale images to refine the mask.

First, here are some keyboard shortcuts that you'll find handy when painting on a layer mask:

- Use the Bracket keys ([) and (]) to change the size of your brush; add Shift to change the brush's hardness.
- Press X to switch your Foreground and Background colors between black and white.
- Change the opacity of the active tool by using the number keys (0–9); for example, if the Move tool (V) is active, then it changes the opacity of the active layer.
- For versatility, consider using a Wacom tablet, which lets you change the size or opacity of your brush based on the amount of pressure you apply.

If you've painted with black on an adjustment layer's layer mask, check your work by typing \ (Backslash) to view the mask as a colored overlay (the default overlay color is red, but you can change it by double-clicking on the layer mask that's attached to the adjustment layer). The areas covered in color indicate where the adjustment is *not* applying to the image.



If the overlay doesn't match the area you wanted to adjust, then paint with black (to cover more areas with color and prevent the adjustment from applying) or paint with white (to remove the color overlay from an area and allow the adjustment to apply). When you're satisfied that the overlay matches the areas that shouldn't be adjusted, then type Backslash a second time to turn off the color overlay. After precisely matching the overlay to the areas you want to adjust, then it's time to triple-check your work because many defects don't make themselves apparent when viewing the mask as a color overlay.

As a final check, hold the Option (PC: Alt) key and click in the middle of the layer mask itself to make the mask visible on the main screen. Now zoom in and inspect the mask for any problem areas, for example:



Look for gaps between paint strokes.

Problem: Gaps between paint strokes often appear as light wisps of gray between otherwise black areas.

Solution: Paint with black to cover those areas.



Original jaggy edge (left); Blur applied (right)

Problem: Jaggy edges appear where primitive selection tools were used to limit where the adjustment applies (the Magic Wand tool is the biggest culprit).

Solution: Paint over the area with the Blur tool to soften the transition.

Problem: White specks in an otherwise black area are often the result of using the Magic Wand or Color Range command to isolate an area.

Solution: Select the general area and choose Filter>Noise>Median to fill in the specks. ■

Ben Willmore is founder of Digital Mastery, a Colorado-based training and consulting company that specializes in Photoshop. He's also author of the bestseller, Adobe Photoshop CS Studio Techniques. Check out the free Photoshop tips at Ben's website, www.digitalmastery.com.