

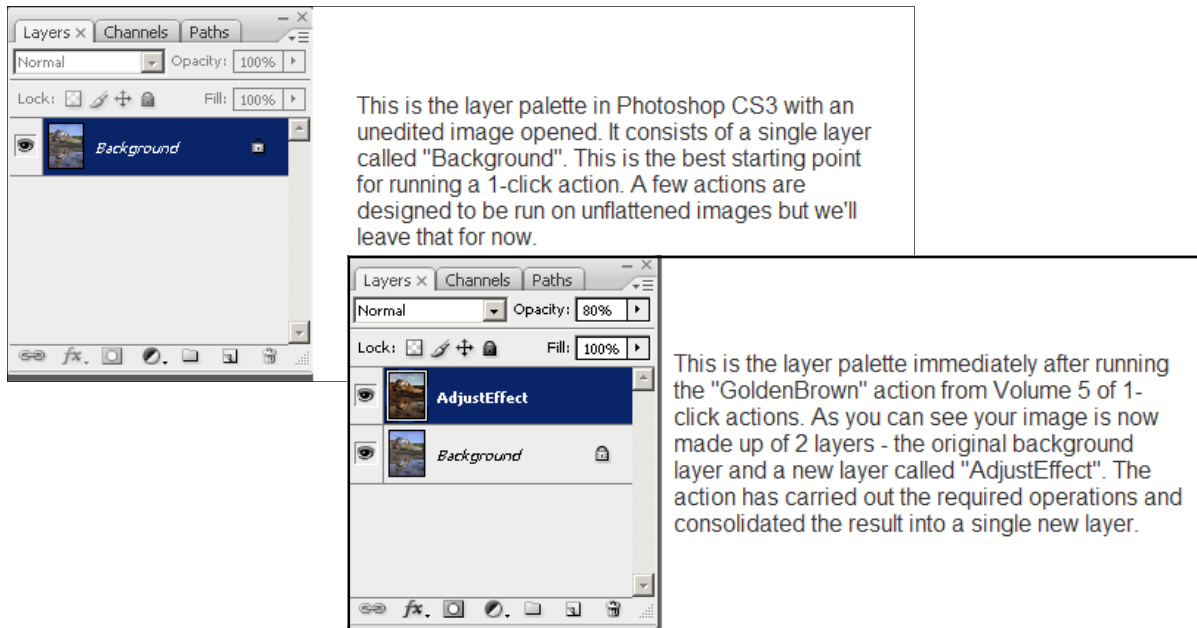
# Photoshop Layers and 1-click actions

A beginners guide to working with layers in Photoshop together with 1-clickactions.

There are many detailed explanations of Photoshop layers on the internet and even whole books written on the subject, often excellent and in depth but this short guide is a quick start without all the technical (boring!) bits. It is intended for people new to Photoshop and 1-click actions and shows how manipulating layers can greatly increase the control and versatility of the actions.

When you bring an image into Photoshop for the first time it will usually consist of a single layer called 'Background' as in the screen capture below. If your image has already been edited it might have layers already. It is recommended that you Flatten your image before running the actions (Select Layer->Flatten from the Photoshop menu).

It might be useful to look at layers as a piece (or pieces) of clear acetate placed on top of your image. On these layers you can carry out various operations and add effects. Most 1-clickactions will add layers to your image.



Some actions will create several new layers rather than just one but for now we'll concentrate on this single new layer and what it does.

Going back to the acetate analogy we now have two images—the original photograph (background) and a modified version on a piece of clear film placed directly on top (the 'AdjustEffect' layer).

Using layers has several advantages, the first being that your original image is untouched. We can pick up the acetate and throw it away and there underneath is your photograph as it was before we started. Suppose our action is designed to modify colours—adding a brown tint for example. If we had been using a physical photograph and painted brown on it it would have been changed forever, by painting on the acetate however we can still get the effect without spoiling anything.

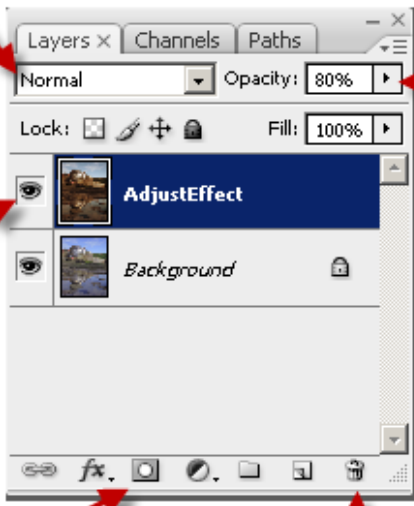
## Changing the way the layer interacts with your original

Allows you to select the "Blending Mode" of the layer. Many actions leave the adjustment layer in "Normal" mode as shown here - other actions might create layers with different blending modes. Changing the mode here can change the effect considerably.

Clicking the "eye" symbol allows you to turn the layer on and off.

Allows you to add a layer mask. Some actions will create these for you but more on these later.

Dragging the layer to the trashcan icon deletes it completely.



Changing the opacity of the 'AdjustEffect' layer is a feature you will use very frequently. It determines how strong the top layer affects the bottom layer, in other words how strong the effect of the action. In this case the 'GoldenBrown' action has set an opacity of 80%. 0% is equivalent to turning the layer off completely, 100% is full strength. You can click the arrow and a slider control will appear. Experiment with different settings and you will see your image change as you move the slider.

The control you might use most is the “**opacity**” setting. This allows you a great degree of control over the result of your actions. Experiment with changing the value between 0 and 100% and watch the effect it has on your image.

You can also experiment with the “**blending mode**” - some settings may well prove quite effective, others will be horrible. To start with leave the blending mode as it is as the action will have picked the most effective setting for you.

“**Layer Masks**” are a very powerful feature that allow you to manipulate which areas of an image you want the layer to work on. In the GoldenBrown example we have been using there is no layer mask. You can add your own of course but for this introductory guide we will just use layer masks when the action creates it for us.

Photoshop allows us to have many layers (think overlaying several acetate sheets over a photograph) and some 1-click actions will create 2 or 3 new layers and some for example the “**Kidz AIO**” action from the Kidz action set will use layers as a type of workflow where all the retouching steps are incorporated into the layers the action creates.

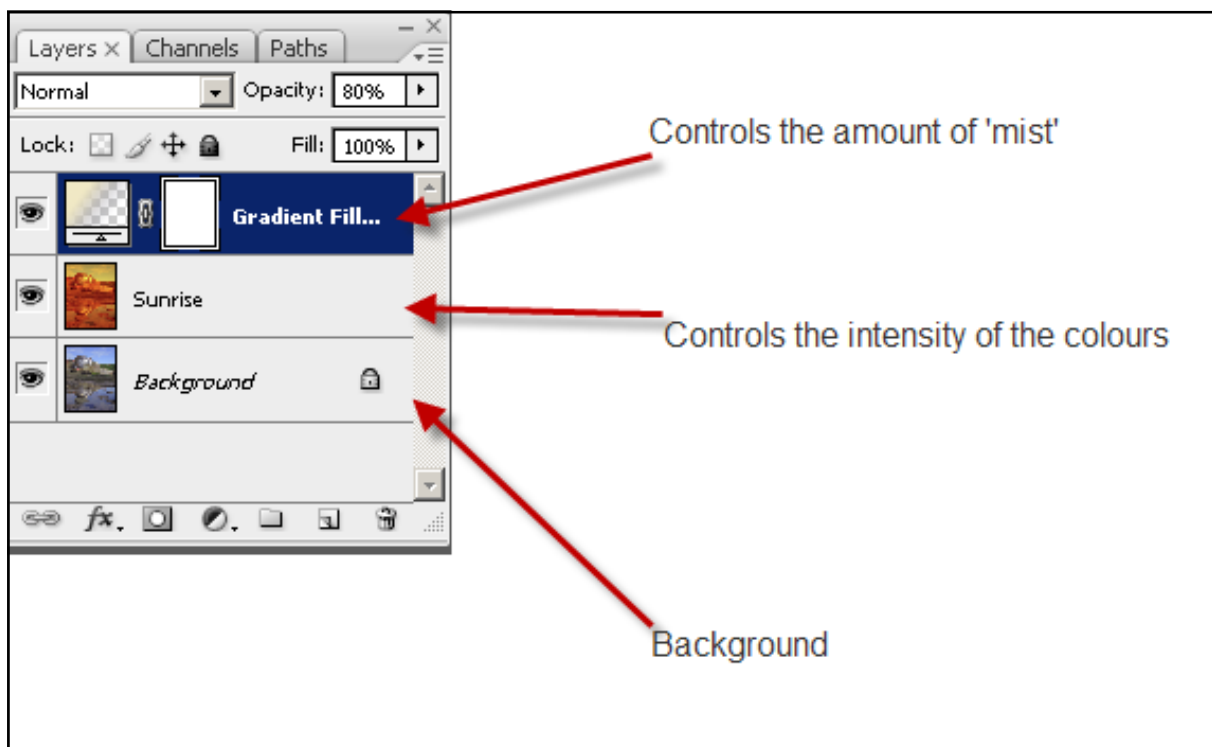
## Actions with several layers.

Below is an example of the layer palette after the “SunriseDistantMist” action again from Volume 5. The idea of this action is to create the warm colours associated with a sunrise and also add a mist effect to the top part of the image.

So that the user can control both the colours and the mist independently the action creates separate layers.

Each layer has its own opacity value so if you wanted a strong mist effect but without a large effect on the colours you could set the opacity of the mist layer (called “Gradient Fill” in this example) to a high value and the opacity of the layer that controls the colour (called “Sunrise” here) to a low value.

By experimenting with different opacity values of the layers you will soon see how a single actions allows you a lot of creative options and control.



You can of course also turn layers on and off as before so in this example suppose we wanted to have the mist effect but no sunrise warm colours you could click the eyeball next to the “sunrise” layer and turn that layer off completely. This has the same effect as setting the opacity to zero.

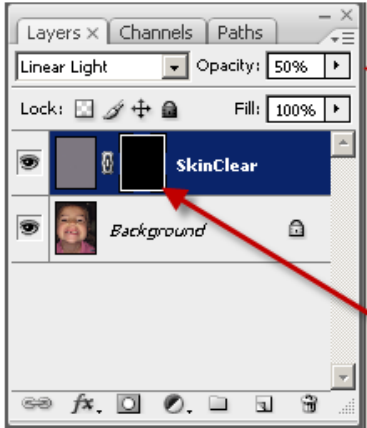
In case you are wondering what the white square on the “Gradient Fill” layer is— then this is a layer mask.

## Layers with Layer Masks

You can add layer masks to layers yourself but for this document we'll look at the layers and masks created by 1-click actions.

Basically a mask will allow you to apply or remove the effect the layer has on the layer below it.

Below is the layer palette after running “**SkinClear**” action from Volume 3



You can still adjust the opacity of a layer even though it has a mask.

The black square shown here is a layer mask set to "hide all" - in other words it hides the effect of the top layer from the bottom layer. If you run SkinClear actions you will see no difference at all to your image. Not very impressive then.


The 'SkinClear' actions are designed to make the skin in a portrait smoother. We don't therefore want the softening effect to work on the parts we need sharp such as the eyes and mouth. Using a layer mask lets us apply the effect to just the areas we choose.

The fact that the layer mask is black means that no effect shows through (imagine a fully opaque area on our acetate). To get the effect to show through (ie make the softening appear) we need to paint on the layer mask in white.

Remember on layer masks **Black Hides, White Reveals**. Before you start painting make sure the mask is selected not the layer itself. The action selects the mask for you but to make sure simply click the black square (a white border appears to show it's selected as in the image above).

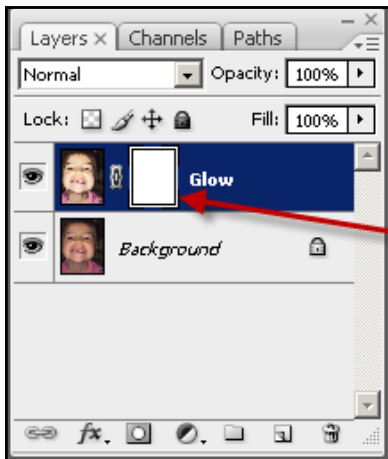
Once you have selected a white brush paint on your image over the skin areas that you want softening. You will then see the effect start to show through.

By painting out the layer mask we allow the top layers effect to show through—in this case softening but could be a colour change, sharpening or a combination of things.



Select the brush tool.

Use a white brush on a black mask and a black brush on a white mask. In this screenshot the foreground colour is white and the background colour is black. This means that the brush will



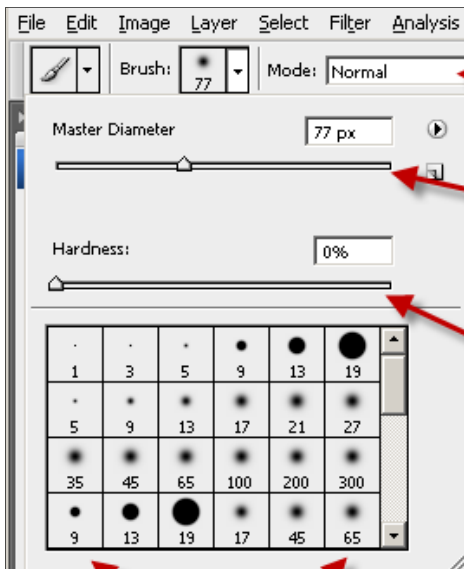
In this example (one of the glows from Volume 9) the layer mask is white indicating that it is set to *reveal* meaning that the effect is applied to the whole of the image.

Sometimes this might be what we want but suppose we wanted the eyes in a portrait to be unaffected by the glow effect of the action. In this case we would select a Black Brush and paint over the eyes to mask away the effect.

You would then get the effect of a glow over the whole picture except the eyes (ie the area you painted over in black).

## Brushes & Masks

A familiarity with brushes is useful when using masks to give you precise control. You can set the brush size, hardness and even the opacity.



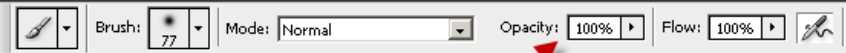
Brushes have a mode too but in general leave this as Normal.

You can set the diameter of the brush here - when painting on a mask vary the size as you are painting, choosing a smaller size for intricate areas.

This lets you choose the hardness of the brush - in most cases a soft brush will be most useful for use with the actions. In general a soft brush had less clearly defined edges and so the transition between brushed and non brushed areas will be less obvious. It often works better to reduce the brush size and keep it soft rather than choosing a hard edged brush at a larger size.

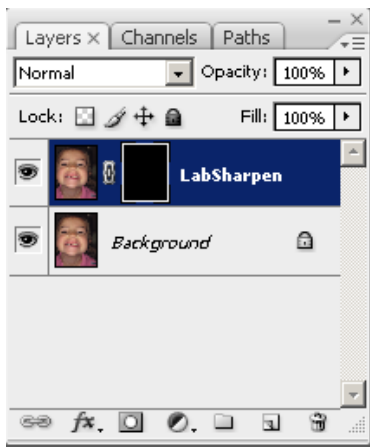
This area lets you choose between brush styles and features

When painting on masks you can correct mistakes by changing from black to white or white to black and overpainting the areas you have already done.



If you want to vary the strength of an action's adjustment layer locally you can use the Brush Opacity feature. This works similar to a layer's opacity and changes the strength of the brush. You can vary the opacity as you are painting on the mask so that some parts are affected more than others.

As an example suppose you have used one of the sharpening actions. You might want the eyes sharpened a lot, the mouth a little less and the skin not at all. To achieve this set a brush opacity of 100% and paint over the eyes then change to 50% opacity for the mouth.

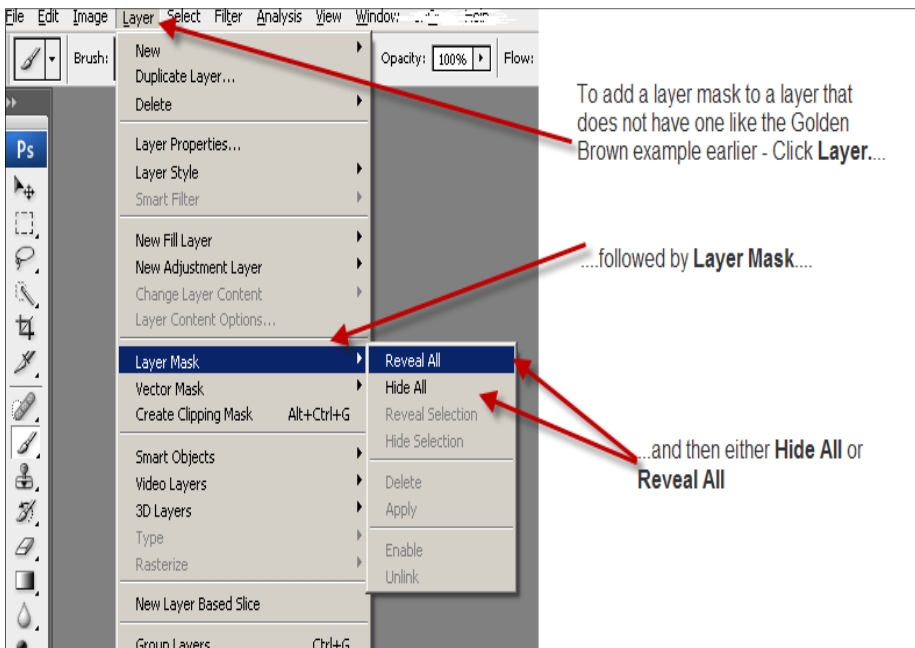


The screen shot to the left shows the layer palette after the "SelectiveLabSharpen" action from Volume 4.

As you can see the sharpening is done on a layer called "LabSharpen" which has a black layer mask hiding the sharpening effect totally. To apply selective sharpening to the image you would select a white brush (this is an occasion where a hard brush might be useful) select the mask and paint over the areas you want to sharpen.

Bear in mind that as well as the overall strength of the sharpening layer (100% layer opacity) by varying the brush opacity you can apply varying degrees of sharpening to different areas of the image.

### Adding your own layer mask



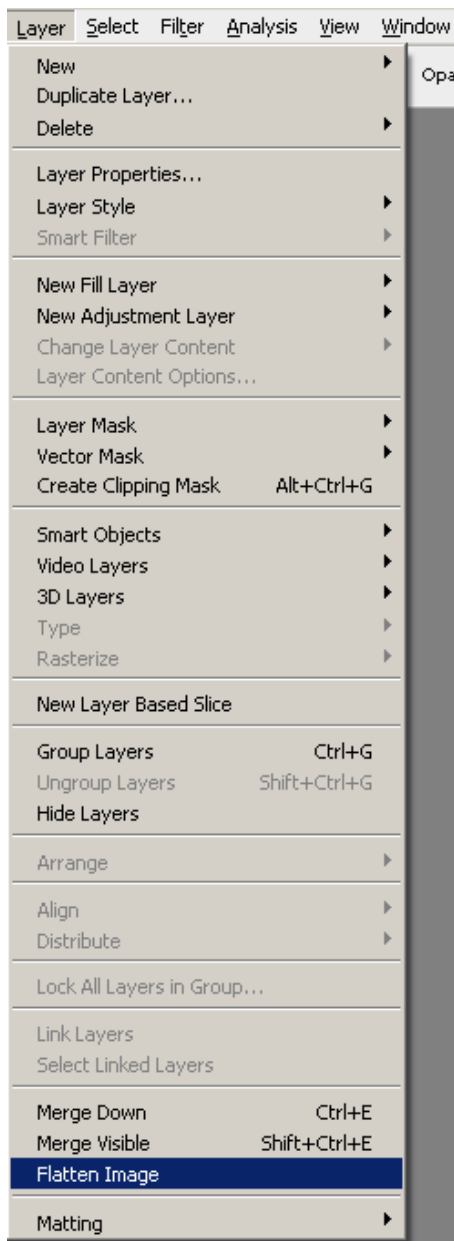
To add a layer mask to a layer that does not have one like the Golden Brown example earlier - Click **Layer...**

...followed by **Layer Mask...**

...and then either **Hide All** or **Reveal All**

Not all actions use layer masks but suppose you want the "GoldenBrown" actions to be applied to only a part of the image rather than to the whole. In this case you can apply your own layer mask.

## A word about flattening.



It is recommended that you run 1-click actions against a flattened image—ie one with a single layer called “Background”.

Out of the camera your image will be flattened anyway but you may have done some editing previously that has created layers already. If so choose **Layer-Flatten Image** from Photoshop’s menu.

Similarly if you have run a 1-click actions that has created layers and then you want to run another then you should flatten before the second action. If you want to keep the existing layered file then make a duplicate and flatten the copy before running the action.

By always starting with a flattened image you can be sure that the action will work as expected.

There are some exceptions to this. For example after running the “**PopGlow**” action you can then run the “**PopGlow HighLight Fix**” without flattening in between.

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## Conclusion

Layers are one of Photoshop’s most useful and powerful features and most 1-click actions take advantage of them. The actions create layers and masks for you where necessary and give you the option of modifying their effect quickly and easily without touching the background layer. The uses of layers vary from action to actions and this is only a brief introduction and has not touched many features but hopefully it will be of use to those new to Photoshop and actions and will open up the versatility and control that 1-click actions provide.