

About Layer Masks

Layers and masks let you do non-destructive editing. Rather than changing the pixels on the *Background* layer, which permanently alters the data, you can make the changes on new layers and then if you change your mind, you can return the pixels to their original state. Using layer masks, you can choose to hide or reveal the changes you made on the layer to which the mask is linked.

How do Layer Masks Work?

Let's suppose you have a digital image of a close-up of your girlfriend that you would like to alter so that the photo looks more like one of those glamour shots with a soft, fuzzy feel.

To create this look, you will need to duplicate the *Background* layer and then apply a blur filter to the new layer. Then, because the most important details in a portrait are the focus on the eyes, you will need to bring back this detail from the *Background* layer below. And the safest way to do this is with a layer mask.

Layer Masks: White Versus Black

By default, when you click on the *Add layer mask* tool at the bottom of the *Layers* palette, you will create a white layer mask for the currently selected layer. The mask will appear as a white *layer mask thumbnail* to the right of the *layer thumbnail*.

The rules of masking state that white reveals and black hides.

What this means is this. With a *white* mask, the layer that the layer mask is on is one hundred percent revealed. That is, you see the entire effect of that layer. So following on with our glamour shot example, the image that you will see in the image window is blurry. Then, if you use a brush to paint *black* on the eyes and other facial features, such as the eyebrows, lips, teeth, jaw line, bottom of the nose, diamond earrings, and so on, the blurriness in the painted areas will be hidden (because you painted them with black paint) and the sharp pixels from the *Background* layer beneath will be visible.

Alternatively, if the mask for the same layer had been filled with *black* (that is, the mask was set to hide the effects of the layer to which it is linked), the image shown in the image window would not be blurry at all – the *Background* layer would be visible in the image window. Then you could use a brush and paint *white* on the areas where you want to *reveal* the blurry pixels from the duplicated layer above.

Masks Are Flexible

The results that you achieve using a layer mask can be heightened and lessened by altering the *Opacity* of the layer, where *100%* displays the full effect of the mask and a lesser opacity percentage will allow pixels from the layer beneath to begin to show through. You can also alter the *Blending mode* for the mask, where you can darken the effects of the mask using a blending mode such as *Multiply*, or lighten the effect with a blending mode such as *Screen*.