



Making selections – part 1

Why make selections?

I guess the first question is, why do we need to make selections? Well, a very common flow of work in Elements is to select a section of an image and then do something to it. Perhaps you might want to change the colour, change the opacity, move it or cut it out and include it in a collage. The permutations are almost endless. To my mind, being able to make accurate selections and mastering layers, which we'll come to later, are the two key areas to being able to use Elements creatively.

We'll start with the simplest selection:

If you want to select the whole image use Ctrl-A – 'A' for 'All'. You'll see what are known as the marching ants around the edge – they mark the boundaries of the selection. I can now copy it, ready to paste on to another image, or I can fill it with colour etc.

Marquee tools

Next we'll use the marquee tools. These are ideal for demonstrating the principles of adding to and subtracting from selections.

You can choose the marquee tools from the toolbar or by pressing the letter M on your keyboard. There are two variations, the rectangular marquee tool and the elliptical marquee tool. You use them in the same way, by dragging with the mouse from top left to bottom right.

So, to make a rectangular selection, you select the rectangular marquee tool, drag and release the mouse. Note that the marching ants have appeared around the edges.

Adding to and Subtracting from Selections:

At the top left hand side of the Options bar you'll see four small icons. These are New Selection, Add to Selection, Subtract from Selection and Intersect with Selection. If I click on Add to Selection and draw another rectangle, then the new shape becomes part of the same selection. A new shape can also overlap the original one to create a composite shape.

Intersect with selection. With this one, if you have two shapes that overlap then the selection will be created just in the area of overlap.

As you'll have realised by now I'm very keen on keyboard shortcuts. The icons for Add to selection and so on are pretty small so I prefer to hold the Shift key down to temporarily change the marquee tool to Add to Selection and the Alt key to change it to Subtract from Selection. If you already have a marquee selection you can see the cursor change to one with a little plus sign if you hold the Shift key down or one with a minus sign if you hold the Alt key down.

Note:

To get rid of a selection, use Ctrl-D – the D stands for Deselect. If you have been adding or subtracting from a selection Ctrl-Z - Undo - will undo the latest addition or subtraction, while Ctrl-D gets rid of the whole selection.

Transform a Selection:

The transform a selection command is really useful. Say, you've created a shape but you want to add a bit extra on one or more sides, you go to the Select menu and choose 'Transform selection' (no keyboard shortcut for this one). This puts a box around the selection with drag handles on each side. You can use these to increase or decrease the selection on any side, in the same way as you did with the crop box.

You can also rotate the selection by moving the cursor a little bit away from the boundary until it changes to a two headed arrow. You then hold the mouse button down and drag the selection round as far as you like.

You can also drag the corner of the boundary to change the height and width at the same time. If you select Constrain Proportions in the Options bar then the aspect ratio will stay the same. If Constrain Proportions isn't selected then you can distort the selection. Finally press the Enter key or click on the green arrow to accept the changes.

Notes:

- If you want to select a perfect square, hold the Shift key down while you are dragging with the Rectangular Marquee Tool.
- If you want to select a perfect circle, hold the Shift key down while are dragging with the Elliptical Marquee Tool.
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NB These only work if you are making a New selection, not if you are adding or subtracting.

This is probably a good time to point out the difference between moving a selection and moving the contents of a selection. You are familiar by now with the idea of holding the Ctrl key down to temporarily change a tool into the Move tool. If you want to move a selection, that is the marching ants, then you just drag with the mouse, making sure that you haven't chosen Add to or Subtract from Selection.

If you want to move the contents of a selection then you hold the Ctrl key down while you drag.

In this section I've deliberately worked with a blank image so that you could see the marching ants easily. In the next section we'll use a variety of selection tools to achieve much more interesting results.