



Bits and Pieces

There are some bits and pieces of Elements that I thought might be useful to you but which didn't really fit in elsewhere or would have made the relevant tutorial too long. So, I've grouped some of them here.

The first thing I want to show you is how to use layer masks. This is a huge subject so we can only cover the basics here, but I hope there's enough to encourage you to investigate further on your own.

Layer masks

Many thanks to Lesley Houghton for letting me use her lovely pictures.

We've already used built in layer masks to restrict the area of an image affected by an Adjustment Layer in the Layers 2 tutorial. Here we're going to look at masks that you can apply to any layer of your image. These mask or hide areas of the layer.

Why would we want to do this when we can use various selection methods to cut out areas of an image, such as cutting the lily out of its background? Well, this is a destructive method so, if you change your mind about, for instance, how much of the image to use at a later date then you would have to re-do quite a bit of work to get the result you want. Using a layer mask gives you a non-destructive way to do the same thing that you can go back to and edit at any time.

Basic commands for Layer Masks

Note that you can't add a layer mask to a locked background layer – you have to unlock it first.

There are three ways to create a layer mask.

| | |
|--|---|
| The default is to create an empty layer mask on the active layer – ie you start with all the image showing. | Click on the Create Layer Mask icon on the Layers panel – looks like a little camera with the lens pointing towards to you. |
| To create a full layer mask on the active layer ie you start with all the image obscured. | Alt-click on the Create Layer Mask icon on the Layers panel. |

| | |
|--|---|
| If you have an active selection then you can create a mask based on the selection. | Clicking on the Create Layer Mask icon on the Layers panel gives a mask with all the non-selected area of the image masked out. |
| To temporarily hide the mask | Right-click the layer and select Disable Layer Mask from the drop down list. To switch it back on, select Enable layer mask from the same place. |
| To delete a Layer Mask without deleting the layer itself. | Right-click on the Layer Mask thumbnail NOT the layer thumbnail, and select Delete Layer Mask. |

Notes:

- You can use any of the selection tools to make your selection before you create your layer mask.
- It sounds obvious but if you want to paint on the mask, make sure the mask is active – you can see that it has a border round it when it's active. If the layer is active you will paint on the layer, not the mask.
- The keyboard shortcut to swap the foreground and background colours is x. So if you are painting on a layer mask you can swap easily from black to white just by pressing the x key.
- You can go back at any time to add more black (to conceal areas of the layer) or white (to reveal areas of the layer).

A couple of things to consider:

- There are two ways to view your mask in the working area:
 - You can alt-click on the mask thumbnail which will show you a black and white version of the mask.
 - You can alt-shift-click (or \) on the mask thumbnail to see a red translucent overlay. NB if your mask is completely filled with white using this keyboard combination won't do anything.
- We've only used black and white on our layer mask so far as it shows the workings most clearly but you can use any shade of grey as well to give, if you like, selective opacity – the darker the grey, the less you'll see of that area.

There are also text tools that create masks. These are under the regular text tools in the toolbox. You may have selected one of these by mistake at some point and wondered why your image turned red all of a sudden. It's because you've selected a text mask tool instead of a text tool.

A text mask tool creates a selection of an image based on the text you choose. To do this you select the text mask tool and click on the image, which then turns red – don't panic! This indicates a mask in the same way as it does on a layer mask. When you start typing you aren't really creating text you're creating text shaped selections. To complete the cutout, inverse the selection and delete the area around the text shape. You'll recognise the result as we

achieved the same thing in Layers 2 using a clipping mask. This way to do it is probably quicker but it's less flexible as once you've committed the text shapes (clicking on the green tick) you can't then change or reposition the text. With a clipping mask you can change or move the text at any point.

Layer styles

Layer styles give you the ability to add things like a drop shadow or a bevel effect to the contents of a layer. The oddity to my mind is that you can't apply a layer style from the Layers panel – you either have to go to the Layer menu or you need to bring out the Effects panel.

In the Layer menu – Layer > Layer Style > Style settings– you'll find four built-in layer styles – drop shadow, glow, bevel and stroke, with options to change some of their settings. Once you've applied a style, you'll see a faint fx symbol on the right hand side of the layer in the Layers panel. If you want to edit the settings for the style, you double click the fx symbol and it will bring up the styles dialogue box and you can make your changes.

In the Effects panel, from the Window menu, you'll find whole rafts of preset styles that you can use. A lot of these are a bit garish but, if you delve down a bit you can find some really nice ones like Salt from the Complex section.

You'll find four icons at the top of the Effects panel, Filters, Layer Styles, Photo Filters and All. Click on Layer Styles, then click on the drop down list on the right and select which sub-section you want to have a look at. The thing to remember here is that you click on a style and then click on Apply – nothing will happen if you don't click on Apply.

There are no options to adjust here, just preset versions to choose from. However, once you've applied you style, you can double click the fx symbol and it will give you the styles dialogue box and you can sometimes adjust some of the settings that make up the style.

An easy way to see what styles do is to add some text to an image and apply various styles to the text layer and see what happens.

The results of applying these styles will vary considerably depending on what the layer contains. Sometimes there is virtually no change at all. For instance, if the contents of the layer go all the way to the outer edge and you try to apply a drop shadow then there is nowhere for the drop shadow to go!

It's probably stating the obvious but a layer style applies to the whole contents of the layer. So if you want to apply a style to an element of a layer you need to select and copy that element on to a separate layer and then apply the style.

Notes:

- You can't apply a layer style to a locked background layer – you need to unlock it first.
- You can only apply a style to a single layer at a time.
- Layer styles are cumulative so you can apply several to each layer if you wish.

Adding a Levels Adjustment Layer

Real photographers will know this function backwards as it is used extensively to correct things like over/under exposure or to remove a colour cast. My emphasis throughout this course has been to stress the creative aspects of Elements so I'm just going to show you one way to use levels that I think fits the bill. If you enjoy the more formal aspects of photography as well, do have a better look at levels.

The example I used is of some dried manutex (sodium alginate thickener) which I allowed to dry on a Perspex sheet and then scanned at a high resolution. I then rotated it and cropped a section out which I then zoomed in on. I thought it would be a more interesting image if it had much more contrast.

I tried a brightness and contrast adjustment layer but even at full adjustment it was still a bit dull.

I then tried a levels adjustment layer. I zoomed right in so that I could see the detail well. I then selected the white eye dropper and clicked on the area I considered to be the brightest of the image. I repeated the process with the black eye dropper and the darkest part of the image. Elements redistributed the tones between these two points in the best way it could. The result was a much zingier image.

Miscellaneous tools

Cookie cutter

I must admit I used to dismiss the cookie cutter, thinking that it was only good for making rather twee shapes, but I've realised recently that it can have its uses.

The function most people use is to simply cut an image out into a particular shape – a sort of fancy crop tool to give you pretty cutout hearts or cute animal shapes. Not particularly my cup of tea but they have their place. However, if you delve down into the shape options you have on the Options Bar then there are some rather more interesting shapes you can use. My favourites are in the crop shapes section. These can be really useful for giving interesting edges to your images.

Once you've created your shape, you can move it to a different part of the image or you can adjust the size and rotation by dragging it round with your mouse. Once you are happy with it, accept the changes by clicking on the green arrow or using the enter key. As with all tools there are further options

that you can play with, such as being able to set specific dimensions or being able to start your image from the centre instead of the top left.

Dodge & burn tools

These two tools are under the sponge tool in the toolbox and are used to selectively lighten (dodge) or darken (burn) areas of an image. The names come from traditional darkroom techniques which do the same thing.

Smudge tool

You'll find this tool under the Blur tool in the toolbox and, appropriately, looks like a finger just about to smudge some paint around. This does just what it says and definitely brings out my inner child. The Blur tool can also be useful if you want to soften edges or just create areas of soft focus.

Merging layers and flattening images

You can find the commands for merging layers and flattening images in the Layer menu, and in the drop down list hidden under the symbol that is made up of 4 horizontal lines at the top right of the Layers panel. You can also see them by right-clicking on a layer within the Layers panel.

I'm just going to whizz through these as I use them very rarely. I'll explain why shortly.

- Merge down – this merges the active layer with the one below. If you have more than one layer selected then the same option in the list reads Merge Layers.
- Merge Visible - this does just that, merges together all the layers that are visible, ie not switched off, into one layer.

One variation that I do use quite a bit is Stamp Visible. This combines all the visible layers into a new, merged one. This is very handy if you are creating something like repeating patterns where you want to copy, perhaps, a row of repeated images, each on a separate layer, in order to create a mirrored design. You could, of course, simply merge all the layers before you copy and paste them but, if you then change your mind and want to go back to tweak something on an individual layer then you'd have a lot more work to do.

I haven't found this command in any of the usual menus but I read about it in a book somewhere. As far as I know there is only the keyboard shortcut for it which is Ctrl-Alt-Shift-e. The only problem I have with this command is manoeuvring my fingers round to hold all four keys down at the same time – digital gymnastics.

The next possibility is to flatten the image entirely into one combined layer. Why would you want to do this manually? I don't think I've ever done so and my thinking is this: for day to day working/storage I stick to .psd or .tif formats as both these retain all the layer information so I can go back and edit them individually at a later date if I wish. If I want to reduce the file size for emailing

or using on a web site then I would copy the original to a .jpg. This reduces the file size considerably and flattens the layers in the process. So I would end up with two versions of the image for different purposes.

The original argument for flattening an image once you were finished working on it was to save storage space but hard disks and other forms of storage are so cheap now that that isn't really an issue.

However, you might want to send an image for someone else to work on whose software doesn't support layers. In this case a tip from Barbara Brundage's book in the Missing Manuals series is that if you use Flatten Image then Elements creates a background layer, made up of the combined layers and background layers don't support transparency so any transparent areas are usually converted to white. If you use Merge Visible the layers are still combined into one but any areas of transparency are preserved.