



Layers! ~ part 1

This tutorial is all about working with layers. This, to my mind, is one of the two critical areas to master in order to work creatively with Photoshop Elements. So, we'll spend some time getting the hang of the basics of layers and then we'll look at a couple of ways to use them.

As with most Windows programs there are many different ways to do any given action but I think it makes sense to use the panels most of the time as they group together functions that you would use together. So the instructions I'm going to give you will be a mixture of this with a few keyboard shortcuts thrown in. Just be aware that you can use the Menus at the top of the screen also

Layers in Elements act as a stack of sophisticated sheets of glass or transparency film. This is called the layer stack and is viewed as if you were looking down through each layer from the top to the bottom. Each layer can contain different images, text etc and each layer can have its own filters, opacity setting and so on. You can add new layers or delete existing ones. Each layer can also move independently of the others so you can position each one exactly where you want it. You can rub away part of a layer so you can see the layer underneath and so much more I can only give you a quick overview of layers here but I hope I will be able to show you that they are worth spending some time on.

The layers panel, usually on the right hand side of your screen is the control centre for your stack. If you can't see a Layers Panel here, go to the Windows menu, click on Layers and the panel should appear. I often have my layers panel and my undo history panel on tabs in the panel bin so I can flip between them. This works the same way that images do in the working area. You can pull each panel off the tab and have it floating or you can pull it to the top, until you see the blue line round it. You then release the mouse and it's back on its tab.

Background layer

When you open a photograph the image automatically becomes the background layer. This doesn't refer to the background of the image but to the fact that it is the base layer at the bottom of the layer stack. Notice that there is a padlock symbol on the layer. **Unless you unlock it the background layer will always be at the bottom of the stack and you can't make any part of it transparent.**

To unlock it, double click on the layer in the layer panel. In the dialog box that comes up you can give the layer a new name, if you wish. If you don't want to change the name you can simply click on OK. The layer is then unlocked and the padlock symbol will have disappeared.

New layer

To create a new, blank layer, click on the new layer icon at the bottom of the panel. This will create a new layer above the active layer. By active, I mean the layer that is highlighted in the layers panel.

Whatever you do will be applied to the active layer. In workshops by far the most problems are caused because the relevant layer isn't active. So, if things aren't happening as you expect them to, the first thing to do is to make sure that the correct layer is active.

Naming layers

It's a good idea to name the layers you create. To do this, double click on a layer in the Layers panel, insert a name into the dialogue box and click ok

Deleting layers

If you want to delete a layer you just drag it to the trash can icon at the top of the panel. If you change your mind you can always use Ctrl-Z to undo the action.

Visibility

The eye symbol to the left of each layer controls the visibility of the layer. Click once on the eye to hide the layer. It isn't deleted, it's just temporarily switched off. Clicking again in the same place will bring it back.

Linking layers

You can also link layers so you can move them around together. To do this click on the first layer you want to link and then, holding the Ctrl down, click on the second layer you want to link. Click on the chain-link icon at the bottom of the layers panel and the link symbol will appear next to each of the layers you've linked. If you move one layer now, the other, linked layer will move as well.

To break the link, make one of the linked layers active and click again on the chain-link icon on the layers panel.

Locking layers

If you are working on a complicated piece of work you may want to protect one or more layers so you can't inadvertently change any of it. To do this you make the layer active and click on the lock icon at the top of the panel.

To release the layer so you can carry on editing, make it active and click again on the lock icon.

Opacity

Next, we're going to have a look at opacity. Each layer can have its own opacity setting. This is controlled by clicking on the little triangle at the top right of the layers panel (next to the word 'opacity'). A little slider drops down and you can adjust how opaque the layer is by dragging the slider with the mouse. If you move the slider further to the left then more of the image shows through.

Using a colour gradient with opacity

- Open an image
- Create a new, blank layer above the image layer.
- Set the foreground and background colours to colours of your choice.
- Select the gradient tool.
- With the blank layer active, drag with the mouse from the top of the screen to the bottom. Your gradient should now appear.
- Adjust the opacity of the gradient layer so that it creates a colour glaze over the original image.

We'll be looking at gradients in more detail when we cover colour – I just wanted to show you an example of how you might use layer opacity.

Adjustment layers

Finally, for this section, we're going to have an initial look at adjustment layers. Adjustment layers let you change things like the value and the colours of your layers.

To create a new adjustment layer click on the New Adjustment layer icon at the top of the Layers panel – I always think it looks like a half-moon shape. The new layer is created above the active layer.

An adjustment layer applies to all the layers below it in the layer stack unless you specify otherwise.

You might not want your adjustment to apply to all the layers below it. To restrict its effect you need to 'clip' it so it only affects the layer immediately below. To do this make sure the adjustment layer is active, then Ctrl-g.

If you want to release the layers so the effect isn't restricted you repeat the process – Ctrl-g.

If you use the Layers menu to do this clipping, you need to look for 'Create clipping mask' – in earlier versions this was called 'Group with previous'.

NB – if you want to save the layers with the image so that you can go back and work on them individually later on, you must save the image in .tif or .pds. Jpegs don't retain their layer information when saved.

Exercise:

- Open an image
- Add two separate pieces of text in different colours
- Add a new layer between the image and the text – add some brushwork.
- Select both layers of text and link them together – if you move one the other will move at the same time.
- Change the order of the layers and observe the differences.
- Delete a layer
- Undo the deletion to get the layer back
- Change the opacity of the brushwork layer and observe the difference.
- Lock the brushwork layer and then try to rub out part of it with the eraser.
- Switch off the text and brush layers
- Create a new, blank layer and fill it with a colour gradient
- Adjust the opacity of the gradient until you like the effect

Save the image, referring to the guidelines for preparing images for uploading, and email it to me.

I've used very basic imagery in the tutorial to keep things visually simple but feel free to add your own touches to the image you send me if you wish. As long as there is an image and a gradient with reduced opacity somewhere I'll be happy.

Summary:

Create new layer	<p>Click on new layer symbol in the panel.</p> <p>This creates a new layer above the active layer. The active layer is the one that has a dark background in the Layers panel – shown as blue in Mac versions</p> <p>To create a new layer below the active layer, hold the ctrl key down and click on the new layer icon.</p>
Delete a layer	Drag the layer to be deleted to the trash can.
Switch off a layer	Click on the eye symbol next to the layer you want to switch off.
Move a layer within the stack.	Drag and drop with the mouse
Lock a layer	<p>To lock the whole layer, click on the padlock next to the word 'Lock' at the top of the Layers palette. To unlock the layer, click on the padlock again.</p> <p>To lock ONLY the transparent pixels, click on the checkerboard next to the word 'Lock' and click it again to unlock.</p>
Link layers together (so that they move at the same time)	<p>Select the layers in the Layers palette (Ctrl-click to select multiple individual layers. Shift-click to select a group of layers which are next to each other in the stack)</p>
Change the opacity of a layer	Click on the opacity dropdown at the top right of the layers panel, then move the slider until the desired effect is achieved.
Create an adjustment layer	<p>Click on the adjustment layer icon and select the type of adjustment you want to make.</p> <p>Adjustment layers affect ALL the layers below them. To apply an adjustment layer ONLY to one layer, make the adjustment active then Ctrl-g. You can also use 'Create Clipping Mask' from the Layers menu. (This function is called 'Group with Previous' in earlier versions.)</p>