

# Photoshop Everyday techniques

*which I didn't quite "get" in my early photoshop classes*

Text and photos  
by Bruce Philpott

**This short article isn't a full course on Photoshop. I suggest you take one of the terrific classes offered at the junior college for that. Their classes are offered during the day and evening and at several locations. Or you might pick up a book on Photoshop. I like the *Visual Quick Start Guide* series. Be sure the book is about the version of Photoshop you're using.**

I use Photoshop full time at work together with other graphics software. Even when I was just doing freelance work, I found that I was using several techniques in nearly every photo which I must have missed during the first Photoshop classes I took. I'm going to try to explain these few techniques in this article, along with a bit of the very basics.

I use the full version of Photoshop CS, but for most photography Photoshop Elements will

suit your needs and is very affordable. The "street price" is about \$100, but sometimes you'll find it comes free with the purchase of a scanner or digital camera, or you'll find it for about \$50 at Costco, or on sale elsewhere, or if you're enrolled at the junior college, you'll find it for about \$50 there.

The method of getting your photos out of the camera into your computer will depend upon whether you're on a Mac or Windows, and which version, but pretty much all you have to do is hook up the USB cord that comes with the camera. Usually the CD that comes with the camera provides its own, less than Photoshop, software.

A rule I've made for myself in Photoshop is never to throw away pixels. Parts of a photo which are changed or cut off can never be reclaimed (you might just want them someday). I always, at the very least, Save a copy of the image or the layer, and archive the camera's images to a CD at some point.

Most photos can use a bit of improvement in Photoshop. When I open a photo in Photoshop, usually there are some areas I want to make lighter or darker and certainly it's a chance to re-crop my

photo. In looking at the photo I might realize I wasn't holding the camera straight (that it distracts from the photo). I might want to blur the background and foreground (since I avoid doing that in taking the picture).

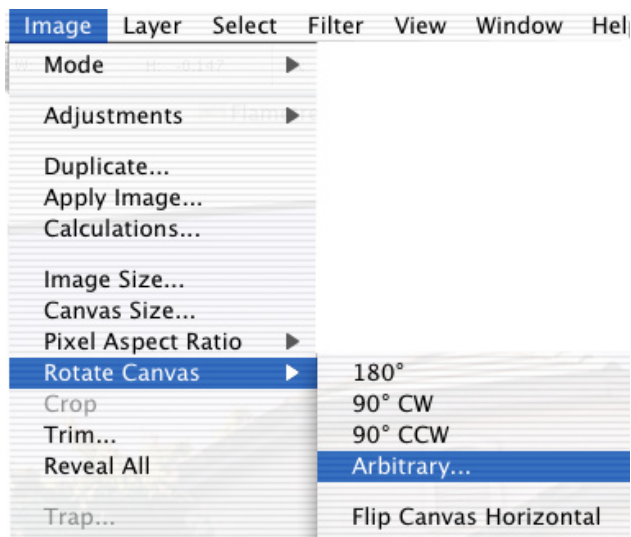
### To straighten the photo:



The tall, skinny “palette” that’s usually on the left of your computer’s screen is the Tools Palette. About two-thirds down on the right side of the Tools Palette, you’ll find an eyedropper. Just to the the lower right of the eyedropper is a tiny black triangle. Click and hold down that little triangle, and you’ll see yet another kind of eyedropper and a RULER icon. This is the **Measure Tool**.

Click on the Measure Tool. Now find something in your photo that you think is perfectly vertical or horizontal.

**Click** at one end of this imaginary (horizontal or vertical) line, then (still holding the mouse depressed) **drag** to the other end of the imaginary straight line and let up on your mouse. Now you’ve made either a true horizontal or vertical reference for Photoshop.



Now nearly at the very top of your screen, near the left, you’ll see “Image.” Click on Image, drag down to Rotate Canvas, and over to Arbitrary. Then just click OK (or press Enter). Now your image is straight! (And now it *really* needs cropping!)

### To crop the photo:

Here’s a place to be careful not to throw away pixels. You don’t know at this point what shape you’ll want. Eventually you may want to put this photo in a 5”x7” frame or an 8”x10” frame or even need the photo to conform to a bunch of other square photos.



Crop tool (highlighted)

You *do* know that you don’t want all of that extraneous, blank background that was created behind your picture when you straightened it in the previous step. I crop to 10”x12” (or 12”x10”), allowing plenty of room around my subject at the narrow measurement in case I need to crop it to, say, 5”x7” later. When I do need a different crop later, I first make a copy\* of this 10”x12” document, putting the new size as part of its new name, then I crop the *new* document, leaving the original document intact.

Something that’s not really intuitively designed is how to **reset the crop tool** if you or someone else has set it to, say 5”x7”. With the crop tool selected, go up to the other crop icon in the top bar (that’s called the Options bar, no mater which tool you’re using). Click on the little black triangle to the right of that upper crop icon. For now, ignore the box which drops down except to click the right-pointing triangle at the right of the box and go to “Reset Tool” and click.

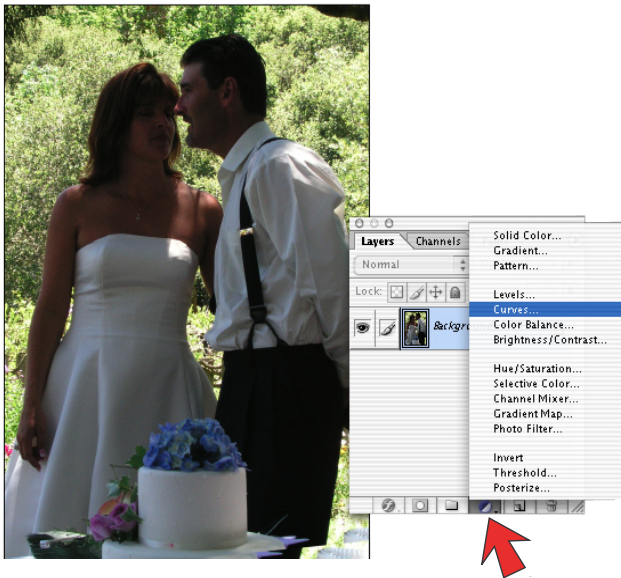
Otherwise, with the crop tool selected, just set the proportions you want in that upper Options bar and click and drag the cursor to the cropping you’d like and click “enter” on your keyboard.

\* To make a copy of your document (photo), go up to the top of your screen and find **File**, drag down to **Save As**, and save your document as a new name.

## Selectively darkening & lightening

You may notice that many areas of your photos are darker or lighter than you'd hoped. My two main ways to solve this are a Curves adjustment layer or a Neutral Overlay layer.

To make a **Curves adjustment layer**, look in the Layers Palette (F7) and look at the bottom. You'll see a circle that's half dark, half light. Click and hold this Adjustment Layer Button, and select **Curves...** A graph-looking thing will appear on your screen. Make sure the "Preview" box is checked so you can see the results of your changes. Click and drag on the middle of the line that's going diagonally across the graph. See how it lightens and darkens your photo!



Just to become acquainted with this Curves business, make a fairly extreme correction and click OK. Notice that you've created a new layer called "Curves..." Now click on the eye icon at the left of this layer. Notice how the curves adjustment goes away... click on the eye again and your adjustment is back!

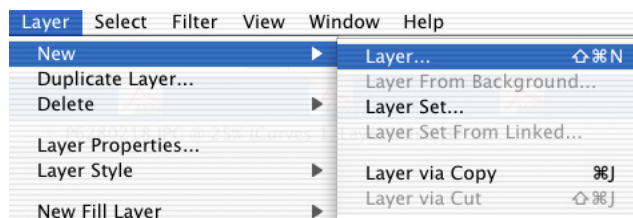
Now, press "d" on your keyboard. That gives you the "default" colors of Black & White. Now click on that brush you see in the Tools Palette (the one *without* the circular arrow!). You can now paint on that Curves layer of your photo with your black brush, (when the eye's visible on the



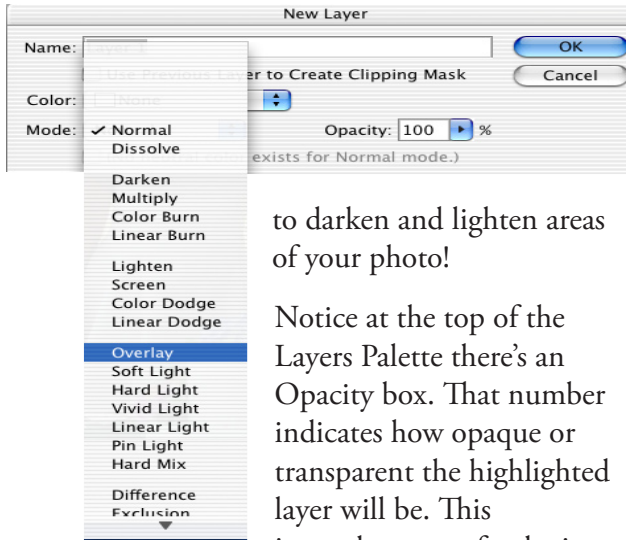
Curves layer of the Layers Palette.) Wherever you paint black on this "Curves Mask," it removes the effectiveness of the curves adjustment. If you paint in Gray (reduce the Opacity or Flow at the top of the screen), it just reduces the effectiveness of the curves adjustment!

Made a mistake painting the Curves layer? Press "x" on your keyboard to switch from a black brush to a white brush and you can put back the curves layer's effectiveness.

A **Neutral Overlay layer** takes a couple of more steps, but once you have it, it's really easy to selectively darken and lighten parts of your photo with great control. Click on Layer at the top of your screen, drag to New, and to Layer and click (or press shift-control/command-N). In the "dialog box" that appears, change the Mode from "Normal" to "**Overlay.**" Then you can **check** the "Fill with Overlay-neutral color" box. Notice that you have another new layer in your Layers Palette, and it's gray. You can paint black or white on this layer to your heart's content



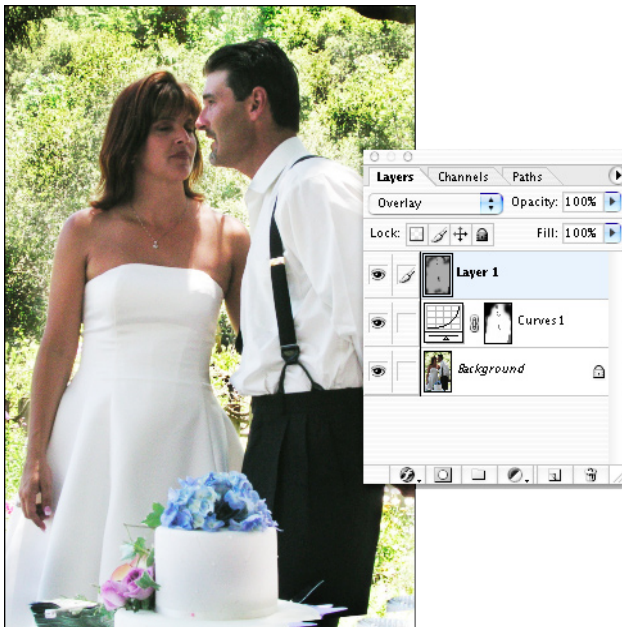




to darken and lighten areas of your photo!

Notice at the top of the Layers Palette there's an Opacity box. That number indicates how opaque or transparent the highlighted layer will be. This is another way of reducing

the effectiveness of your adjustment layers, in case you've gotten carried away.



## Creating a Layer Mask

Ok, I know you'll try to skip this one and try something more fun. You'll be back. A layer mask lets you "disappear" parts of your layer as you want, and you can make them RE-appear! I use this to blur a background or foreground (more about that later) or to put in a more attractive sky, for instance.

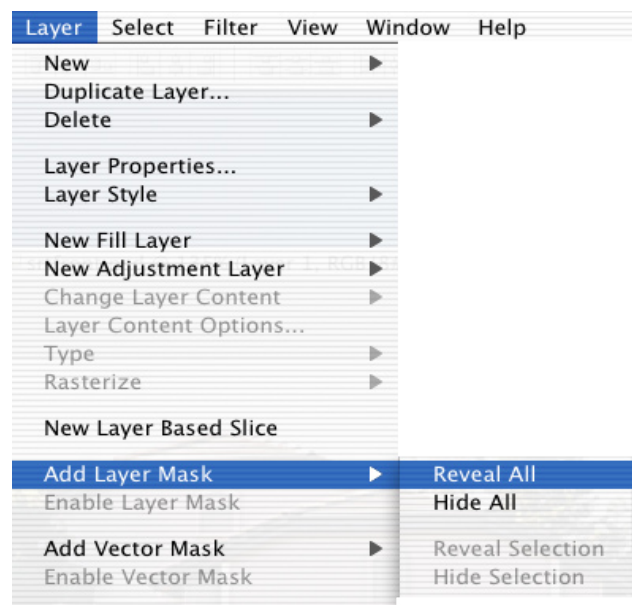
You can't mask a **Background** layer. That's OK,

though, because you'll need something beneath your layer to show through. You'll see.

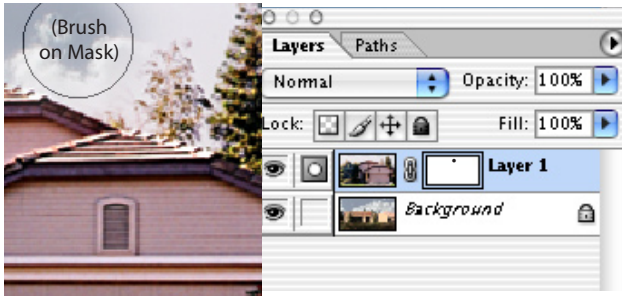
In Photoshop, find a scenic photo you've taken that has a boring sky, and one that has an interesting sky. Click and drag the un-interesting image right on top of the image with the cool sky. Now you have two layers in one document (photo). You *could* simply *erase* the sky in the top photo (as I always did) and let the more attractive sky show through. This method is more forgiving, though.



With the top layer (with the ordinary sky) highlighted in the Layers palette, go up to the top of your screen to Layer, and drag down to Add Layer Mask > Reveal All, and click. Now you're

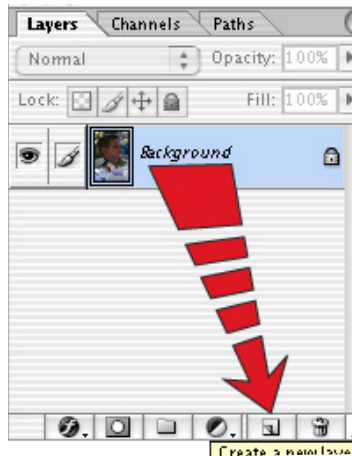


on the mask itself\*. If you paint with black on the mask, *you can see through that layer to the next layer!* Goof up? Just paint the mask with white! Very cool. Try painting white or black using the airbrush like we did on the Curves mask and the Overlay layer. You get a subtle blending.



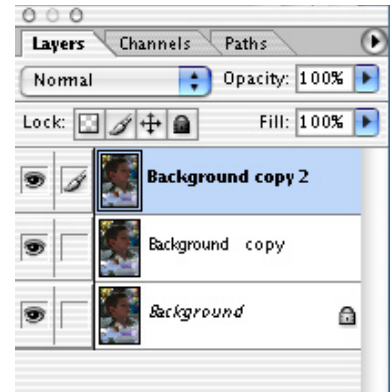
### Blurring the background or foreground

Everything in your photo is perfectly focused. You did a good job taking the picture! If you subtly blur the things behind your subject and in front of your subject, your viewer's eye will be drawn more to the subject. (Our eyes naturally seek focused things.)

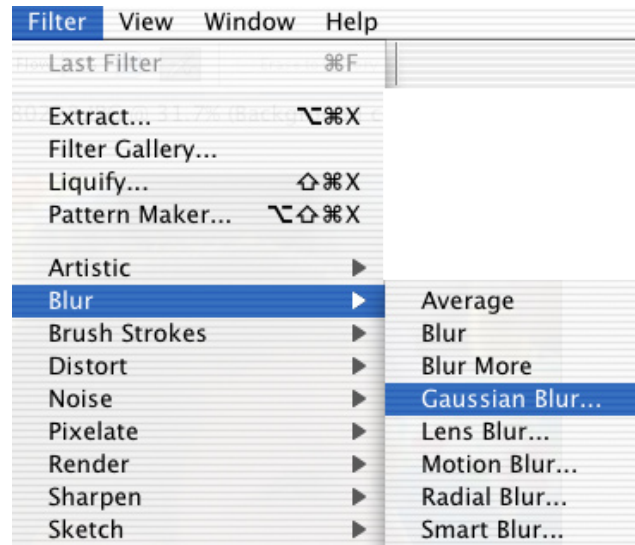


To make a blur layer, go to the Layers Palette. I like to save the **Background** layer in case I need something from it later, so let's make *two* copies of it: Drag the Background layer to the turned-page icon (*not* the trash

can!) at the bottom of the Layers Palette. You've made a Background copy layer, now take THAT layer and drag it to the turned-page icon. Now you have a *second* copy.



**Close the eye on the top Background copy layer and click on the lower of the Background Copies** (not the true **Background** layer). Now that you have that highlighted, go up to Filter and drag to Blur to Gaussian Blur and click. Be sure "Preview" is checked in the Gaussian Blur dialog box. Drag the slider until the picture looks a bit out of focus. Click OK.



Now open the eye on the *top* Background Copy layer. I add a layer mask to this layer and selectively, slowly "paint away" the visibility of the top layer (using a black brush on the layer mask), revealing the less focused layer.

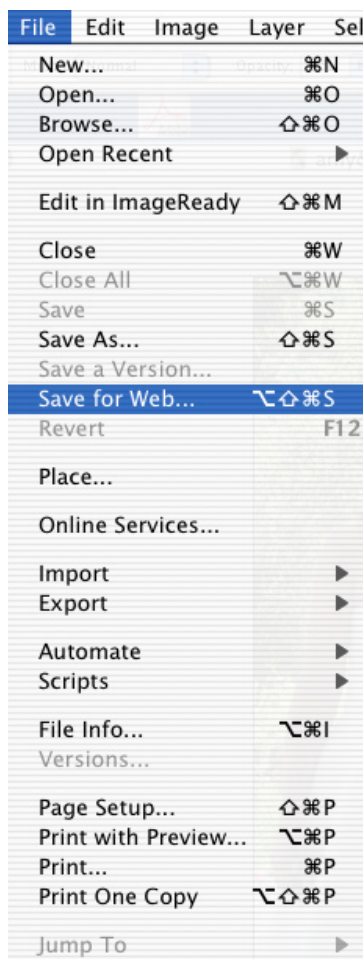
\* If you go away from the mask to do something else, you can always come back just by clicking on the mask itself in the Layers palette.



You *could* just use a low opacity, low flow brush *Eraser* tool, directly on the top layer but when you've goofed this up once or twice, you'll be back to the safe, old mask method\*. I use this technique in retouching blemishes and wrinkles, too. I make a slightly blurred layer behind my sharply focused layer, and mask out those sharply focused imperfections, minimizing them.

### Save, Save As and Save for Web

Now you have your photo straightened, cropped and selectively exposed and focussed. Instead of simply saving the image from your camera back to wherever you found it (in its original format), press **shift - control(command\*\*) - S** to **Save** your picture **As** a Photoshop document. (Be sure to choose Photoshop as the File Type.) Save it someplace you'll remember, maybe in a folder of photos of similar subjects or taken at the same time.

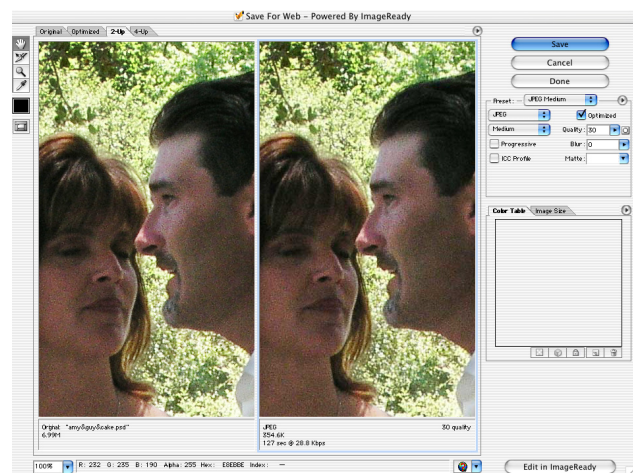


Your camera gives the photo a number (the date and frame number), but now you can call it something logical like “bobeatingpizza.psd.” I use lower case letters with no spaces because older web browsers like it that way.

To prepare it to send as an attachment to your email, you have to change the image from its wonderful, high resolution (hundreds of dots per inch) down to the 72 dpi (dots per inch)

which is the standard for computer screens, then “optimize” the photo for the web, which reduces your file size and makes it faster to open when you send it to someone.

This will degrade the image quality, so first let's (File>) **Save** the image **As** a different name. This step prevents you from accidentally Save-ing over (replacing) your high resolution with this one you're going to make for the web. At the top of your screen, go to Image, drag down to Image size (not Canvas Size) and **UN-check Resample Image**, and choose **72 dpi** and a size you want to send over the web. OK, now (File) **Save for Web**.



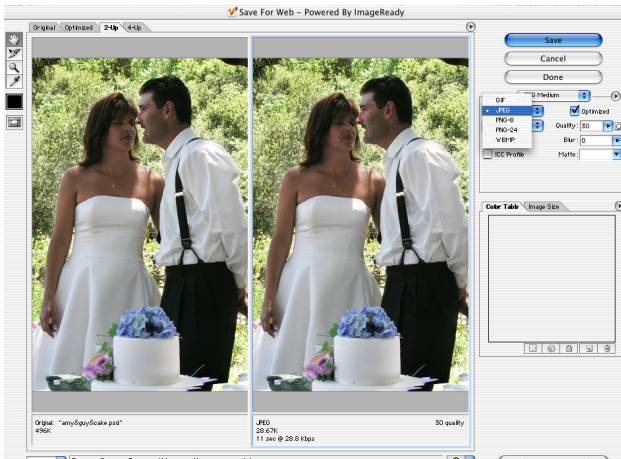
OOPS! Too many dpi

Does the Save for Web dialog box that comes up show the image **lots** larger than you planned? That means you forgot to reduce its resolution to 72 dpi. (Sometimes a portrait you forgot to reduce in dpi will preview like King Kong peering in the window!)

If the image is the size you were expecting, choose **jpg** as your compression type and choose

\* If I plan to use my foreground image as a selection to make a drop shadow or cast shadow, I use the Eraser method instead.

\*\* Computers running Windows don't have a Command key, so press Control. Mac users have both, so they press Command.



**medium** quality and save it where you'll be able to find it when you're browsing to attach it to your email. Now you can go back and delete that "bobeatingpizzaweb.psd." You have the first, high resolution image and your jpg image, so you don't need the "safety" image you created.

There's a lot I didn't cover in this article. I specifically left out all of the various methods of Selection which takes up entire chapters in the good textbooks I encourage you to read. You can apply any of the techniques in this article to "selected" areas of any layer.

*Having an extensive background in professional photography and thirty years' experience in computer graphics (20 in daily newspapers), Bruce Philpott took a class in Photoshop 4.0 before the turn of the century, and knew he'd found his ideal tool.*

*He branched out into freelance graphics including both print media and web development and is currently the Graphics Designer / Web Developer / Photographer for three wineries of the Terlato Wine Group: Rutherford Hill, Chimney Rock, and Alderbrook.*

*Photoshop is one of the primary tools of his job.*

*He has also written an article about digital cameras and photography which may be downloaded from: [brucephilpott.com/photos](http://brucephilpott.com/photos)*

*email: [graphics@brucephilpott.com](mailto:graphics@brucephilpott.com)*



Philpott Photography



Bruce Philpott

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