People are increasingly original when they name their children. This is wonderful, but eventually those children notice kids with more traditional names have mass produced things with their names on them. Things like little license plates for their tricycles.

I made license plates for my two small neighbors and posted a photo on Facebook. The idea generated a lot of interest, so I decided to make this quick tutorial so you can do this, too, if you have an image editor (Photoshop or GIMP) on your computer, and a printer and a laminator.

If you lack the printer or laminator, your local quick print shop can probably help you.

You may need to Zoom in on many of these images.

If your grandson has a long name like Rumpelstiltskin, clearly this license plate project won't be possible. Eight characters or fewer work very well.

You'll need a photo of a clean, unframed license plate of the desired date. I might have just taken a picture of the rear plate on my car, but instead I Googled and found a decent size/resolution image which I downloaded.
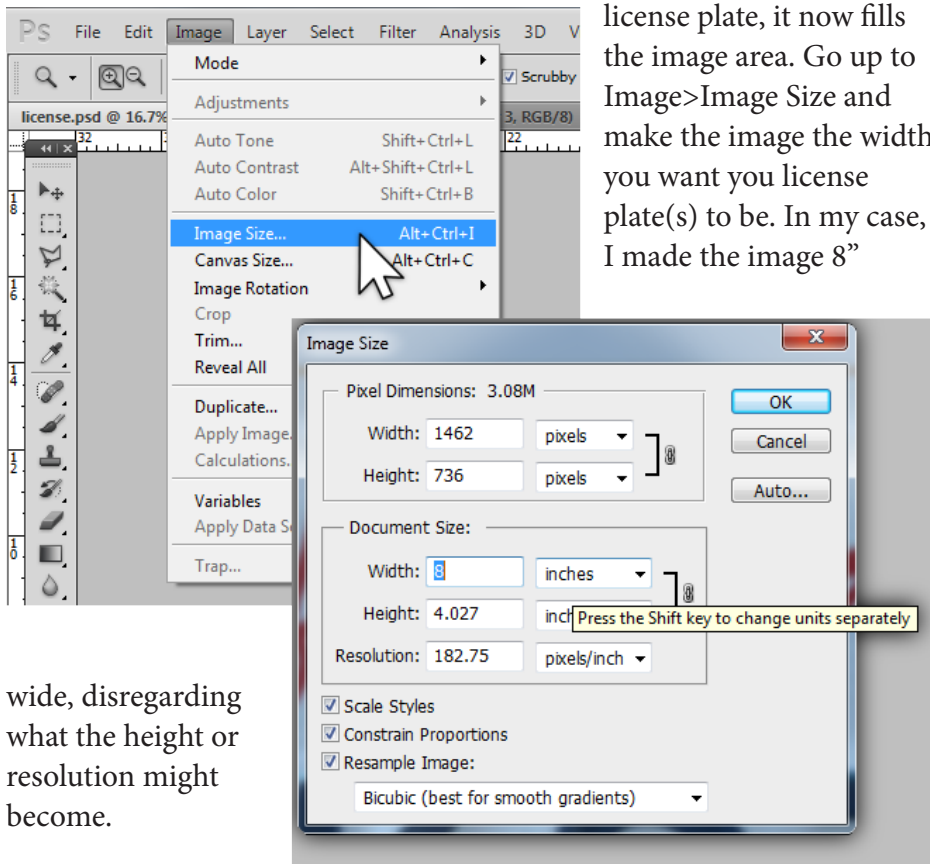
You'll also need a type font that closely matches the one used in that state. I Googled "California license plate font," and was told it's Penitentiary Gothic.

I Googled that font name and was offered downloads for various prices (including free), but I only needed eleven capital letters and didn't want to download any malware, so I looked at Google's Images tab and found the entire alphabet of caps and numerals. Not quite the large size I wanted, but they'd do. I Saved that alphabet image to my computer.

You may find a font on your computer just has to be condensed a bit to plausibly match the font you want. Don't worry about the emboss effect. We're going to do that ourselves.

Decide on the size you want your license plates to be. To be sure no one mistook one of my plates for counterfeits of actual 12" wide California plates, I made them 8" wide, the printable width on my printer. That way I could stack my two kids' plates on one sheet of card stock and use one lamination pouch. This is a handy size for kids' stuff, too. You may decide to make yours smaller. You could get six grandkids' license plates on one sheet if they're 5" wide on a horizontal page!

Open the image of your license plate photo in your image editor. Crop it usng the Crop Tool (C) and straighten it if necessary. Having cropped out everything except your license plate, it now fills the image area. Go up to Image>Image Size and make the image the width you want you license plate(s) to be. In my case, I made the image 8" wide, disregarding what the height or resolution might become.
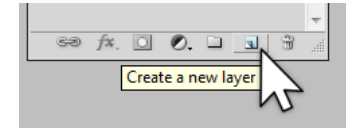
I knew I was going to make two little license plates, but that I could cut the work nearly in half by making one at a time. Let's get started on that first one.
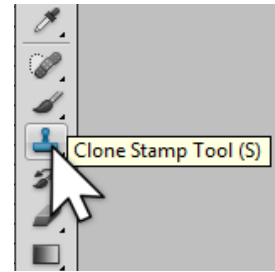
Anytime I use the Clone Stamp Tool (S), I do so on a new, empty layer. That way I can fix any mistakes I make; I won't have irreparably damaged my original layer. At first, your picture only has a *Background* layer. Click on the "New Layer" icon at the bottom of your layers panel to make this new, empty layer. Using the Clone Tool, sample blank, background areas of the plate and clone them onto the letters and numbers that are actually on this license plate. Even clone into the already blank areas around those characters. We'll want a full field of background color/texture to work with later.

California's plate background is white, but if you get the right image/angle, you can see that it has a sparkly, metallic texture (the reflector stuff). If you only capture pure white, your final plate won't look nearly as embossed (bumped out) as it would with a color/texture showing.

If you're working with an image of that font's alphabet, drag it into your document now. At this point I was disappointed in how small those letters were, but they'll enlarge well enough for our purposes. That alphabet probably has a background color you'll need to select (Magic Wand, not contiguous) and delete.

Now, using the Rectangular Marquee selection tool(M), surround the first letter you'll be using, hit Enter and press Cont/Cmd-J. That puts a copy of that letter on a layer of its own, leaving the original alphabet intact. Continue this process of selecting and copying individual letters onto their own layers until you have the
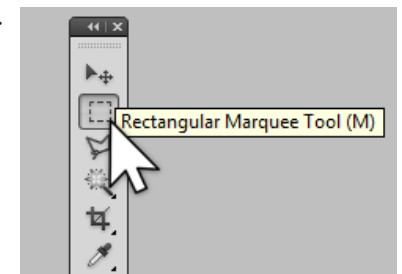
ones you need. Then click the visibility (eye) icon of the alphabet layer to turn it off. You'll see only the letters you need.

If you don't see rulers at the top and left of this image area, press Cont/Cmd-R to make them appear, then drag a horizontal guideline down from the top to align with the bottom of one row of these characters. Holding Cont/Cmd and clicking on any of these letters will "address" that layer/character. Some of your letters already sit on the line you dragged, so hold Shift as you use the Move tool to drag them where you want along this line. (Holding Shift prevents them from veering up or down as you drag left or right.) Then drag the rest of your letters to where you want them, making the child's name. Double-check the spelling and spacing at this point.

In the Layers Panel, click on the topmost of these letter layers to select it, hold Shift and click on the bottommost of those single-character layers. Notice they're all highlighted. Press Cont/Cmd-e to combine them into one layer with just the child's name on it. Blink the visibility of this layer to be sure nothing else is on the layer. Go back in the History Panel if you need to correct anything.

Now temporarily turn off the visibility of that cloned background layer, revealing the plate's original numbers and letters. Move your custom name layer so your letters are aligned with the left and bottom of the real plate's type. With your custom name layer selected, press Cmd/Cont-t (Transform) and hold Shift as you drag the upper right "handle" to the top of the original plate's numerals.
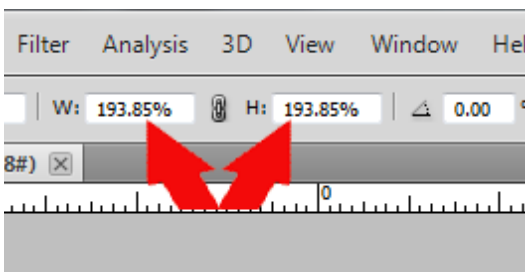
(If you'll be making similar plates, make a note of the percentage you've enlarged this at the top of your screen.) Click your mouse and your letters now match those on the real plate.

Turn the visibility of your cloned background layer back on. It may be tempting to adjust the width of the name, but you do want those letters to look just the way they would on a real personalized plate. The state would not stretch out a short name to fill the space, they'd just center it.

Now we're going to do the nifty emboss part. You'll notice it's not just those thin strokes of the characters that are embossed. The emboss on a real license plate includes a lot of that surrounding background.

Cont/Cmd-click on the thumbnail of the child's name. This makes a selection of the shapes of those letters (photo above). Expand the
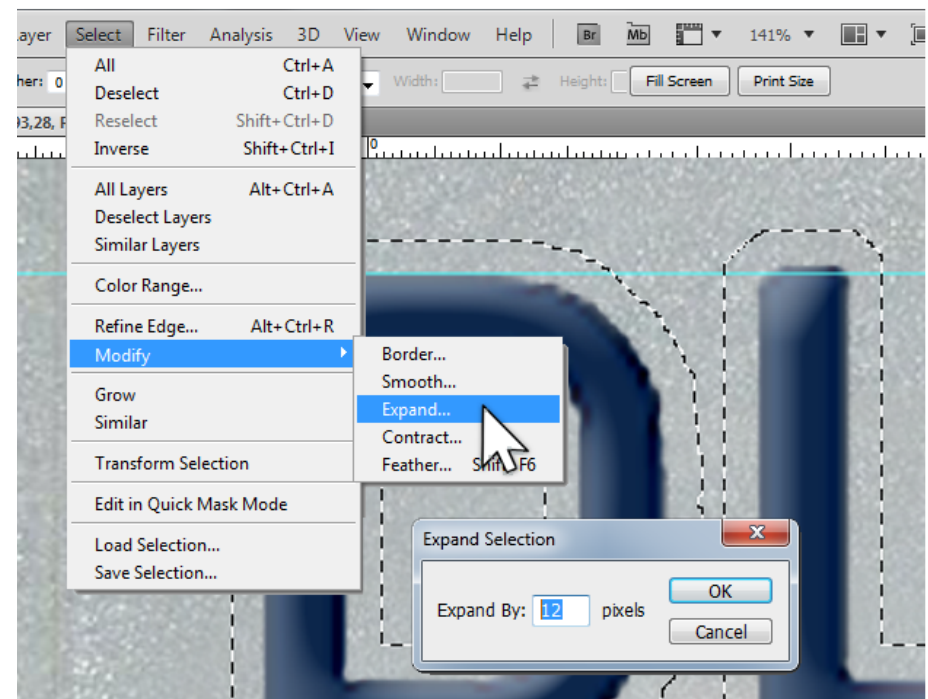
selection by going up to Select>Modify>Expand and fill in the number of pixels' expansion.

The pixels per inch of the license plate I found and re-sized happens to be 182ppi and expanding my selection by 12 pixels looked good to me, so that's how much I expanded my selection. Go to Image>Image Size just to see how many ppi your image is. If it's half of what mine was, only expand by 6 pixels. If it's twice what mine was, expand by 24 pixels. Easy!

OK, you have your expanded selection (shown at bottom right of previous page). Select your cloned layer and press Cont/Cmd-j. You've made a new layer, copying the selected area of that cloned background. You can't see it yet because it looks exactly like that big cloned area beneath it. With that new layer still selected, go down to the bottom of the Layers Panel and click on the FX button and choose Bevel/Emboss. With Inner Bevel and Smooth chosen, use the size and depth sliders to make the emboss look the way you want.

Layers Panel
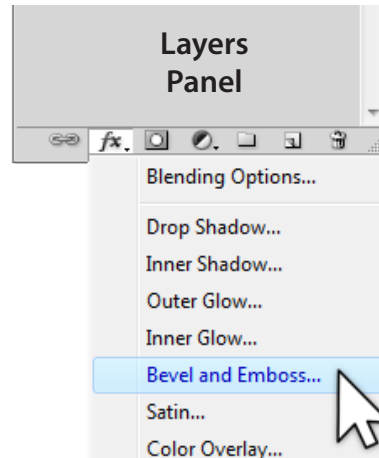
The actual letters themselves will be embossed a bit, too, so go back to that name layer and do Bevel/Emboss to taste. Maybe being a little less enthusiastic.

If you're only doing one name plate, you're done!

If you have a second, dfferent plate to make, go to Image>Canvas size and click the top-center square and make the height 10".

To simplify the making of my second plate, I made a group in the Layers Panel named for that child (PHOENIX). To do so, I Alt-option-clicked the New Group icon
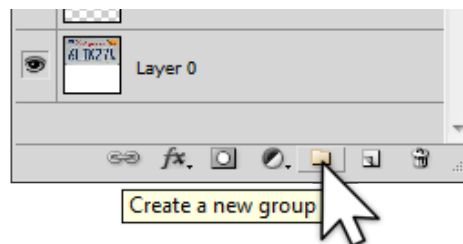
(looks like a file folder). Holding Alt-Option brings up the New Group dialog box, giving me the chance to name it right then instead of changing the default name later.
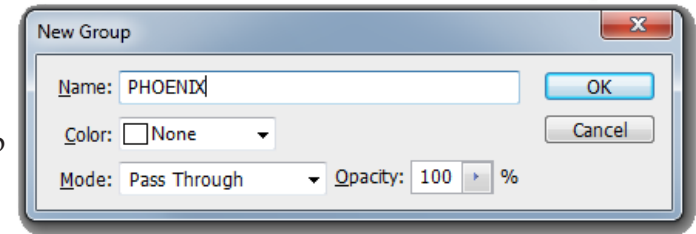
Double-click on your **Background** layer to make it an editable layer like the others. Then click on the top layer and hold Shift and click on the bottom layer, selecting all of them.
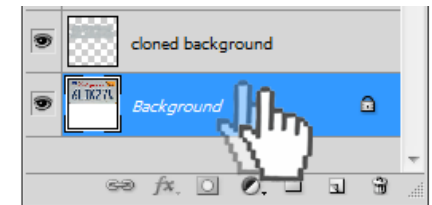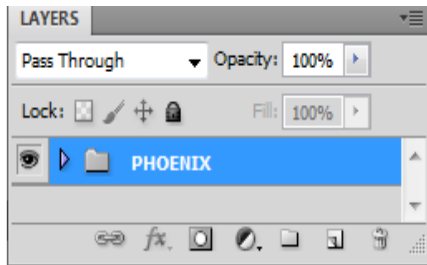
Now drag all of your layers into the group (as shown below).

You can tell if those layers are inside the group: The layer names are indented from the left, and when you twirl the little triangle next to the group name, the layers collapse into the group, simplifying the Layers Panel.

Double-click
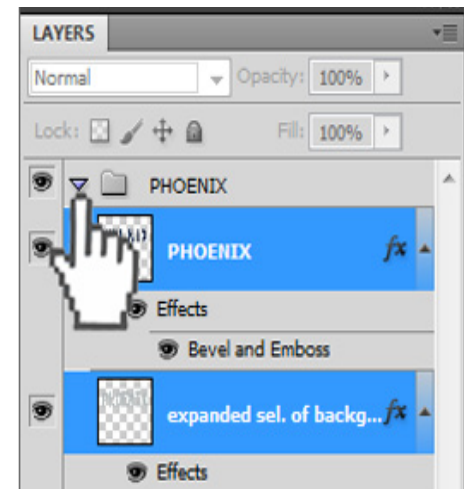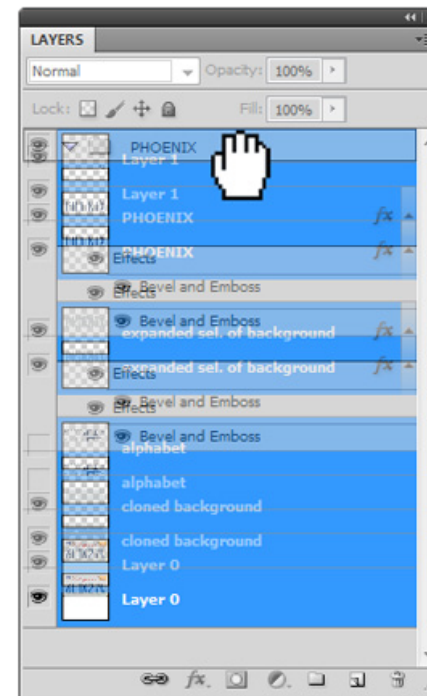
Then drag that folder down to the "New Layer" icon to duplicate the folder (PHOENIX copy). I renamed this new folder ZEPHYR. Rename yours accordingly.
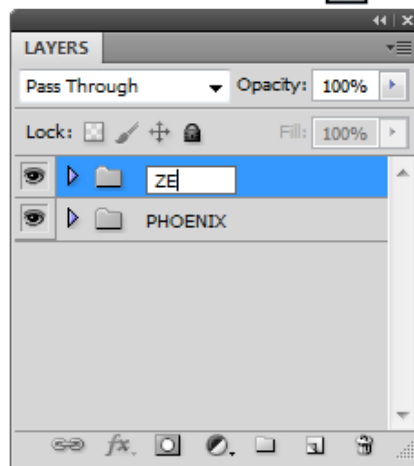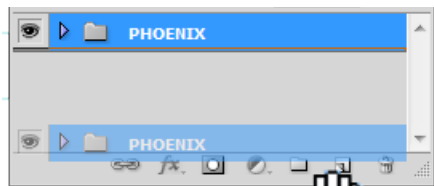

Now, using the Move Tool (Black arrow - V) in your image area, drag your most recently made folder down so it's visible at the bottom of the page, with the first plate at the top of the page.

Inside your new folder, turn off the visibility of both the name layer and the layer you made from that expanded selection from the cloned layer. Don't delete them, just click the eye icon.

Turn the alphabet layer's visibility back on and select the letters for this child's name. Proceed as before, assembling their name, combining those letters onto one layer and Transforming (enlarging) the name by the same percentage as you did the first name. Use the same selection enlargement procedure to select/create a new embossible background shape.

Now here's a speedy trick: Within this folder, you still have the first child's name layer and background emboss layer, but their visibility is turned off. Copy those exact FX by draggomg the FX from the first child's hidden name layer onto the new child's name layer. Do the same with the first child's background emboss shape layer beneath the first child's name, Alt/Option-dragging the FX onto the second child's background emboss shape. DONE!
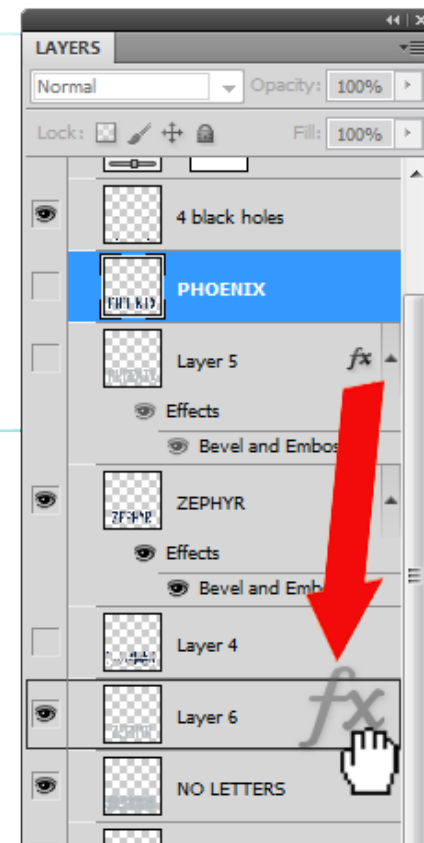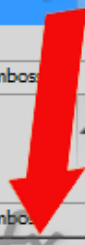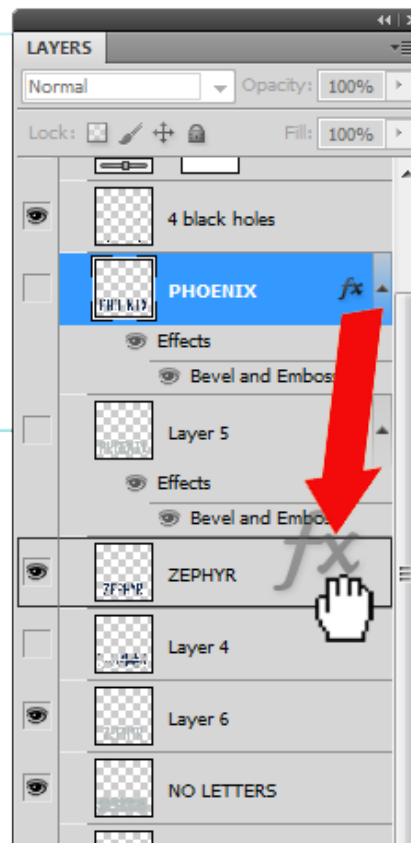
Turn on the visibility of the first folder and your entire project should be perfect. Print onto card stock. Cut each of the plates out carefully, rounding the corners and using a hole punch where the actual plate has screw holes.

Put the cut out plates in a lamination pouch, allowing ample space between them and away from the edges of the pouch. Run this through

the laminator. Cut each plate out being careful to allow enough margin not to break the seal anywhere. Heat a soldering iron and melt a self-

sealing hole in the center of those hole-punched areas, being careful to maintain the seal. If water can enter the tiniest hole in this lamination, it will eventually rot the card stock.

The child can decide where the plate will displayed. You can help them mount it without damage to anything by running long Twist-Ties, cable ties or string through those holes you made. Enjoy!

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