

# MASTERING ADOBE PHOTOSHOP LUMINOSITY MASKS

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE FOR PHOTOGRAPHERS

ROBIN WHALLEY



**Mastering Adobe Photoshop Luminosity Masks**  
The Definitive Guide for Photographers

By Robin Whalley

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# INTRODUCTION



## IMPORTANT: PLEASE READ FIRST

After some thought, I decided not to write the usual long introduction for this workbook. Most people seem to skim read the introduction or ignore it completely. I then receive lots of emails querying important points from the introduction that were missed. To ensure this doesn't happen to you, please read the following.

This workbook teaches you Luminosity Masking using Adobe Photoshop. In it, you will learn many different methods for creating masks and Selections based on the Luminance, Colour and Saturation information in an image. It also explains how to use the masks you create to improve any image. My only assumption is that you are editing photography

A common misunderstanding by those new to Luminosity Masking is that producing the masks not important. This is not true. There are many techniques to choose between, and which is best depends on what you are trying to achieve. This book therefore devotes a lot of space to explaining these different techniques and you will find yourself creating many masks in the early chapters. This is a very important step in

## INTRODUCTION

learning about Luminosity Masks and I would urge you not to rely on third party tools to create these for you, at least not initially. Then, once you reach the chapters on how to apply Luminosity Masks to editing situations, you will find the work much easier.

As you progress through the book, you may find there is some repetition. For example, I may repeat the shortcut keys regularly for some tasks. This is because the chapters cover many different techniques and including such details allows the chapters to stand alone as a reference in future

The examples that I've shared in the workbook use landscape photographs because I am a landscape photographer. This doesn't prevent you from using the same tools and techniques with any style of photography. Portrait photographers will find working with Luminosity Masks especially beneficial.

Whilst this workbook was written and based on the latest version of Adobe Photoshop CC, it can be used with earlier versions. You can even use these methods in versions of Photoshop from 10 years or more ago – they are timeless. But what you can't do is use them with other software like Photoshop Elements or Affinity Photo. Those require different techniques that work in different ways

I suspect that some of you reading this book already have Photoshop Extension panels for Luminosity Masking. Three such panels which are mentioned later in this book are Raya Pro, Lumenzia, and TK Actions. Whilst these panels are mentioned, you do not need to use them, and no instruction on their use is given. But by learning the techniques set out in this book, you will find that if you later decide to invest in one of these panels, you will find them much easier to use.

In terms of your existing Photoshop skills, I have assumed that you can find your way around the Photoshop interface. That you know how to add and work with layers to edit an image. And that you feel reasonably comfortable working with masks. Whilst I do explain everything that you will need to know, if you don't have some experience of the things

## INTRODUCTION

mentioned, you will find this book difficult to understand. Luminosity Masking is not for Photoshop beginners.

The final important point about this book is that it's designed as a series of exercises. You should therefore read the book in the order presented, and please don't skip anything – even if you think that you already know it. The exercises are presented as chapters which you can read. But you will gain the most value from following the exercises using the example images. You can download the images accompanying the book from my website at <https://lenscraft.co.uk/learn-photo-editing-books/useful-downloads-books/>.

Whilst you're doing this, please take a moment to join my monthly newsletter. This is where I publish new information about books and courses as well as tutorials. I think you will find it quite different to a lot of other photography newsletters

## AMERICAN/ENGLISH SPELLINGS

Many of the terms used in this book have American spellings which may differ from the English spelling. As I was born and live in the UK, I use the English spelling in the book, UNLESS it relates to a feature of the software with an American spelling. For example, I may talk about making a Color Range Selection. This is a feature of Photoshop and so uses the American spelling. But when I'm referring to say the colour of an object or the colour red, I will use the English spelling of colour.

I do encourage you to contact me with any errors you find, but please be sure the word is genuinely misspelled and not using the American/English variation for a reason. If you do find any genuine mistakes (and there will be some in a book of this length) please email me using [robin@lenscraft.co.uk](mailto:robin@lenscraft.co.uk).

### NOTE FOR WINDOWS USERS

This book was developed using an Apple Mac computer and the Mac version of Adobe Photoshop CC. If you are a Windows PC user, you may notice some minor differences between the screenshots and your computer. The good news is that Photoshop is largely standardised across both operating systems. You should therefore have little difficulty following the book whether you use an Apple Mac or a Windows PC.

### TRADEMARKS

Throughout this book, I may have referred to various organisations and their products. Where reference is made to any trademarks or product names it is purely in an editorial capacity. There is no intention of copyright infringement, and all trademarks are recognised and respected.

### DISCLAIMER

Whilst I have made every effort to ensure the information in this book is accurate and factual, it does represent my views and approach to photo editing. Some may disagree with the information I present but I have not intentionally made any omissions or errors. If you do find something you believe needs correcting, please contact me by email using [robin@lenscraft.co.uk](mailto:robin@lenscraft.co.uk)

Thank you and I hope that you enjoy this book.

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# ONE

## UNDERSTANDING LUMINOSITY MASKS



**Have you started reading here? Then please return to the start of the book because you've missed some important information.**

This chapter will provide you with an introduction to Luminosity Masks and how to read them. It's essential that you understand how to read masks. This will help you to use the different Luminosity Masking techniques effectively. Being able to understand the mask by looking at it, allows you to make important decisions when editing, like choosing the best mask to use.

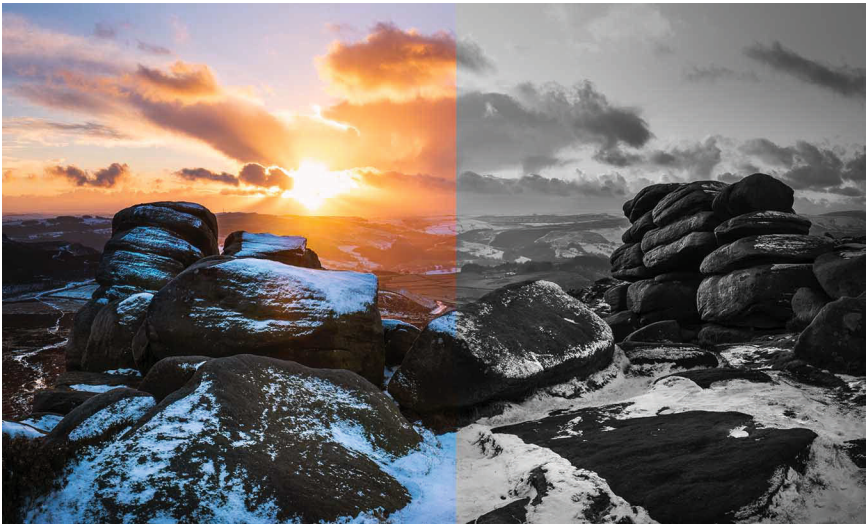
We will also look at the Layers Window in Photoshop to ensure you understand some of its features and tools. Whilst I have assumed you know the basics of editing with Photoshop, you may not yet know some of the important points when working with layers

The final part of the chapter then demonstrates how Luminosity Masks can improve simple adjustment techniques like Dodging and Burning.

## UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF MASKS

When we add an Adjustment Layer to edit an image in Photoshop, the adjustment is applied to the entire image. This is known as a global adjustment. But there are times when we don't want our adjustment to affect all areas of the image. In these cases, we want to apply our adjustment to specific areas which is known as making a local adjustment. The way we create local adjustments in Photoshop is by using a mask to restrict where the adjustment is applied. Let's look at an example of a simple mask and the effect it has on an image.

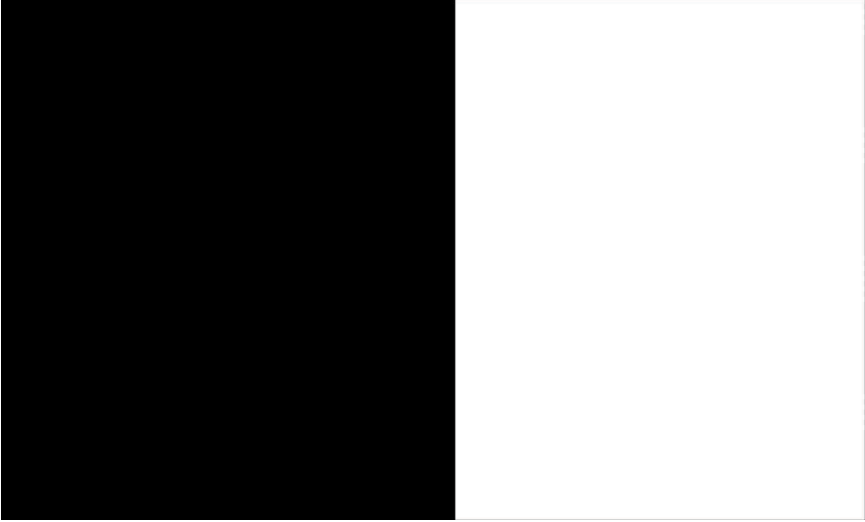
In the following screenshot, you can see an image that's been edited in Photoshop. Half the image is seen in colour and the other half is in black and white and white



*Applying a Black & White Adjustment Layer to an image using a mask.*

This effect was created using a Black & White Adjustment Layer, which converts a colour image to black and white. The reason half of the image is black and white, and the other half is in colour is that a Layer Mask was used to restrict the effect. You can see this Layer Mask in the following screenshot.

## UNDERSTANDING LUMINOSITY MASKS



*The Layers Mask attached to the Black & White Adjustment Layer.*

The Layer Mask is the same shape and dimensions as the image it's applied to. Half of the Layer Mask is black, and the other half is white. If you compare this to the image, you'll see that the image is in colour where the Layer Mask is black. Where the Layer Mask is white, the image is converted to black and white. This is important to remember as it's the basis for how masks work.

The mask is the same size as the image that it's applied to and is often attached to an Adjustment Layer. That's when we might also call it a Layer Mask. From this point on in the book, we will use the term mask rather than Layer Mask.

By default, when we add an Adjustment Layer (like the one converting it to black and white), a white mask is attached to that layer. Because the mask is white, it allows the effect of the Adjustment Layer to be seen across the entire image. It's only if we paint with black on the mask that we hide the effect of the layer where we paint with black. This is why the Black & White conversion is hidden from half of the image because only half of the mask is white

## UNDERSTANDING LUMINOSITY MASKS

Now let's look at an example where we apply a black to white gradient to the mask.



*Applying a black to white gradient on the mask attached to the Black & White Adjustment Layer.*

Notice in this example, that the transition between colour and black & white is now graduated so that you don't see a hard cut-off. This was achieved by painting a black to white gradient on the mask attached to the Black & White Adjustment Layer. You can see this mask in the screenshot below.

## UNDERSTANDING LUMINOSITY MASKS



*The graduated black to white mask.*

What's important to notice in this example, is that the image changes from colour to black & white gradually. If you look at the transition area on the mask, between the black and white areas, we see grey. This allows the Black & White Adjustment Layer effect to be partially seen. The lighter the grey, the more we see the layer's effect. Whilst the darker the grey, the more the layer's effect is hidden by the mask. This is what blends the Black & White Adjustment Layer effect so that we don't see a clear point of transition from colour to monochrome.

One of the benefits of using Luminosity Masks is that they create a natural transition which helps to blend your adjustments into the image. The key to understanding the rest of this book is learning how to read a mask. At its most basic, where you see black, the mask is hiding that part of the layer that it's attached to. But where you see white, the effect of the layer is seen in the image. Then where you see grey, you will partially see the effect of the layer. The darker the grey the less the layer's effect is visible, whilst the light of the grey the more it's seen.

Now let's look more closely at layers and the Layers Window in Photoshop

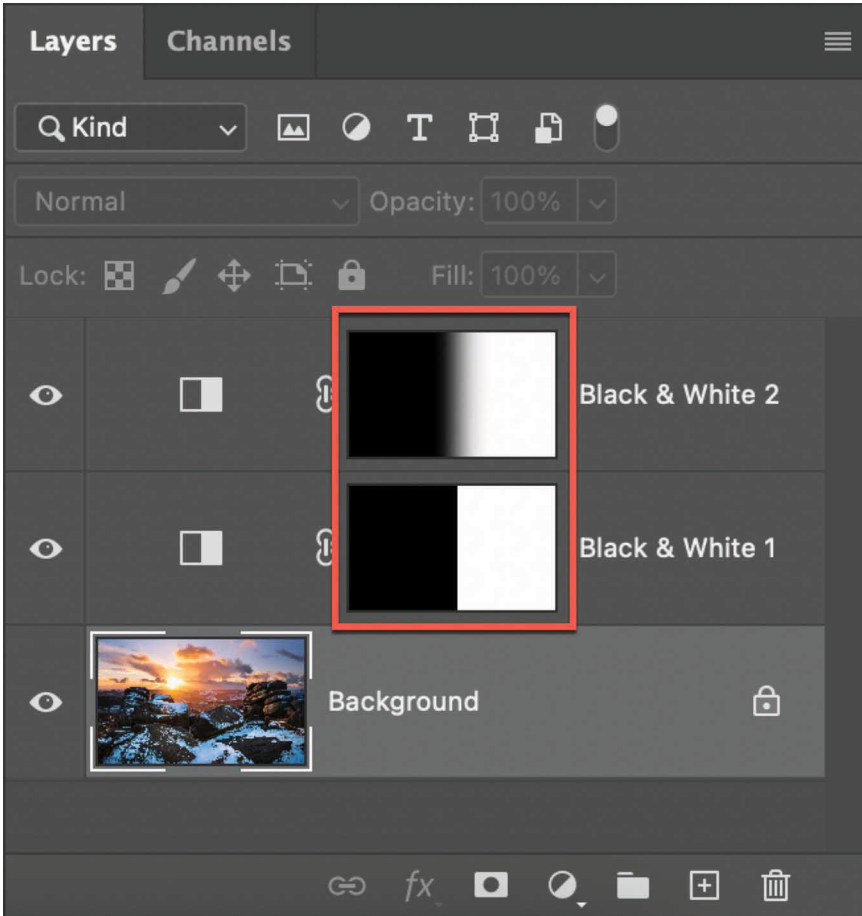
## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT LAYERS

When editing an image in Photoshop, there are a few ways you can apply an adjustment. These are:

1. In the “Image” menu, under the “Adjustment” submenu. Here you will find a list of adjustments like Levels, Curves, and Vibrance. Applying one of these to an image will change the pixels of that image and is a destructive edit. We call it a destructive edit because it’s not possible to change the settings you applied later if you want to remove or reduce them.
2. By applying an Adjustment Layer to the image. The Adjustment Layers provide the same adjustments as found in the Adjustment submenu mentioned above. The difference is that each of these adjustments creates a new Layer in the Layers Window. When you apply adjustments in this way, they are non-destructive, as you can turn them off and on, as well as change the settings in the future.
3. By applying a Filter to the image. These changes are also typically destructive and can’t be adjusted or removed in the future

Here’s a screenshot of the Photoshop Layers Window, showing the example image from the start of this chapter.

## UNDERSTANDING LUMINOSITY MASKS



*An example of the Layers Window in Photoshop.*

In this screenshot, we can see the image has three layers. At the bottom, we have the background layer containing the image, which is comprised of pixels. Then above this, we have two Black & White Adjustment Layers called “Black & White 1” and “Black & White 2”. Both layers have a Layer Mask attached to them which is shown as a black & white thumbnail. You can see these indicated by the red box. If you look at these thumbnails, you’ll see that they match the masks that we’ve looked at previously

## UNDERSTANDING LUMINOSITY MASKS

The order of the Layers in the Layers Window is important. This is because pixel layers like the background layer will hide any layer they cover. In contrast, the Black & White Layers are examples of Adjustment Layers. These apply an effect to the image but never hide the layers below them. Because of this, we can stack layers on top of each other and you will see their combined effect on the image.

Now let's look at an example of a Luminosity Mask.

### WHAT IS A LUMINOSITY MASK

Luminosity Masks may sound complicated, but they aren't. In fact, they are just like any other mask. The only reason we call them Luminosity Masks is because they are created using the luminance information in the photo being edited. By luminance information, we just mean how light or dark each of the pixels in the image is.

Here's an example of a Luminosity Mask created from the photo that we've been using.



*Example Luminosity Mask.*

## UNDERSTANDING LUMINOSITY MASKS

If you're thinking that this looks like the image converted to black and white, then you're right. Just like the other masks we have been looking at, a Luminosity Mask is a black and white image. Where you see white, the mask allows the layer to be seen. Where you see black, it hides the layer. And of course, grey allows the layer to be partially visible, depending on how light or dark the grey is.

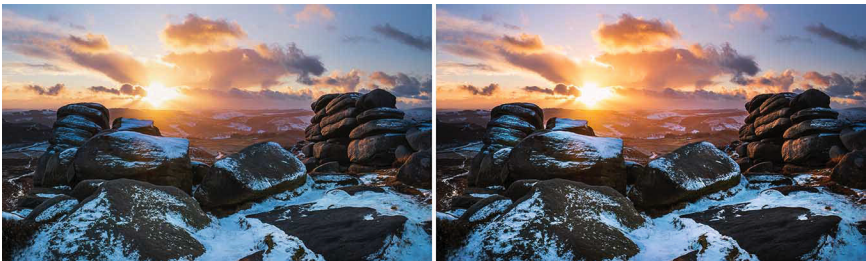
Although we have been talking about Luminosity Masks being created from the luminance information of an image, we can also create them from other sources. The colour channels in an image are another source for creating these masks. Additionally, we can create Luminosity Masks using the level of saturation in an image. We will be covering these subjects and others later in the book.

Ultimately, Luminosity Masks work just like any other type of mask. But if there's nothing special about them, why are they so useful for photo editing?

### WHY ARE LUMINOSITY MASKS SO USEFUL?

The main reason that we use a Luminosity Mask is that it allows us to target adjustments in a natural way. This makes them perfect for editing landscapes and many other types of photography. When you make an adjustment using a Luminosity Mask, it allows the adjustment to blend naturally into the image.

Carefully compare these two images.



*Image before and after editing with Luminosity Masks.*

## UNDERSTANDING LUMINOSITY MASKS

Here you see two versions of the same image. The image on the left is the original RAW file before editing. The image on the right was produced by adjusting the image colour as well as Dodging and Burning. These changes were made using Luminosity Masks to target them on specific areas. The Luminosity Mask also ensured that there was a natural blending of the adjustments, making them difficult to spot. These changes were minor, but their combined effect on the finished image is significant.

I'm sure you're now keen to create your first Luminosity Masks and start editing. But before we do, it's extremely important that you set up Photoshop correctly for masking. That's the subject of the next chapter.

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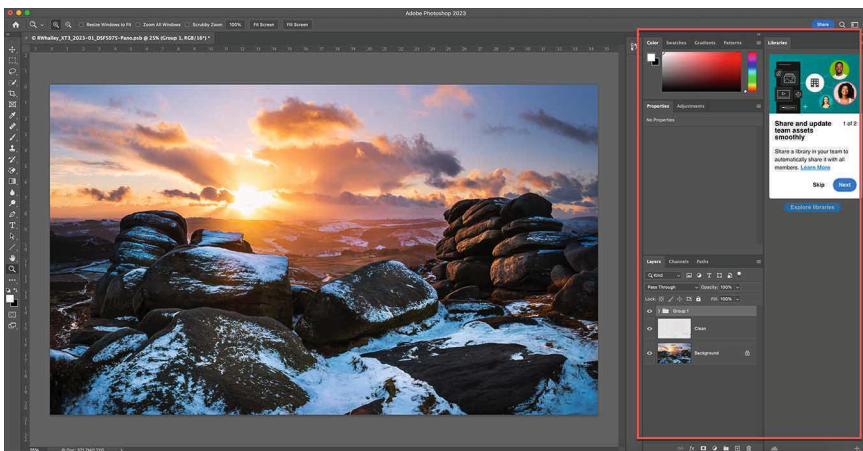
# TWO

## SETTING UP PHOTOSHOP FOR MASKING



The objective of this chapter is to set up Photoshop in a way that makes working with masks much easier. To do this, we will create a new Workspace in Photoshop which we can use when working with Luminosity Masks.

Before we go any further, here's what my default Photoshop CC Workspace looks like.

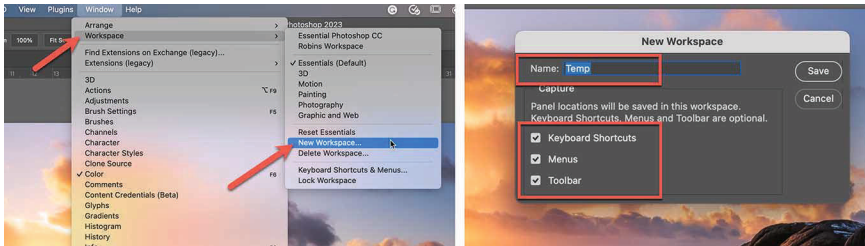


*The default Photoshop CC Essentials Workspace.*

## SETTING UP PHOTOSHOP FOR MASKING

The Workspace in Photoshop is just the name for a collection of Windows and how they are laid out on the screen. In the screenshot above, you can see the Windows grouped on the right side of the screen. This is the default layout or Workspace. You may find that your layout or Workspace is different from this, depending on the changes you've made to it in the past. Sometimes you can make changes without even realising

Before we go any further, we should save your current Workspace in case you want to return to it later. We can do this in the “Window” menu under the “Workspace” submenu. If you click on the Window menu in Photoshop and then hover over the Workspace submenu, you will see several Options you can choose. In this list you will find one called “New Workspace...”. You can see this in the left screenshot below.



*Saving the current Photoshop layout as a new Workspace.*

After selecting the New Workspace option, you will see a dialog displayed where you can enter the name of the Workspace. You can see this in the above screenshot on the right. In this example, I've named the Workspace to be “Temp”, but you can use a more meaningful name. You can also see that there are three options in the dialog which are “Keyboard Shortcuts”, “Menus”, and “Toolbars”. These have been selected and will be saved as part of the Workspace as they can be modified.

When you're happy that you have saved your current layout as a new Workspace, go back into the Workspace submenu. You should now select the “Essentials (Default)” Workspace in the list. Once selected we will

## SETTING UP PHOTOSHOP FOR MASKING

reset it to the default. We are doing this in case you made changes to your Workspace in the past. You will find the option to reset the Essentials Workspace in the Workspace submenu

Here's what my Essentials Workspace looks like once it's been reset



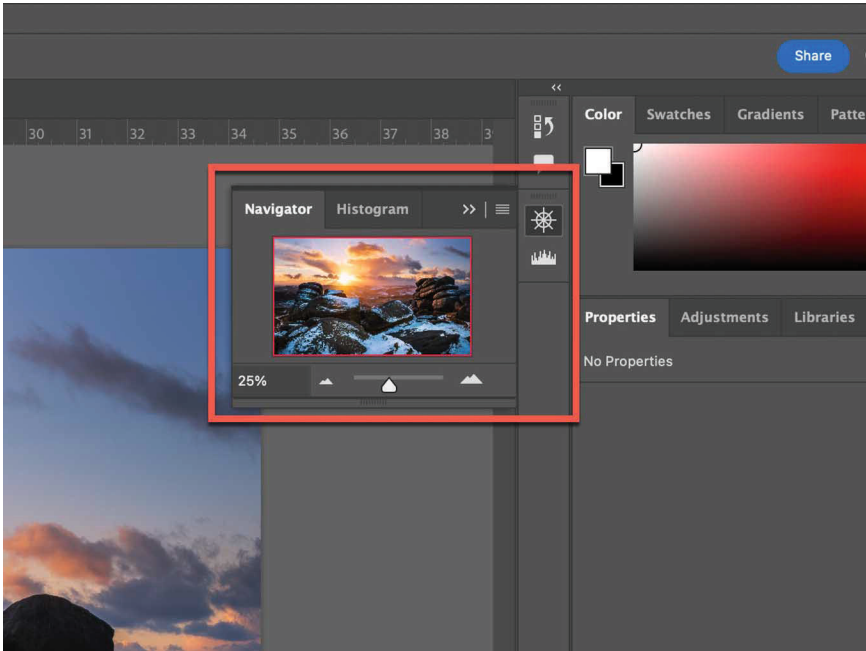
*The Photoshop Essentials Workspace when reset.*

As you can see, this is different to the Essentials Workspace I started with

Now that we have a common starting point, let's make some changes to configure the Windows for masking. If you click the Photoshop Window menu, you will see a list of all the available Windows we can display. Some of these will have a tick mark to the left of the name. These are the Windows that are already visible in the Workspace. Currently, not all the Windows that we want to use are visible, and in addition, some Windows that we won't use are shown.

Let's start by selecting the Navigator and Histogram Windows in the list to make them visible. When you do this, the Windows will be displayed but they may be docked to a sidebar rather than in the main area. You can see an example of this below.

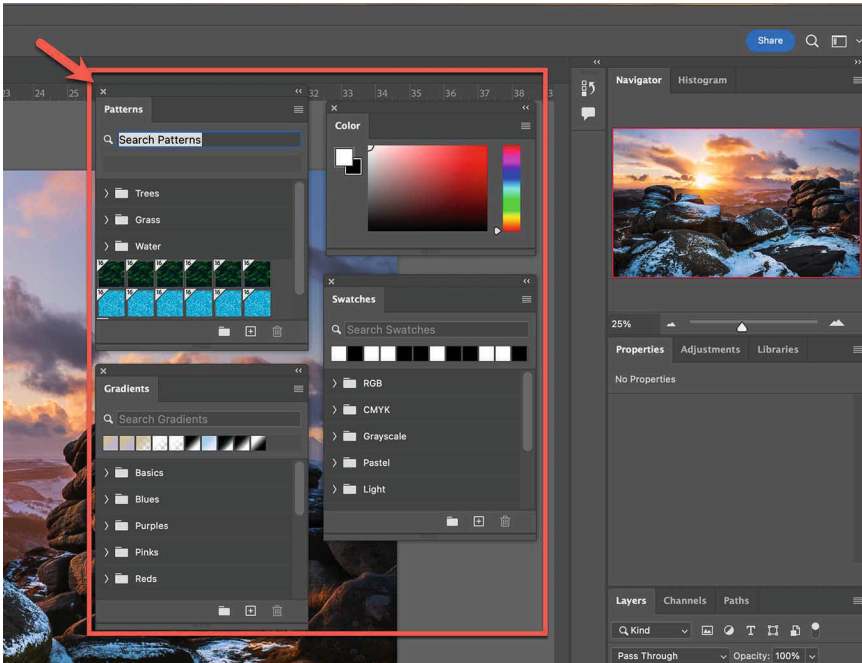
## SETTING UP PHOTOSHOP FOR MASKING



*Navigator and Histogram Windows docked to the sidebar.*

If this happens, you can click and drag the Windows, docking them with the other Windows on the right of the interface. At the same time, let's remove some of the unwanted Windows from the area by clicking and dragging them. In the following screenshot, you can see the Windows have been dragged out of position, and they are now floating over the image area.

## SETTING UP PHOTOSHOP FOR MASKING

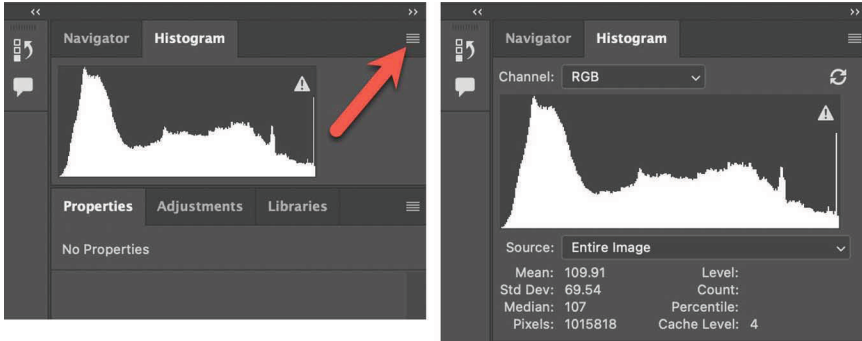


*Floating Windows that have been removed from the dock area.*

Having removed the Windows, you will find that each one has a small cross icon to the top left. Click this to close it. You should now have only the Navigator and Histogram Windows visible at the top right of the interface

Something else that you may find is that you need to resize the Windows. Often Windows like the Navigator will be too small, so you need to click and drag on the bottom of them to make them larger. The Histogram Window is also shown in a “Compact” view by default, as seen in the screenshot below. This is unlikely to be of much use to us and so we need to change its settings

## SETTING UP PHOTOSHOP FOR MASKING



*The Compact and Expanded view the Histogram.*

To switch the Histogram Window from the Compact to Expanded view, click the icon showing four horizontal lines in the top right of the Window. This displays a menu where you can select the Expanded view. You should also select the options to “Show Statistics” and “Show Channels in Color” from the menu. Once you’ve done this, your view of the Histogram Window should look like the screenshot on the right above

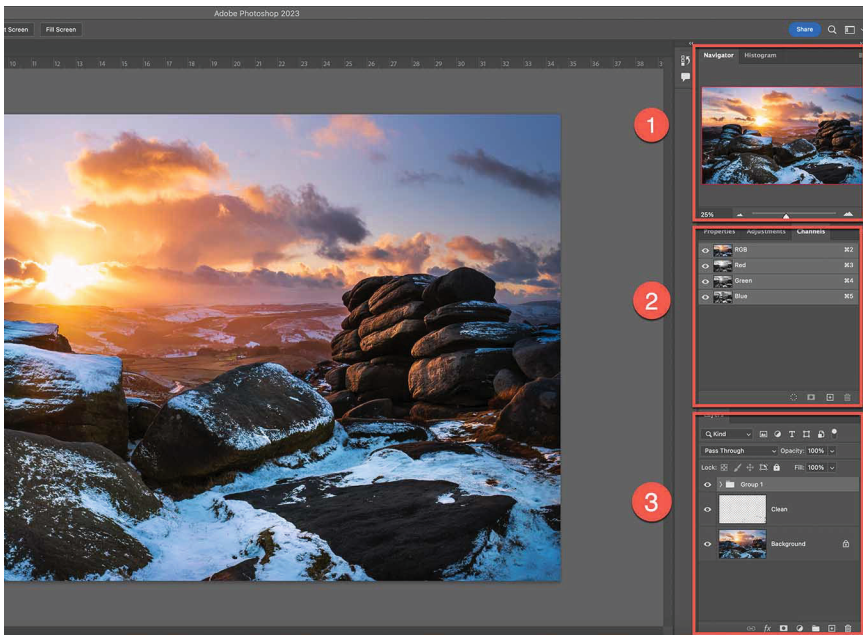
Now look at the Windows docked on the right of the screen. These are arranged into three groups, one at the top, one in the middle, and one at the bottom. In the top group, you should now have the Navigator and Histogram Windows. Then in the middle group, you should see the Properties, Adjustments, and Libraries Windows. The only one of these that we don’t need is the Libraries. You should therefore click and drag the Libraries Window to remove it from the group. After that, you can close it by clicking the X icon in the top left of the Window. This will leave only the Properties and Adjustments Windows in the central group

In the bottom group, you should see the Layers, Channels, and Paths Windows. Of these, we don’t require the Paths Window, so you can remove it from the group and then close it. This should leave the Layers and Channels Windows in the bottom group.

When we are working with Luminosity Masks, it can be advantageous to be able to view the Channels and Layers Windows at the same time. We

## SETTING UP PHOTOSHOP FOR MASKING

will therefore click and drag the Channels Window to dock it in the middle group. Your layout should then look like the Workspace shown below.



*New Workspace layout showing the Photoshop Windows arranged into three groups.*

When you have arranged your Windows like this, you can save the Workspace. To do this, click the Photoshop “Window” menu and then the “New Workspace...” option in the “Workspace” submenu. When the New Workspace dialog is displayed, enter the name “Luminosity Masking”. Also ensure the Keyboard Shortcuts, Menus, and Toolbar options are selected so that they are saved. You can then click the Save button to create the new Workspace.

Having saved the new Workspace, click the Photoshop Window menu and hover your mouse over the Workspace submenu. You should now see your new Luminosity Masking Workspace saved in the top section. This will also have a tick mark to the left to show that it is the active

## SETTING UP PHOTOSHOP FOR MASKING

Workspace. If you ever find that you change the Workspace in error, you can return to the Workspace submenu and select the “Reset Luminosity Masking” option there. This will reset the Workspace to the saved position

We now have a well configured Workspace for Luminosity Masking.

---

# THREE

## YOUR FIRST LUMINOSITY MASK



In this chapter, you will learn how to create your first Luminosity Mask. In addition, you will look at how to switch between Luminosity Masks, Selections and Channels. These are critical skills when creating and using Luminosity Mask to edit photography.

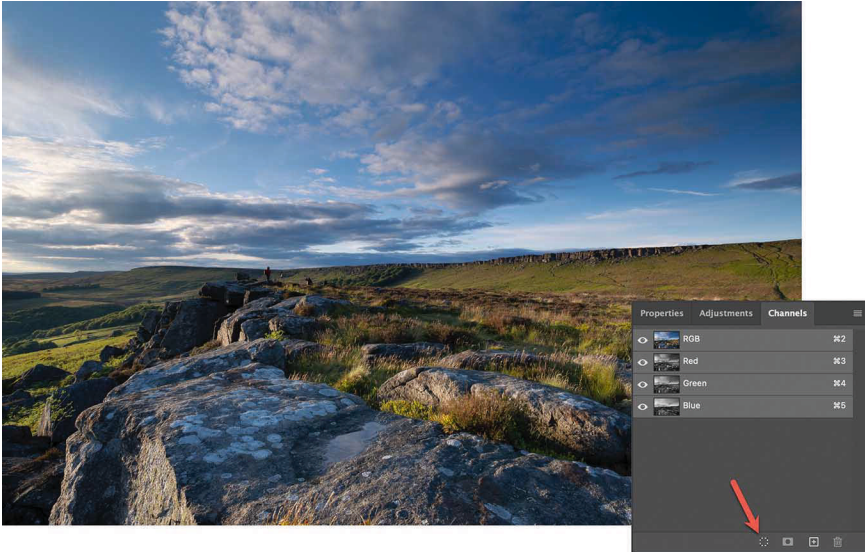
This chapter will also examine a couple of simple ways you could use Luminosity Masks to selectively edit a photograph. You will find the image used in this chapter available in the download files that accompany this book. You can download these from my website using the link.

<https://lenscraft.co.uk/learn-photo-editing-books/useful-downloads-books/>

This page contains links to download images for any of my published books. Whilst you're there, don't forget to sign up for my monthly newsletter if you haven't already.

Below, you can see the example image used in this and several other chapters of the book

## YOUR FIRST LUMINOSITY MASK



*Example image, together with a screenshot showing the Photoshop Channels Window.*

If you open the example image in Photoshop and check the Channels Window, you will see that it is an RGB image. This means three colour channels make up the image which are Red, Green, and Blue. You can click on any of these channels in the Channels Window to view them. They will then be displayed as black and white images. We will be returning to look at these and how we can use them in a later chapter. For now, you need to ensure that the RGB image channel at the top of the Channels Window is selected. When you click on this, it ensures you see a colour rather than a black and white image

A common mistake when working with Luminosity Masks is to forget to click the RGB channel as you are working. When this happens, you will see a red overlay appear on the image. If this happens (or should I say when), go to the Channels Window and click the RGB channel.

We will now load the brightness or luminosity information for this image as a Selection. There are two methods we can use to do this:

## YOUR FIRST LUMINOSITY MASK

1. Using the Keyboard Shortcut of Cmd + Click on a Mac or Ctrl + Click on a Windows PC. To do this, hold down the Cmd key or Ctrl key on your keyboard. Now position your Mouse Pointer over the RGB channel in the Channels Window. You will then see a small icon appear below the pointer showing a square with a dotted line around it. The icon is indicating that a Selection will be loaded from the channel when you click. Click once with your mouse to load the Selection
2. Using the “Load Channel as Selection” icon at the bottom of the Channels Window. The icon shows a circle with a dotted outline and is indicated by a red arrow in the screenshot above. Be sure you have the RGB channel selected in the Channels Window and then click the icon at the bottom of the Window to load it.

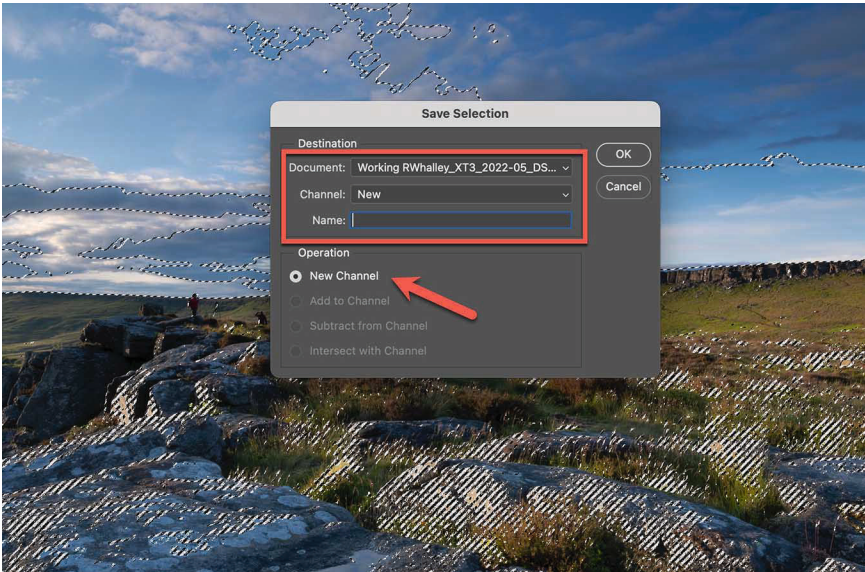
When you use either of these methods, it loads the brightness information from the colour image as a Selection. You will then have what we call an Active Selection. To show there’s an Active Selection, Photoshop displays Marching Ants on the image. This is an animated dotted line around the selected areas. There are times when you might not see the Marching Ants, but we will talk about those later. For now, you should try both methods to ensure you can use either.

After loading a channel as a Selection, you can clear the Active Selection by clicking the “Select” menu at the top of the Photoshop interface. You can then choose the “Deselect” Option. You can also use the Keyboard Shortcut Cmd + D on a Mac or Ctrl + D on a Windows PC. If you clear the Active Selection by mistake, you can reselect it by using the “Reselect” option in the “Select” menu.

Now let’s repeat the example and load the RGB channel again. You can do this using either of the described methods. Once you have an Active Selection let’s save it in case we want to use it in the future. Saving the selection avoids the need to recreate it, which in some instances may be time consuming or difficult.

## YOUR FIRST LUMINOSITY MASK

To save the Active Selection, click the “Select” menu at the top of the Photoshop interface. Then click the “Save Selection...” option to open the “Save Selection” dialog. You can see this in the following screenshot.



*Saving an Active Selection as a new channel in the image.*

In the screenshot, you can see the Marching Ants indicating there is an Active Selection. Then in the “Save Selection” dialog, you can see several options in the Destination section at the top. We can use these to choose where we will save this Selection. In this example, the settings are to save the Selection in the current document (the image is the document) as a new channel. This is also where you enter the name of the new channel that you want to create.

If you look below the Destination section, you can see the “Operation” section is set to create a new channel. There are several other options here, but they are currently greyed out and not available. Don’t worry about any of the other settings for now. All we need to do is enter the name “Lights 1” in the Name box. When you’ve done that, click the OK button. You should then see a new “Lights 1” channel appear in the

## END OF SAMPLE

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