

MASTERING PHOTOSHOP MASKS

PROFESSIONAL STRENGTH IMAGE EDITING
TECHNIQUES FOR PHOTOGRAPHERS

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Mastering Photoshop Masks

Professional strength image editing techniques for photographers

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CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>	v
1. Why Use Masks	1
2. Working with Photoshop	13
3. Painting a Mask	37
4. Channel Masks	63
5. Luminosity Masks	94
6. Selection Based Masking Techniques	119
7. Mask Refinement Techniques	139
8. Worked Examples	173
9. Photoshop Masking Panels	216
<i>Video Course</i>	221
<i>Thank you</i>	223
<i>Books & Courses by Robin</i>	225

INTRODUCTION



Anyone interested in photography for more than a few years can't help but have witnessed the many hot trends that have seemed to have emerged. HDR is one typical example, as are Reverse ND Grads and more recently Luminosity Masks. With each emerging trend, there is great enthusiasm as more photographers "hype up" what the tools are capable of. Luminosity Masks, one of the areas covered in this book, are no exception. Often this hype is accompanied by a lot of technical jargon, designed I'm sure to confuse the average photographer.

Personally, I like to investigate as many new developments as I can to determine what is of value, then try to integrate those elements into my own work. When I started to investigate Luminosity masks, what I found surprised me. Luminosity Masks are just like any other mask. What's different is the method of creating the mask and what they can be used for. As I started to use them, I became aware that they were very powerful but also difficult to understand. This has driven me to develop a book covering the different masking techniques.

Masks, together with Layers are the most powerful tools in Photoshop. If you want to be an expert editor, you must know how to use these tools.

Masks are a means of targeting an adjustment on specific areas of the image. It's the techniques you use to create these masks that vary and give rise to confusing terms such as Luminosity Masking, Channel Masking and Painting effects. This book provides you with a comprehensive explanation of how to apply these, quickly creating masks to deal with almost any situation.

A final important point to recognise that masking is a skill. This means that you need to practice the techniques to become good. It's not sufficient to learn about a technique and expect to be proficient in its application the first time you need to use it. There is a wide gap between knowing something and being able to apply that knowledge in a practical situation. Until your skill reaches a certain level, you will encounter situations that you struggle to manage. The only way to avoid this is practice. Be sure to practice with the accompanying image files which can be downloaded from my web site and with any images of your own.

Do You Need This Book?

If you're a beginner at using Photoshop, you probably won't benefit much from this book. The book requires you have a basic understanding of Photoshop and how to work with some common Photoshop tools. What you don't need, is to be an expert with Photoshop. If you have read and understood either of my previous Photoshop Books (Essential Photoshop and Photoshop Layers) you will be able to progress through this book without much problem.

You should also be aware that this book is not intended to make you a masking expert, covering every possible technique. To do that would probably require a book 10 times the length and would probably waste your time. It also doesn't cover all the different ways you could apply masks in your editing, although what's presented is largely example based. The objective of this book is to help you understand key masking techniques so you can quickly and easily create masks to use in your editing.

You can of course dispense with masks almost completely if you are using some editing tools such as the Nik collection. These tools usually take care of masking automatically through the selection tools they use. For example, the Nik tools use Control Points which generate a hidden mask based on the area of the image below the centre of the Control Point. This can help you to work quickly and intuitively, but you will encounter situations where you need to resort to Masks in Photoshop. If you increasingly find the finished image you imagine is difficult to achieve with such tools, it's probably time to seriously consider masking and Photoshop.

Do you need to use Photoshop to follow this book? It's probably not essential as the same techniques can often translate to other tools such as Affinity Photo. Despite this, I wouldn't recommend you use this book for the first time with other tools. The book was written specifically from the perspective of using Photoshop. You may be able to follow some of the techniques using other software but this isn't intentional.

Who Is This Book For?

I always think twice before including this section in an introduction. If I include a profile of the reader who might benefit, it could put people off who might otherwise benefit. After all, if you don't see an accurate description of yourself, you might be tempted not to bother. Instead, I will present two important pieces of information:

1. The minimum requirements you need to benefit from the book.
2. What outcome can you expect.

Minimum Requirements

This book is written primarily for Photographers who use Photoshop to edit and enhance their photography. That's not to say others who need to edit and enhance images won't benefit, but my assumption is you are a photographer. I also assume you are using Photoshop. As

mentioned previously, the concepts and even some of the information might apply to other tools but the book covers Adobe Photoshop.

There is also a requirement regarding your current level of skill with Photoshop. It's assumed you're an existing Photoshop user and comfortable finding your way around the interface. If I start to talk about using the Paint Brush Tool, you will know that this is found in the Tools Palette on the left side of the screen. I won't, other than in a brief introductory chapter, be explaining every step in precise detail. It's assume you will know the basics.

In terms of the version of Photoshop used, the book is illustrated using Photoshop Creative Cloud 2017. If you have an earlier version, I can reassure you is not a problem for 90% of the book. The tools and techniques presented are so fundamental that Photoshop has included them now for many years. I personally started editing with Photoshop V6.0 around 2001. If I were to return to that version, most of information in this book could still be used. What has changed, are some of the features and enhancements within the tools, that are designed to improve results and make editing easier.

What to expect

If you read, learn, practice and apply the contents of this book, you can reasonably expect to improve your photography. How much you improve will depend on the level of skill you develop. Reading this book alone will not turn you into an expert Photoshop user. It will however give you the tools you need to understand how to create masks quickly, and to work with those masked effectively.

The common difficulties many people seem to face when working with masks are:

1. How to identify the best technique to apply.
2. How to produce good masks easily.
3. Masking is time consuming.
4. Refining and improving masks requires a lot of technical knowledge.

The information within this book will remove these difficulties and more. If you have progressed to a level where you know the basics of Photoshop, this book will allow you to apply masking techniques like those a professional might use and to achieve similar results.

To gain the greatest value from this book it's important to follow the exercises using the download files provided. Having mastered each of the examples in the book, you should continue to practice these skills using your own photography.

Master these skills well, and the level of results will become limited only by your imagination. When developing your imagination, it's also important to understand how to translate this into actions that you can implement in your image editing.

Consider the following example.



Before processing with masks



After processing with masks

This is a before and after picture taken from one of the examples in this book and described in full later. The important point is not the result, but that it's the same basic masking techniques that have allowed this transformation to take place. To create dramatic results, you really need a good imagination and an understanding of how to apply the technique covered in this book. This is not something you will develop overnight and will require practice; don't be disheartened if your initial attempts fall short of your imagination.

Despite my stressing the need to practice, you will be able to achieve some quite dramatic improvements in your photography using this book. The techniques presented are quick to learn and enable you to achieve results very quickly.

Supporting downloads

This book is designed to be both read from start to finish and to be

used practically. This means you are expected to follow examples on your own computer. There are many examples in the book, based on images that I have shot and which are provided for you to download from my website. Please do download the files and follow the examples to get the maximum value from this book.

You can download the files from the address <https://lenscraft.co.uk/mastering-photoshop-masks-book-registration/>.

Registration to my website is free and will give you access to many more benefits in the Members Area.

Computers & Operating Systems

This book has been developed using both Windows and Mac computers. Most of the images and screen shots have been captured using a Mac to ensure they are of a sufficiently high resolution and quality. Where the text features keyboard shortcuts, these are given in the Mac format first, with the Windows equivalent following in parenthesis. Your computer and operating system will not make a difference as Photoshop is consistent across both platforms.

Trademarks

At times in this book, I may mention companies and their products. Many of these names will be registered trademarks and copyrighted. All such trademarks and copyrights are recognised and used in this book in a purely editorial sense. There is no intended breach of either trademark or copyright.

Disclaimer

Whilst I have made every effort to ensure the information in this book is accurate, up to date and factual, it does represent my views and approach. Some may disagree with the information I present, but to

the best of my knowledge there are no omissions or errors. If you do find something that needs to be corrected, please contact me by email using robin@lenscraft.co.uk. I will then include this for future versions of the book.



WHY USE MASKS



This chapter will introduce you to the basic idea of layers, masks and why these are so important when editing images.

Understanding Layers – A Basic Primer

To understand masks properly, you first need to understand the concept of layers. In Photoshop, images are composed of layers. These can be viewed in the Layers window. By default, when you open an image you see the Background image. You can see an example of this in the screen shot below.

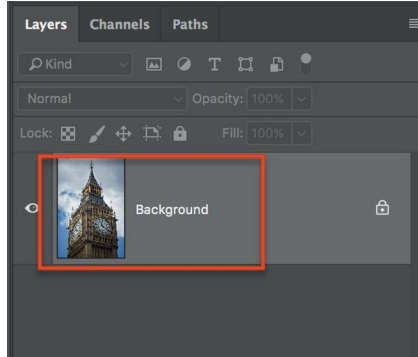


Figure 1: Screen shot of the Photoshop Layers window

One common mistake is to edit this “Background” image directly. This is what we term destructive editing as the adjustments are applied directly to the image. If you save the changes and close the image, there is no way to undo or adjust these changes later. This can be dangerous practice and we should aim to preserve the original image unchanged.

Photoshop has been designed to support non-destructive editing and achieves this using layers. Rather than applying adjustments directly to an image, the changes are applied as a new layer. The resulting image preview you see in the editing window is the sum of all the layers in the “Layer Stack”. You can see an example of an image with many layers below.

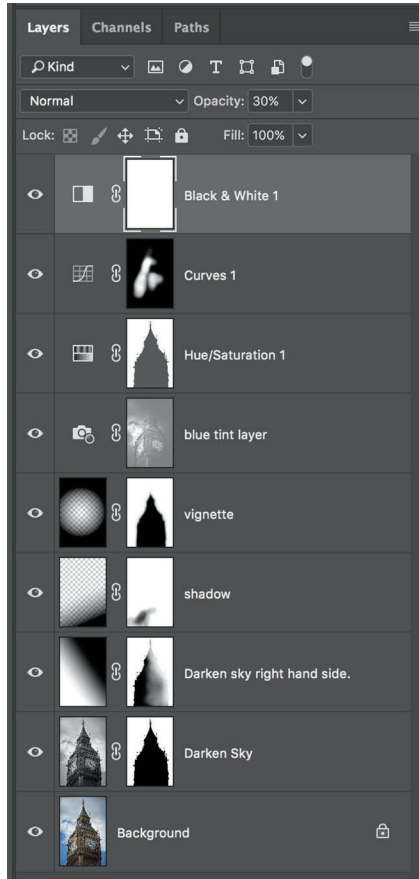


Figure 2: Screen shot of the Layers window showing an image with any layers and masks

In Photoshop, the Layer Stack is displayed in the Layers window. The layer at the top of the window is at the top of the stack and the layer at the bottom (usually the Background image) is at the bottom of the stack. Position in the stack is important as the layer only acts on the layers beneath it in the stack.

You should realise that not all layers are the same and can be classified in two ways:

1. Adjustment layers – these modify the appearance of the image layers below them but don't have any content. These layers are

mathematical calculations that change the image appearance. For example, you might add a curve adjustment layer to modify the tones in the image.

2. Image layers – These layers contain an image that replaces (or blocks) the lower layers from being visible.

It's possible to modify the behaviour of a layer in several ways. For example, we can change the blending mode of a layer from Normal to Overlay as shown by the arrow in the illustration below. Blending modes are mathematical calculations that describe to Photoshop how a layer should interact with the layers in the stack below it.

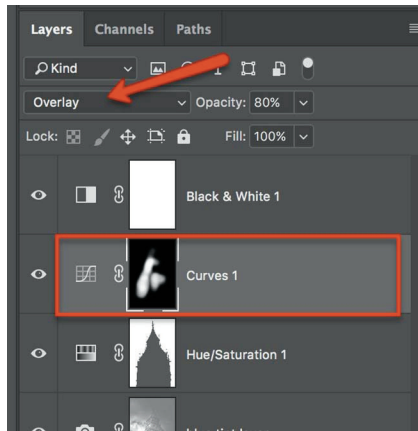


Figure 3: Layers and Blending Modes in the Layers window

Another way to modify the behaviour of a layer is by using a mask. When you create a new adjustment Layer, you will see that there is a mask attached to it. In the above example, you can see a Curves layer that has a mask attached to it. Image layers in contrast don't have a mask attached but you can create them. It's possible to add a mask to all layers in the Layer Stack except for the Background image as shown below.

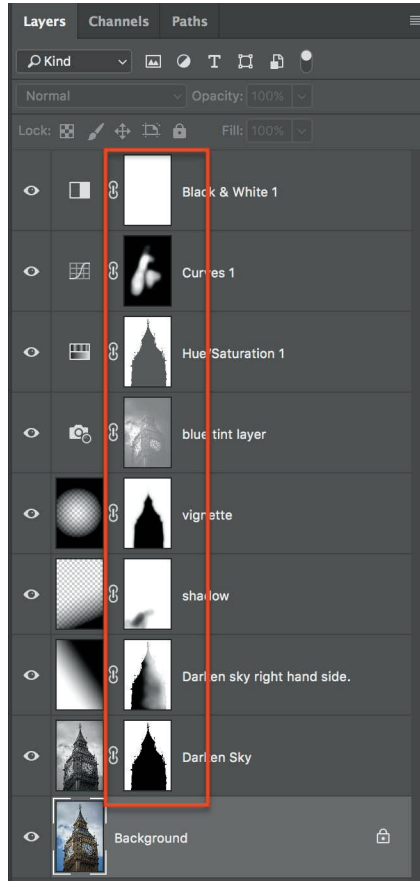


Figure 4: Layer Masks attached to Layers in the Layers window

The purpose of the mask is to control what elements of a layer appear in the adjusted image. The mask hides part of the image or the adjustment for the layer its attached to.

Understanding Masks – A Basic Primer

To help you better understand masks and the role these play in image editing, consider the following example.

In the following screen shot of the Layers window, we see the Background image together with an adjustment layer which has a mask attached. You can think of the mask as being a transparent sheet

that exactly covers the image. When you draw on the mask with black, it prevents that part of the layer from affecting the image.

In this screen shot, the Background image is in colour and has a Black and White conversion layer applied over it. The Black and White adjustment layer makes the colour image appear black and white. The black square on the mask attached to the adjustment layer prevents the layer from having any effect in this area. This creates a black and white image which has a square of colour.

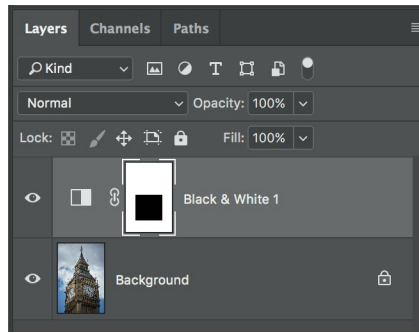


Figure 5: Demonstrating a simple Layer Mask

You can create this example for yourself by taking the following steps:

1. Open a new image.
2. Add a new Black and White adjustment layer to the image.
This converts the image to black and white.
3. Click on the layer mask attached to the Black and White adjustment layer to select it.
4. Select the Rectangular Marquee tool from the Photoshop Tools Palette by pressing M on your keyboard.
5. Draw a square selection on the image using the tool.
6. Press Command + I on your keyboard (Ctrl + I in Windows) to invert the selected area of the mask. This changes the selected area from white to black as can be seen in the screen shot above.
7. The resulting image can be seen below.



Figure 6: Result of the Layer Mask demonstration

The area of black on the mask hides the adjustment whilst the white areas allow the effect of the layer to be seen at full strength.

We can now extend the above example but this time we will set the mask colour to be grey:

1. Repeat the exercise above.
2. After inverting the selection of the mask to black, select “Edit | Fade Invert...” from the menu.
3. When the “Fade” dialog appears, set the Opacity to 50%. This changes the black area of the mask to be a mid-tone grey.
4. You should now have an image like that shown below.

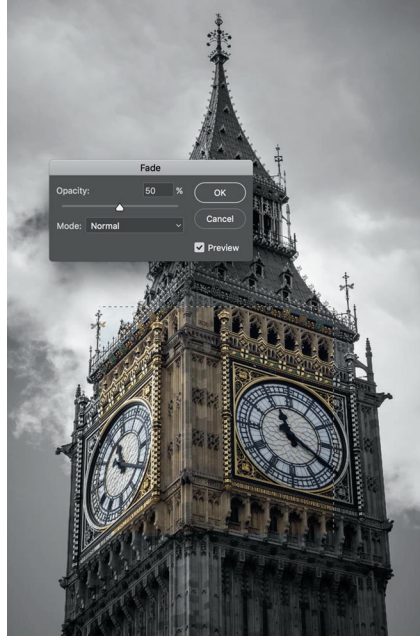


Figure 7: Fading the Layer Mask to illustrate the effect of Grey

Notice this time that the grey area of the mask allows the effect of the adjustment layer to be partially visible. In the following screen shot of the Layers window, you can see the mask attached the adjustment layer is grey rather than the black, as in the first example.

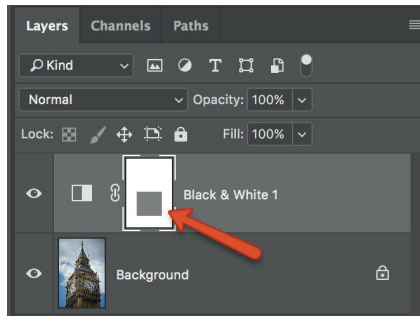


Figure 8: Grey Layer Mask resulting from the fading the mask

The lighter the tone used for the mask, the more the effect of the layer

can be seen in that area. When the mask becomes white the effect is seen at full strength. The darker the tone used for the mask, the more it hides the effect of the layer. When the mask is black, it hides the effect completely.



Tip: To help you remember this, use the rhyme “Black conceals and white reveals”.



ALTHOUGH THIS HAS BEEN a simple example, it’s the basis for all masking adjustments. Masks allow you to target your adjustments on specific areas of the image. The tricky part, which is covered and simplified by this book, is understanding how to quickly create the necessary masks.

Masking Techniques

Whilst the concept behind masks are consistent across all types of mask, it’s the technique by which the mask is created that changes. It’s these different techniques that give rise to the different masking types. For example, you may hear people discussing Channel Masks and Luminosity Masks. In both cases, these are masks attached to layers, just as in the exercise in the previous section. What has changed is how the mask was created and therefore what is being targeted.

To help cut through the confusion surrounding the subject, it may help to think that there are four different types of mask creation technique (which we will cover in this book):

1. Drawing/painting a mask.
2. Channel masks.
3. Luminosity masks.
4. Selection masks.

Drawing/Painting Masks

Typically, these are created using the painting and drawing tools such as the Brush Tool. We then paint onto a white mask with black to hide elements of a layer. Or we can paint with white onto a black mask to reveal elements of a layer. This approach is imprecise but can be helpful in blending large areas of change or adjustment.

Channel Masks

When you open an image in Photoshop, the image you see is comprised of several channels. The example you are probably familiar with is the RGB image, which is the Photoshop default for photography. RGB images are comprised of three channels (Red, Green and Blue), each channel holding the information for that colour. A channel mask is a mask created from one of these three channels.

In addition to the RGB channels, it's possible to switch images into other formats such as Greyscale, CMYK and Lab. Each of these formats is comprised of channels representing image data, but in different ways. It's possible to create channel masks using any of these formats, although some will be more useful than others.

Channel masks provide a fast and easy method of creating detailed and complex masks. They are very good for making precision adjustments but these can sometimes be tricky to blend into the image.

Luminosity Masks

The term Luminosity refers to how light or dark something is. When we create a Luminosity Mask we are creating a mask that can target elements of the image based on how light or dark they are.

Imagine dividing the tones in your image into Blacks, Whites, Shadows and Highlights. This is precisely what a Luminosity Mask can achieve for you. It's then possible to target an adjustment specifically onto the Shadow or Highlight areas.

Dividing an image into four tonal ranges as described above is just one possible approach. You may already be familiar with other approaches that can be used with Luminosity Masks. For example, the Zone System divides the image into 10 separate zones. It's possible to create Luminosity Masks that correspond to the different zones in the Zone System and thereby target our adjustments.

As with Channel Masks, the techniques we cover in this book provide a means to quickly create these highly-detailed masks. These share the same characteristics in terms of precision and blending adjustments.

Selection Masks

Channel and Luminosity masks are created based on the information within the image itself. A selection mask is a little different, possibly more like the painted mask. The approach to creating a selection mask is to select an area of an image using a variety of tools and techniques. These selections can then be used to quickly generate a mask which can be applied to any layer or adjustment layer. Photoshop provides several selection tools which can be used to create a selection before converting it to a mask. These include the tools such as the Magic Wand, Magnetic Lasso and Marquee tool.

Selection based masks tend to be best suited to select one or two larger objects within a scene. Often you need a degree of precision that exceeds what can be achieved by drawing/painting a mask.



Tip: The more precise a mask, the more difficult it can become to blend strong adjustments into the image. When this happens, the brain tends to tell us something is wrong and the image is in some way false. When editing photography, we need to avoid this and keep adjustments believable.



Mask Refinement

In addition to the different mask creation techniques, there are mask refinement techniques. These can be applied to any mask to add a level of refinement or control. We tend to use these techniques to improve the level of blending in the image. By improving the blending of the adjustments and image elements we can achieve a more believable final image.

An example of this could be where you are using a mask to composite an image. For example, the sky from one image is being used in another. After you create the image you might find there is a visible edge where the two elements of the finish image meet. Refinement techniques help you to blend the areas seamlessly together.

But before we can look at the different masking and refinement techniques, it's important that you understand the basic Photoshop skills we will need. The next chapter will provide a foundation level of knowledge on which the remainder of the book is based. Please be sure you understand before progressing to the chapters on masking.



WORKING WITH PHOTOSHOP



Photoshop has continued to evolve over many years, each new release improving on the last (you may not agree) and adding new features. In addition to there often being many ways to achieve an outcome, the Photoshop environment is highly configurable. You can even change some elements of the interface without even realising what you have done. This means, the images in this chapter may not match your version.

Despite this, what you should know is that many of the techniques and tools we will discuss, date back to the early versions of Photoshop. They continue to be supported by the latest version I don't doubt this will continue. Why? Because these are professional techniques which are hard to improve on in terms of both quality and speed.

The purpose of this chapter is to orientate you to the most important elements of the Photoshop interface for the techniques that follow. This will ensure you are familiar with the tools we will be using. Once we enter the main part of the book, we won't be repeating detailed instructions, so be sure to read it at least once. The chapter does assume you are familiar with the basic operation of Photoshop and isn't intended to provide detailed instruction.

The information and screen captures are taken from Photoshop CC 2017.

Overview of the interface

Welcome to the Interface for Adobe Photoshop CC 2017. If you're not a regular Photoshop user you might find this screen a little confusing. It's also quite possible that your using an older version of Photoshop which could look quite different. The Photoshop interface has been through several evolutions over the years so we should start by familiarising ourselves with the key areas as shown below.

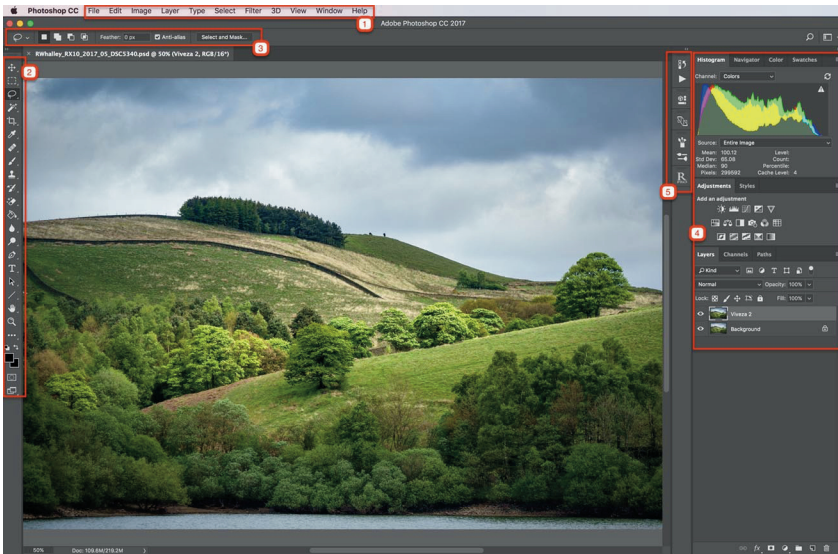


Figure 9: Layout of the Photoshop interface

The above illustration breaks the interface down into the key areas with which you should be familiar:

1. The Menu – There are many menu options within Photoshop. These are arranged under “logical” headings based on their function. We will be using several these menus as we progress

through the book. The relevant menu items will be covered at the point they are required.

2. The Tools Palette – Here you will find several useful tools to help you perform specific activities such as selecting an area of an image or painting a mask. We will review the most useful of the tools in advance of the masking sections.
3. Context sensitive toolbar – The toolbar area is located at the top left of the screen, just below the menu. This provides additional control over the tools in the Tools Palette. As you select different tools you will notice that the contents of the toolbar change to show settings appropriate to the selected tool. These will be reviewed together with the Tools Palette shortly.
4. Docking Windows – This is a collection of Windows that help you work with and manipulate your image. What often tends to confuse people is that the displayed windows are configured by the user. You control which windows are displayed and whether they are floating or docked in position on the right of the interface. Not all Windows are helpful for masking so we will concentrate on those that are essential. These are likely to be the Layers and Channels windows.
5. Fly-out Windows – In addition to the Docking Windows above, some windows can be collapsed and fly out from the docking area. This again can be confusing as it changes dynamically based on many variables. It's very unlikely your screen will match mine, even if you are using the same version of Photoshop, because I have some specialist tools installed (more on that towards the end of the book).

The remainder of this chapter is devoted to ensuring you are familiar with the key tools used in the book. Where the tools are then used in later chapters, specific instruction will be given about which settings to use and why. Not every tool or setting is explained, we concentrate on those that are most valuable to masking and working with masks.

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