

USING LAYER MASKS IN PHOTOSHOP ELEMENTS TO EXTRACT

by Kim Hill

If you have any questions about this tutorial, please contact me at kim@cgesentials.com.

This tutorial will help you learn how to use layer masks to remove a portion of your photo so that it is separated from the background. Layer masks are a non-destructive method of doing extractions. If you make a mistake, you can simply paint back on the original photo as you'll see in this tutorial.

Before going any further, you will first need to download the layer mask action. Elements doesn't have a layer mask button, so I've created this simple action so that you can create a layer mask with one click of the mouse.

DOWNLOAD the layer mask action for PSE 4, 5 and 6.

http://www.cgedownloads.com/DigiTutorials/CGE_LayerMask.zip

DOWNLOAD the layer mask action for PSE 3:

http://www.cgedownloads.com/DigiTutorials/CGE_PSE3LayerMask.zip

Once you download it, you will need WinZip to open up this file. You will then need to install the action in order to use it. Below are instructions based on your version of Elements:

PSE 6 Action Installation Instructions:

- 1. If Elements is open, please close it.*
- 2. Place the entire action folder into your PSE effects folder. Be sure to remove it from the original CGE_folder first. To do this, go to My Computer, navigate to the C:/ drive and then copy this link into the address bar: C:\documents and settings\all users\application data\Adobe\Photoshop Elements\6.0\Photo Creations\Photo Effects*
- 3. Enable view hidden files by going to Control Panel > Classic View > Folder Options > View > Show Hidden*
- 4. Now you can launch the Elements 6 program. Click on Effects Palette > Photo Effects > Show All. You will see it building the thumbnail image of the action you just installed.*
- 5. Repeat the above steps for all the actions you want to install and then go to the C:\Documents and Settings\All Users\Application Data\Adobe\Photoshop Elements\6.0 folder and delete the file called: ThumbDatabase.db3 (I suggest you install as many action as possible before doing this step, because it takes a long time to recreate the database once that file is removed.)*
- 6. Your actions are now ready to use.*

PSE 5 Action Installation Instructions:

Place the action folder into C:\documents and settings\all users\application data\Adobe\Photoshop Elements\5.0\Photo Creations\Special Effects\Photo Effects. You may need to experiment a little with folders/no folders in there. No cache deletion needed now. (Just so you know, the "application data" part of this path is hidden. I actually had to type the pathname into my file browser. You can't just point and click to get there.)

Rename each of the thumbnail images (.psd files) to thumbs.psd so that your thumbnail image will show up in your effects palette.

Please note that Vista users have a different folder to place the actions into:

C:\ProgramData\Adobe\Photoshop Elements\5.0\Photo Creations\special effects\photo effects.

PSE 3 & 4 Action Installation Instructions:

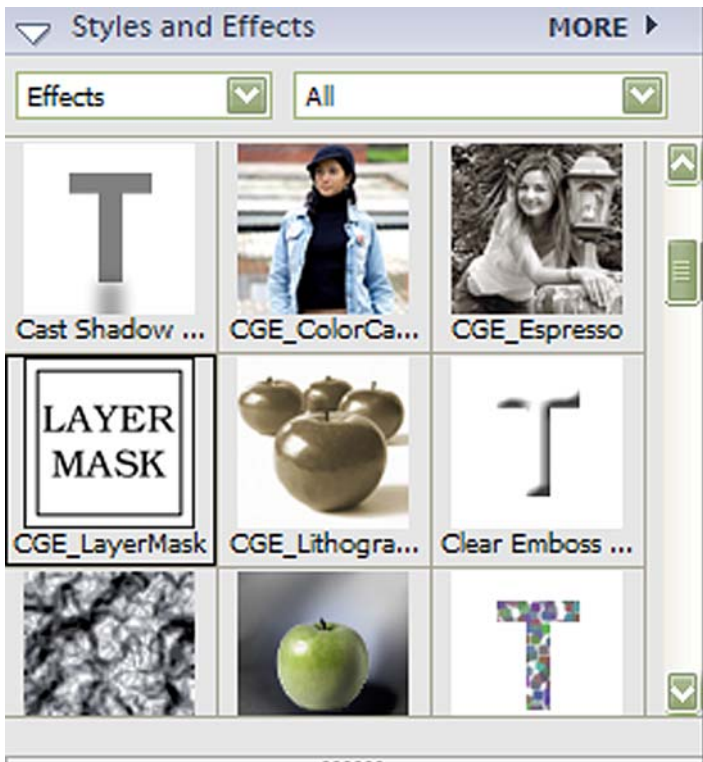
To load the actions:

- 1. If Elements is open, please close it.*
- 2. Place the entire action folder into your PSE effects folder. It will look like: c:\Program Files\Adobe\Photoshop Elements 3.0\Previews\Effects Folder*
- 3. To reset your action list and add the new effect you just installed, you will first need to delete the files named:*
 - CategoryCache.che*
 - ListCache.che*
 - ThumbNailCache.che*

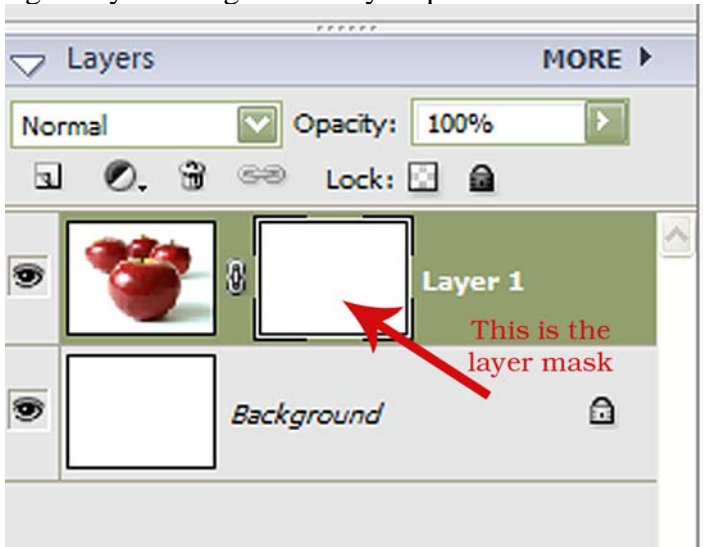
You must delete these from both the Effects Cache subfolder and the Filters Cache subfolder.

- 4. Now you can launch the Elements program. Click on the Styles & Effects palette. Then click on Effects. You will see it building the image of the action you just installed.*
- 5. Your actions are now ready to use.*

Okay, now that your action is installed, let's begin. Open up a photo you want to extract from. You will see my Layer Mask action in your Effects folder on the right side of your screen. It will look like this:



Double-click on the Layer Mask icon to play the action. If you look in your layers palette on the right side of your screen, you will see that the layer mask has been created. The mask is the white box on the right of your image in the layers palette. It will look like this:

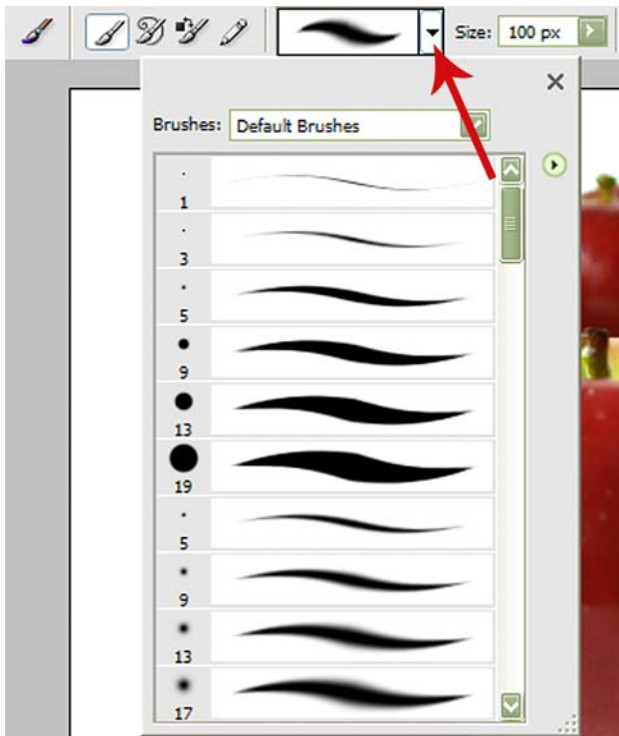


You can go ahead and delete the white background layer by dragging it to the trash can.

Now this is where the fun begins. You will need to get a black paint brush, make it 100% hard, and adjust the size to work with your photo. I find that I usually start with a really big brush to get rid of the bulk of the photo, and then switch to a smaller brush when I'm working on the very edge of the area that is being extracted.

To view your brushes, click on the brush tool in the tool bar on the left side of your screen. It will be right above the paint bucket. To change the brush size and hardness, go to the Options Bar at the top of your screen and click on the drop-down arrow next to the brush icon. Now you can view all brushes you

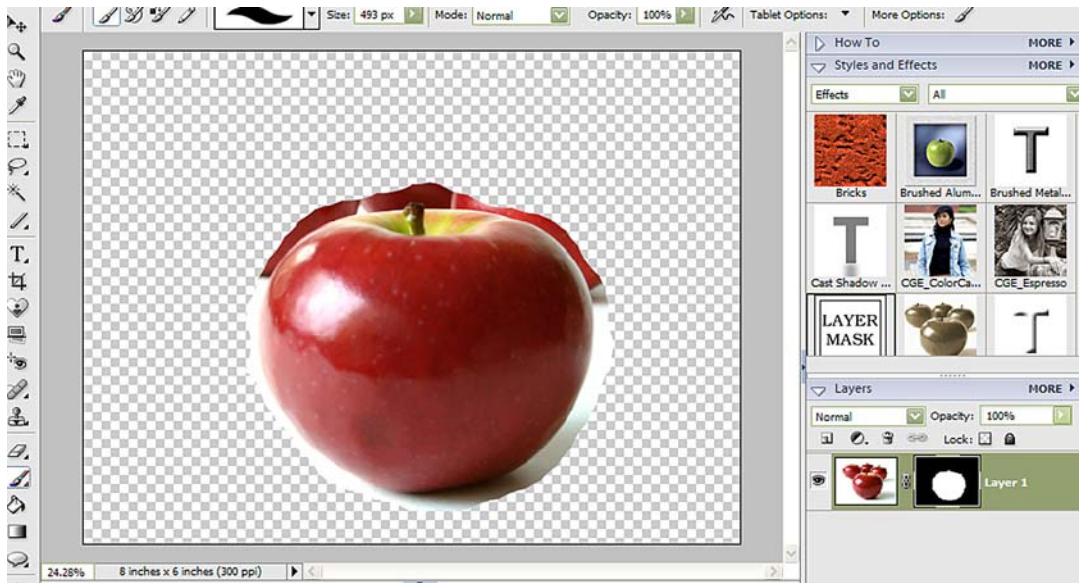
have. Select one that has a hard edge like the one shown here as 19. Then you can click on the SIZE and increase or decrease the number shown to suit your image.



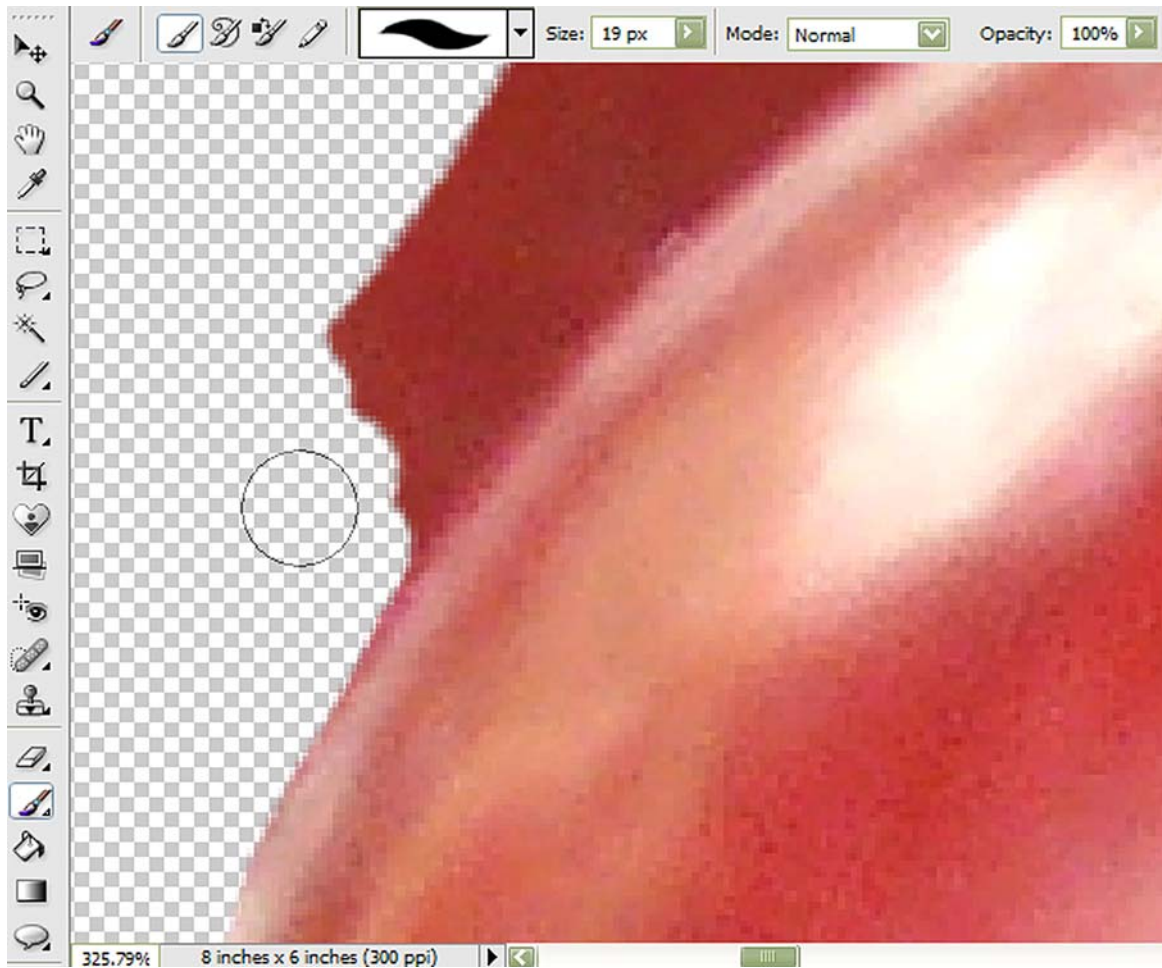
When working with a white layer mask, you need to use black paint in order to show the effect. So using a black paintbrush will act like an eraser for you to remove certain areas of your image. If you erase too much, you can fix it quickly by switching your paint color to white and painting back on the image. To switch between your black and white paints, go down to the paint picker at the bottom left corner of your screen. Just click on the double-arrow to switch from black to white and back again. It will look like this:



Now you can begin to paint away the background. Use black paint and a hard brush. Then click on the white mask and begin painting on the areas you want to remove. I started with a large brush and did a quick pass over the bulk of the image I wanted to remove as shown here:

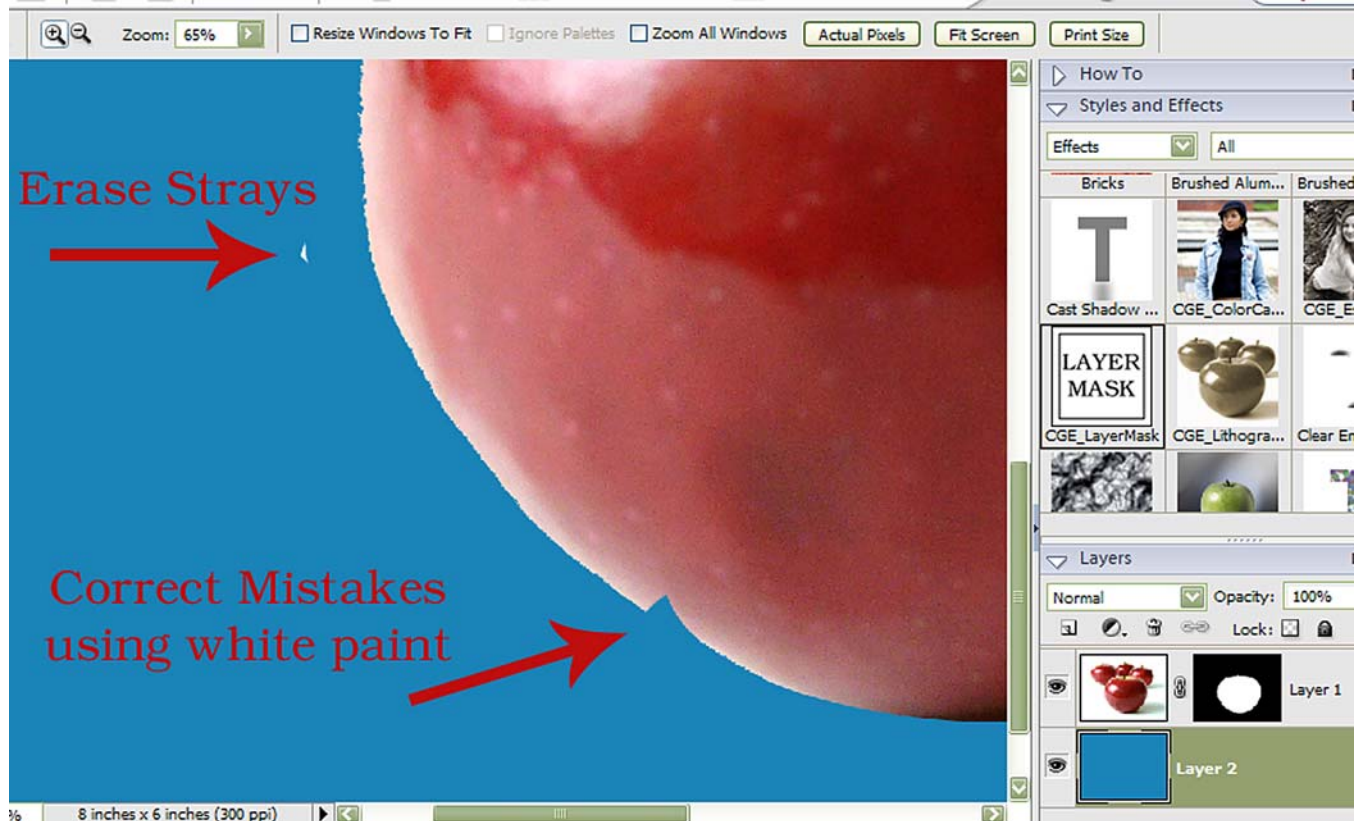


Now it's best to get your magnifying glass and zoom in really close to the edge so that you can have a nice clean edge. The zoom tool is at the top of your tool box in the upper left corner of your screen – it's right below the arrow tool. Once you are nice and close, change the brush size to something smaller. I changed mine to 19 pixels and started painting away (still using black paint on the layer mask) very carefully along the edge as shown below:



Once you get all of it painted away, it's a good idea to be sure you don't have any stray pixels floating

around. To do a quick check, create a new layer and position it beneath the photo. Then fill it with a color that is really bright and of a different hue than the image you are working with. I find a neon blue or bright red seems to work really well. Use your paint bucket to fill the layer. Then zoom in and look for the strays or errors. They should be pretty noticeable as are my errors shown here.



To remove the strays, just continue painting with your black paintbrush. To fix areas where you removed too much, switch to white paint and brush over the mistake to reveal the original photo again.

When you are all done, remove the colored layer so you are only left with your photo and mask. Be sure to save your image as a PNG file type so that the transparent background shows through.

If you have any questions, feel free to contact me.