

Making selections

Steve Brabner

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These notes were written to accompany tuition at Amersham Photographic Society, focusing on just the key facts needed to master each aspect of digital image manipulation with Photoshop Elements.

The computer has no idea which area of an image is a sky or a tree. If we want to modify such elements we can tell the computer by making a *Selection*. Selecting areas of an image is one of the most fundamental and important skills in digital imaging. Tools are provided in Photoshop to help make selections but there is almost always an element of human skill and judgement too. Once a selection has been made, most Photoshop actions will be limited to the area enclosed by the selection only. Note that we can alter images without selections using brush-based tools, but mastering selections opens up the full power available from Photoshop in comparison to simpler programs such as Adobe Lightroom.

Lasso tool (L)

This tool allows a selection to be drawn (rather like a pencil line) around an area of the image. A variation of the tool (*Polygonal Lasso*) allows the selection of points which are joined by a straight line, like a rubber band. A *Magnetic Lasso* tool tries to find an edge automatically for you - often with limited success.

Application: don't try to draw accurately around an object with the Lasso tool – this way lies madness! The Lasso tool is best used (when heavily feathered) for indicating general areas of an image for adjustment, e.g. clouds or foreground features. It can also be used to tidy up rough selections by lassoing unwanted areas to delete. The Polygon Lasso tool can be useful for selecting shapes with straight sides and some people like to zoom in close and use it detailed accurate selections. Although time-consuming, this can result in very accurate selections.

Magic Wand (W)

This tool selects areas based on similar colour. As a default, it selects pixels that are next to one another, e.g. one red flower head. However, if the *Contiguous* option is switched off it will select all the red flowers in the picture ... but also anything else with a similar red.

Application: can be very useful given a suitable subject such as a blue sky or a red flower. Adjust the Tolerance control carefully until you get as close as possible to the selection you need.

Selection Brush (A)

This enables you to use a brush to paint over the area that you want to select and then turn it into a selection. Much easier to use and control than the *Lasso Tool*, but slower. Difficult to create long straight lines or smooth curves.

Application: good for tidying up selections already made with other tools. By default the Selection Brush creates a selection but with the Alt key pressed it will subtract from the selection too. A tool option switches between painting the selection directly (marching ants) or painting a translucent red mask which can be turned into a selection later. I like to create a selection with another tool but then zoom in close and tidy up the edges with the Selection Brush. Always use a soft-edged brush on photographs or the result will look artificial.

Marquee tool (M)

This simply selects rectangles or ovals.

Application: very quick and useful for casual cropping of areas of a picture. The circle makes a good artificial sun! Hold the Shift key down to constrain a rectangle to a square or an oval to a circle. The Crop Tool (C) is a version of the rectangular marquee tool specifically for cropping the image to a smaller area.

Quick Selection tool (A)

A relatively new arrival, this tool is an excellent combination of automatic and manual selection creation. *Application: good for any area that is reasonably defined by colour or tone. Having arrived at an approximate selection automatically, the edge can be pushed in or out manually whilst holding down the mouse button.*

My favourite method

I sometimes want to isolate a photographic element (such as a sky) so that I can move it, or use it in another image. If the automated selection tools above don't produce a good result, I usually make a very rough selection with the *Lasso* tool and then cut and paste this on to a new layer. With all the other layers switched off, I then nibble away at the edge with the eraser using a small soft-edged brush. Working on a small section at a time, I can restore each section as I go along with the *Undo* command if I'm not happy with it. Using recent versions of Photoshop Elements, this procedure has largely been replaced by the *Quick Selection* tool.

Adding and subtracting selections

A complex selection is rarely made on one step. It is often built up in a number of stages. You can add to a selection, or subtract from a selection. For example, the best results with the *Magic Wand* tool are often achieved by adding several selections together, using a low *Tolerance* value (press *Shift* to add and *Alt* to subtract). You will often find that in addition to selecting the pixels that you want, tools such as the *Magic Wand* will also select other unwanted areas. These can be quickly subtracted by drawing around them with the *Lasso* tool whilst pressing the *Alt* key.

Selections can also be modified with a variety of menu commands under the *Select>Modify* menu. These include the ability to expand or contract the selection by a given number of pixels. Other features attempt to automatically increase an initial selection to include similar adjacent pixels (*Select>Grow*) or similar pixels throughout the image (*Select>Similar*). These can sometimes improve a selection and may be worth a try with a difficult subject.

Forcing a selection

Often, the part of the picture that you want to select does not stand out clearly from the rest, so automatic tools such as the *Magic Wand* won't work very well. Before you spend ages creating a manual selection, try increasing the contrast or saturation to see if this will 'force apart' the edge that you are trying to select. Work on a copy of the image so that if you destroy the image in the process of getting a selection you can always revert to the original (having saved the selection first).

Saving selections

Selections can, and should, be saved (*Select>Save Selection*) if they have taken more than a minute or two to create. They take up little disk space and are saved along with the image in a .PSD file.

Edges

The accuracy and quality of the edges of your selections will determine whether they look realistic or not. Always check the results by zooming in close. Nothing in photography is pin sharp so you should normally feather selections (*Select>Feather*) by one or two pixels so that they blend in naturally. Don't forget that you can also feather a selection by a huge amount to create a gradient, e.g. to create recession by gradually rendering the background out of focus.

So-called 'marching ants' indicate the edges of a selection on-screen. Be aware that these do not necessarily show all selected pixels. It's easy to forget that selections are actually of variable density, i.e. a pixel could be 100% selected or it might only be 5% selected. The marching ants only display around pixels that are 50% or more selected, and also may not show small selected areas when zoomed right out.