

STEVE CAPLIN'S **A** TO **Z** OF DESIGN

Q: Quick Mask

Steve Caplin walks us alphabetically through the concepts essential to success for any jobbing or aspiring designer.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve Caplin is a designer and illustrator working for a range of national newspapers. His best-selling *How to Cheat in Photoshop*, now in its fourth edition, is published by Focal Press.
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Quick Mask is one of the most versatile selection tools in the Photoshop arsenal. But it's underused by the vast majority of users. In part, this is due to the name: it was originally designed as a digital equivalent of the rubyolith film airbrush that artists use to mask off areas that they don't want to work on. This explains both the red colour, and the fact that, by default, areas highlighted are 'masked' – unselected areas.

But by double-clicking on the Quick Mask icon (the second from bottom icon in the Photoshop toolbar) you can change the mode from Masked to Selected areas: now, when you paint in Quick Mask, you'll be painting areas that will become your selection when you exit Quick Mask mode. A useful keyboard shortcut is Q, which takes you in and out of Quick Mask mode.

All the standard painting tools can be used within Quick Mask, and this is part of its versatility. The concept is simple: paint in black to show the red overlay, adding to your selection; paint in white to remove the overlay, so removing that area from your selection. You could select a person's outline by laboriously tracing with the Pen tool; but it's far easier to use a small, hard-edged brush in Quick Mask to paint it instead. Use a brush the width of a finger to paint in the selection of a hand; switch to a larger, soft-edged brush to paint in the hair, and then use the Smudge tool to tweak out the mask to follow the strands of hair.

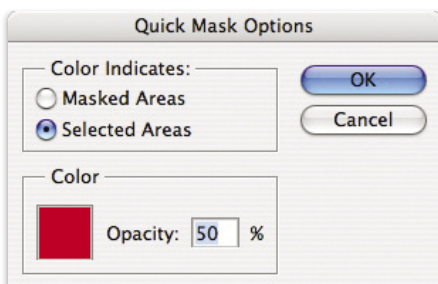
Since you'll be changing brush size and hardness frequently while using Quick Mask, it's worth learning a few shortcuts. Use the 'greater than' and 'less than' signs (> and <) to make the brush size larger and smaller; hold Shift with the same keys to make the brush harder or softer. Pressing D will set the foreground colour to black and the background colour to white; pressing X will swap these colours over.

As well as black and white, shades of grey can be used for a partially transparent selection. If there's an area you want to be consistently transparently selected, such as the wing of an insect, then use a mid grey to ensure that the wing is evenly selected. Alternatively, use black with the brush set to 50% opacity – but be aware that painting over existing strokes will build up the opacity. If you've selected a wing using the grey method and find, on exiting Quick Mask, that it's too transparent, then it's easy to fix without repainting. Return to Quick Mask mode, and use the Brightness/Contrast, Curves or Levels adjustments to lighten or darken the midtones of the mask.

You can enter Quick Mask after using any of the selection tools, and the selected area will be highlighted in red (as long as you've swapped the default setting). Not only that, but you can use any of the selection tools within Quick Mask. Say you want to select a regular array of rectangular sections from an image. Go into Quick Mask, make the first rectangular selection, and use Alt+Delete to fill with black (the foreground colour). This will fill in red within Quick Mask. Now duplicate that selection, nudging it a single pixel by pressing the cursor keys while holding Alt to make a copy; remember, you can hold the Shift key to move the selection by 10 pixels rather than one. Release Alt and nudge it to where you want it, then repeat again to make an array. When you exit Quick Mask, you'll have a perfectly lined-up and evenly spaced set of rectangular selections.

Making elliptical selections is always tricky in Photoshop, especially at an angle. It's far easier in Quick Mask. First make an elliptical or circular selection at any size; then enter Quick Mask to show it as a red overlay. Use Free Transform to rotate, move and scale your ellipse to the required

▼01 Be sure to change your Quick Mask settings from Masked Areas to Selected Areas, so you can more easily use it for making selections.





▲ 02 Selecting the elliptical top of this cup, at an angle, would be tricky by conventional means.



▲ 03 First, make a circular selection; then press Q to enter Quick Mask mode, and you'll see it highlighted in red.



▲ 04 Use Free Transform to rotate and scale the selection to fill the space required...



▲ 05 ...so that we can work with it when we leave Quick Mask.

position, then exit Quick Mask. No need to make a further selection before entering Free Transform: simply press Command T when within Quick Mask and the mask will be automatically selected.

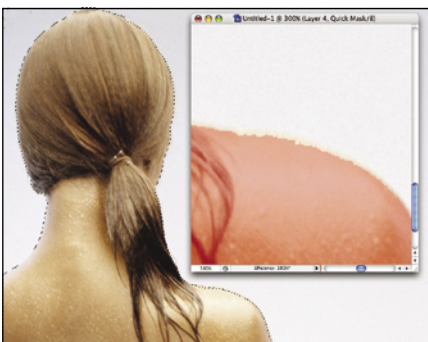
The only difficulty comes when you've painted around an object to select it, and want to fill the 'hole' to select that as well. The Paint Bucket tool will fill any bounded area, but will tend to leave an unselected

fringe within your border. A better method is to use the Magic Wand to select the interior, then use Select > Modify > Expand to make that selection a few pixels larger; then fill with the foreground colour using Alt+Delete to complete the selection. If this is a process you use frequently, it's worth assigning a simple Action to it automatically.

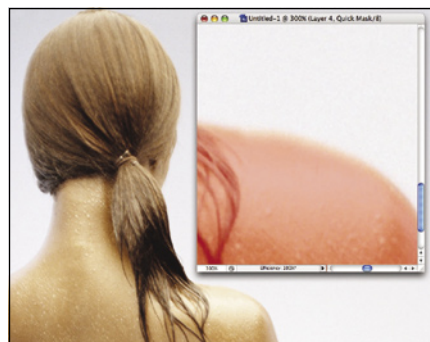
You can also use Quick Mask to smooth selections, in much the same way as the

Refine Edges dialog does in Photoshop CS3. After making a selection with the Magic Wand, say, you may find its edges are too rough. Enter Quick Mask, and apply some Gaussian Blur to soften the edges. Then open the Levels dialogue, and drag the black and white triangles together so they're just touching the centre grey triangle, to tighten up the outline. The result will be a smooth tight selection. ☒

▼ 06 Selecting the background with the Magic Wand produces jagged edges, as the close-up shows.



▼ 07 By applying Gaussian Blur to the Quick Mask view, we can greatly soften that edge.



▼ 08 We can now use the Levels adjustment to tighten that selection. Jaggies gone!

