

# INTRODUCTION TO LAYERS IN PHOTOSHOP BY DOUG DOEDE

I would like to acknowledge the following sources for material used in this tutorial: **Wikipedia, the Photoshop CS6 Reference Manual, Photoshop Layers 101 - By Colin Smith, The Master Guide to the Photoshop Layers Panel by Joshua Johnson and Adobe Photoshop CS5 for Photographers by Martin Evening**

This tutorial was written from the point of view of a of Photoshop CS6 user, my current image editing software. The basic concepts will apply to any version of Photoshop or Elements (or other software such as Paint Shop Pro) that supports layers. Depending on which version of the software you have and how it is set up, the location/selection method for some of the tools (such as the Layers Panel) may vary from those described here. In this tutorial we will learn some layer basics, and briefly discuss different types of layers and their use.

In order to follow along, you only need to know a few Photoshop basics, such as the Workspace Layout and how to access the Layers Panel. If you are not familiar with using layers, this should not be a problem: this tutorial includes a small “hands on” file (approx. 4 MB) in PSD format: “Intro to Layers.psd”, available on the Trillium website: <http://www.trilliumphotoclub.org/downloads.htm>

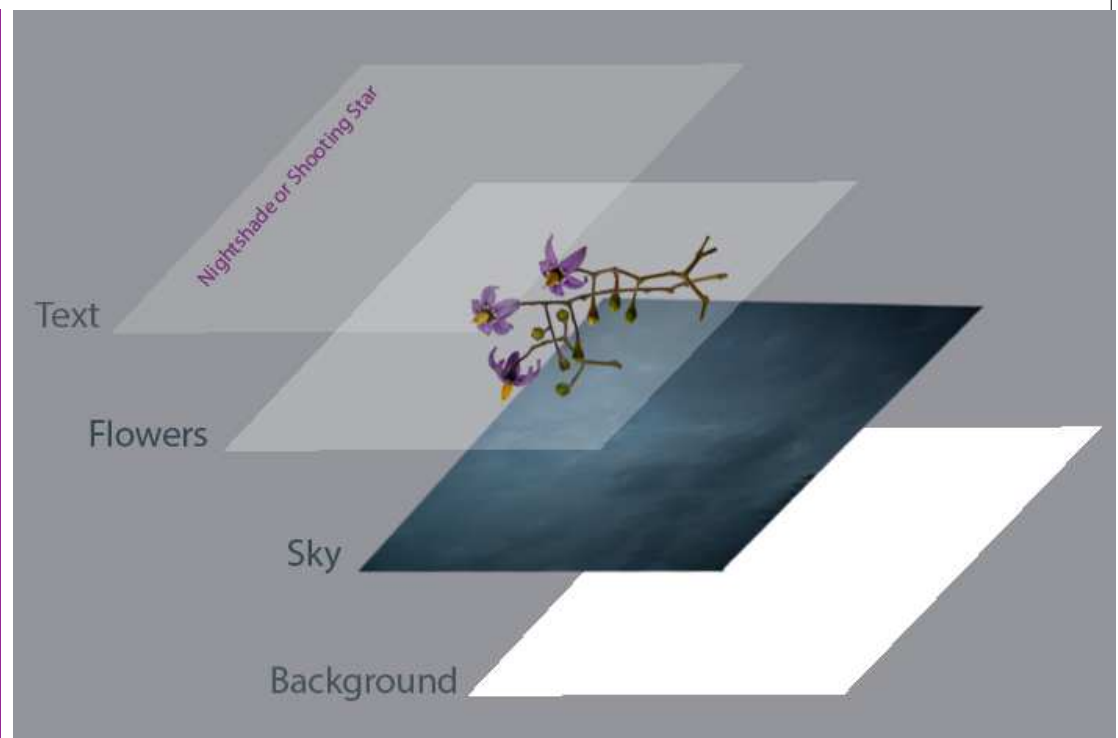
Just scroll down to the link at the bottom of the page and follow the instructions to download. This file has several layers already set up. It has been tested with Elements 8 so if you have this or a later version you should be able to use it. Also, it has been tested in Paint Shop Pro (ver. 7) which can use PSD files. If you happen to have a later version, or Corel Paint Shop Pro X, it should work with those too.

## What are Layers?

Layers are simply images that are placed or stacked on top of one another. A layer can be compared to a transparency on which images or image effects are applied and placed over or under other images. In Photoshop, layers were first introduced in version 3.0 way back in 1994, in the dark ages of computer graphics. This was a huge innovation at the time, as it greatly simplified the process of creating complex compositions. Currently, Photoshop supports up to 8000 layers in a single PSD (Photoshop Document) file. The number of layers you can add to an image is essentially limited only by your computer’s memory.

This image shows how layers may be stacked to compose a more complex image. When you open a new image in Photoshop, it has a single layer, known as the “background”. By default, the background is locked, and cannot be moved or have layer effects applied to it.

In this example there are 3 layers which are stacked on top of a white background.

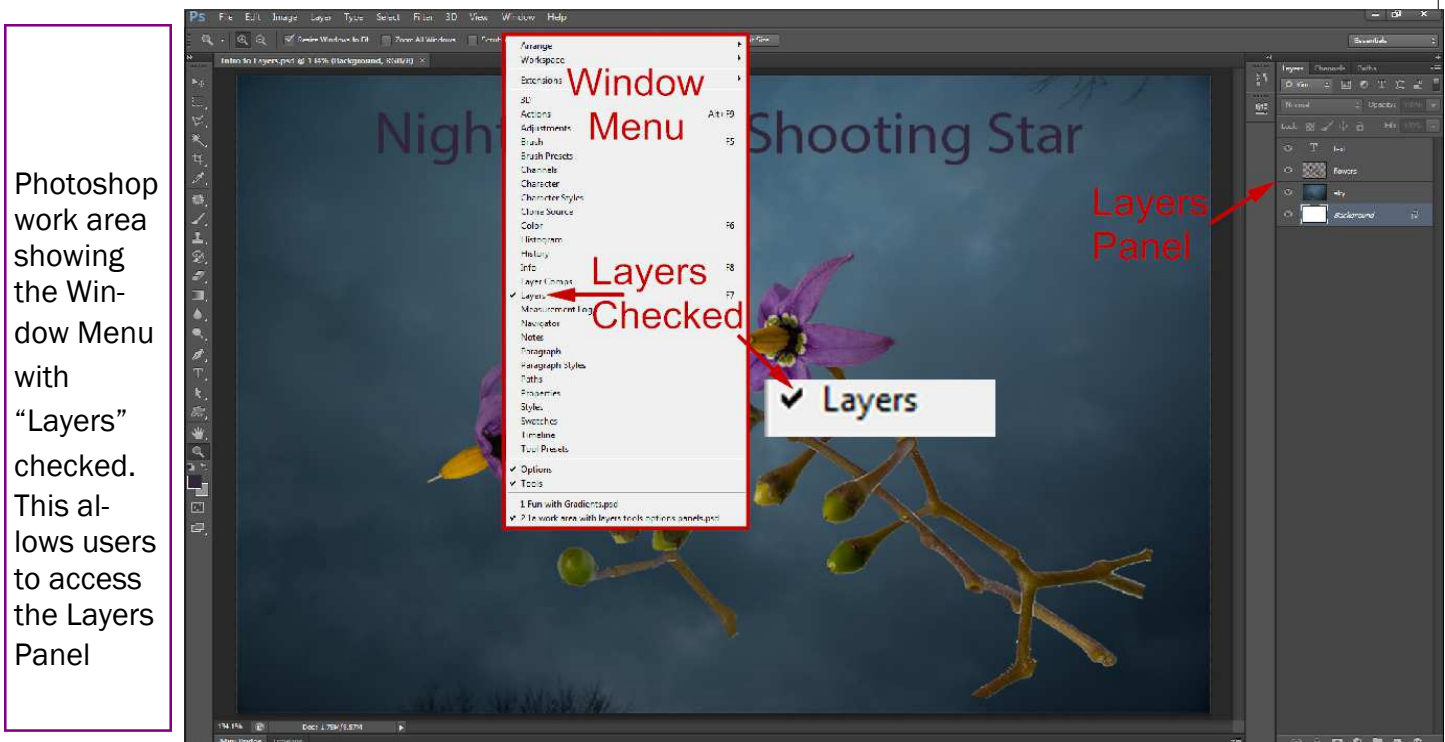




If you were able to view these layers looking straight down from above, they would appear much like the image to the left...which is how they appear in a Photoshop PSD file. The tutorial file available on the Trillium website contains the layers as illustrated in this example. This should help to make things easier for those who are not so familiar with using layers.

### The Layers Panel

Formerly known as the Layers Palette, this is where all layer-related tasks are performed. Since it's one of the most commonly used panels, Photoshop is set up so that the Layers Panel opens automatically by default each time the program is launched. Also by default, it is found in the lower right part of the screen. I'm using Photoshop CS6 here, but regardless of which version you have, it can be found in the same general location.

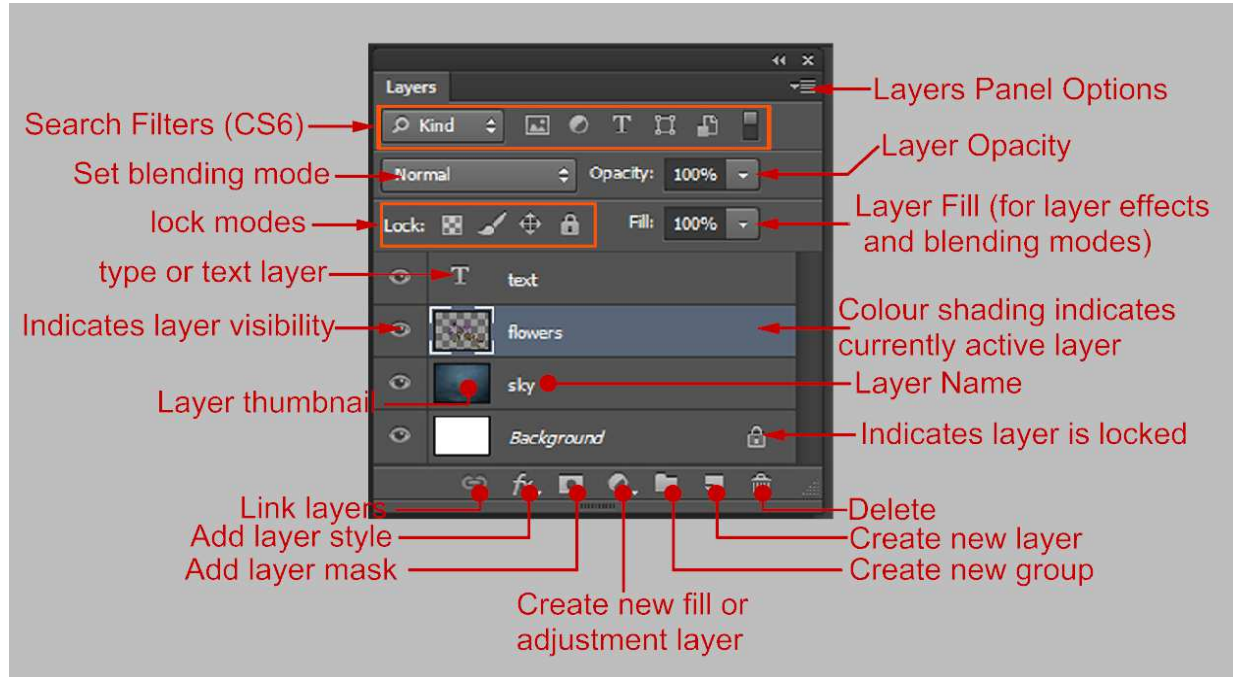


Photoshop work area showing the Window Menu with "Layers" checked. This allows users to access the Layers Panel

If the Layers Panel is not visible on your screen, you can access it (along with all other Photoshop panels) by going up to the Window menu in the Menu Bar along the top of the screen and choosing "Layers". A checkmark to the left of a panel's name indicates that it is currently displayed on the screen. No checkmark indicates that the Layers Panel is currently hidden. Note the little padlock icon to the right of the background layer: this indicates that it is locked.

### The Layers Panel

Basic tasks such as adding and deleting layers, controlling layer visibility, turning layers on and off and renaming layers are all done here, as well as more complex tasks such as adding layer masks, adjustment layers, layer effects, changing layer blend modes and grouping layers. The illustration below shows the Layers Panel with all the various controls and a brief description for each one. It is rather complex, which is necessary to enable the user to achieve such a high degree of control over complex images.



View of the Layers Panel and the many controls as they appear in Photoshop CS6. If this looks complex, that's because it is!

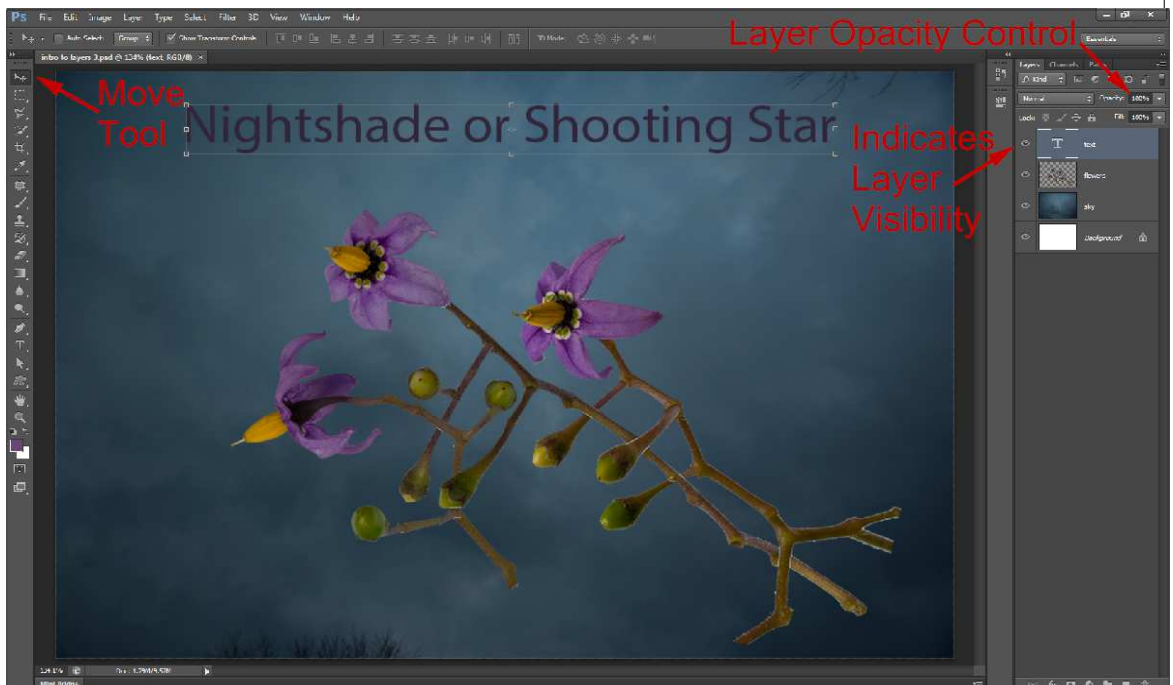
Many of these layer controls can be quite complex, and an in-depth discussion of their use would be beyond the scope of this tutorial. They are shown here for illustrative purposes, and for future reference.

### Working with the “Intro to Layers.psd” Tutorial File

If you are still with me and have downloaded the Intro to Layers file, you can open it and try out a few basic tasks. For our purposes here, the key controls are:

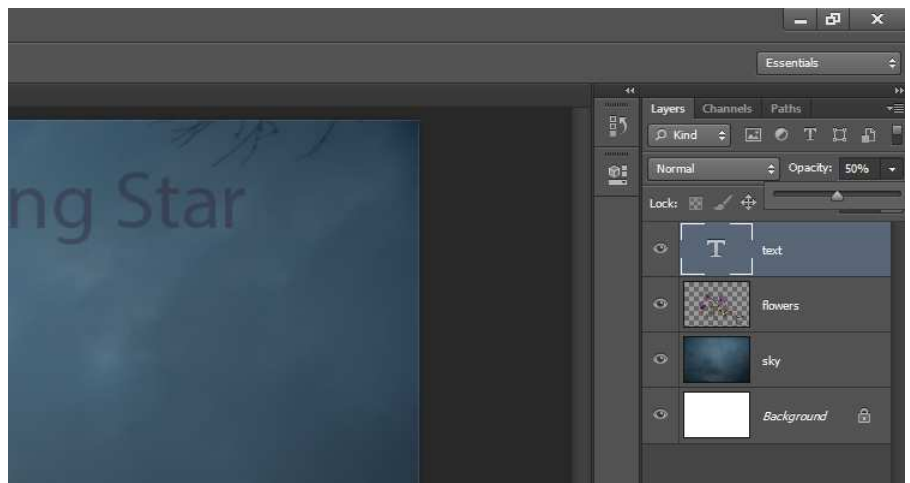
- The “eye” icons which turn layer visibility on and off
- The Layer Opacity control
- The “move” tool

If all has gone according to plan, you should have a display similar to the image here, and you should have access to the Layers Panel and the Move Tool.



Try clicking on some of the “eye” icons. These appear to the left of the layer thumbnails in the Layers Panel. This allows you to display and hide any of the layers individually. Next, click on the “sky” layer to make it current. Then click on the down arrow where it says “Opacity”, near the top right of the Layers Panel. This should reveal a slider control; try moving it slowly all the way to the left and back again. This will gradually fade out the sky all the way to completely invisible, which will reveal the white background underneath, and then fully visible again. Next, try clicking on the “text” layer and do the same thing. You can render the text from fully visible to fully invisible or anywhere in between. With the text layer still current, try clicking on the “move” tool at the top of the tools panel at the top of the screen. (or press “v” on your keyboard to activate the move tool). There should be a rectangle which appears around the text; this indicates that the move tool is active with the text layer. Click somewhere in the middle of the rectangle, and drag it around with your cursor. You can move the text independently of all the other elements in the image. You can also click on the edges and corners of the rectangle and drag with the cursor; this allows you to rotate, stretch and warp the text. Similarly, you can make the flower layer current and perform similar actions. Even with these basic layer controls, some fairly sophisticated effects can be achieved.

View of Layers Panel showing the Opacity Slider set to 50% for the Text Layer



In addition to those already discussed, there are many other types of layers and layer styles. Some of them are:

### **Adjustment Layer**

An adjustment layer is a special kind of layer used to modify colour and contrast. The advantage of adjustment layers is that you can apply corrections without affecting the pixels. This is known as non-destructive editing. Adjustment layers apply your editing only to all the layers below them, without affecting the above layers.

**Fill Layer:** Fill layers let you fill a layer with a solid colour, a gradient, or a pattern. Unlike adjustment layers, fill layers do not affect the layers underneath them.

**Shape Layer:** This is a general term used to describe non-pixel layers where the layer is filled with a solid colour and the outline is defined using either a vector or pixel layer mask. A shape layer is created whenever you add an object to an image using one of the shape tools.

**Effects Layer:** Can be used to apply many types of effects such as shadow, glow, overlays and many others. These can all be applied non-destructively.

**Layer Mask:** Layer masks are nondestructive; you can re-edit the masks without loss of pixels they hide.

**Text or Type Layer:** When you create text in Adobe Photoshop CS6, the text is created on its own layer. This facilitates applying different styles and blending modes to customize the type, as well as repositioning the text, is simplified. The Options bar gives you the controls to change the font, size, blending mode, and color of the text. With all the available layer styles and the comprehensive controls in the Layers Panel, a virtually endless variety of effects can be achieved. Future tutorials will have more in-depth exploration of the many capabilities of layers.