

You can improve your complex selection skills with a little help from masks and some creative thinking.

BY KATRIN EISMANN

# Paste and Fade masks

SELECTING HAIR AND FINE DETAIL

When it comes to silhouetting people with a full head of hair, animals with fur, or scenes with fine detail, I sometimes wish that everyone was as bald as Michael Jordan, that all animals were fish, and that I worked only with pictures of skyscrapers. But of course we don't live in a world where smooth selections play a key role in evolutionary development.

Making selections of fine details requires patience, practice, and creative thinking. One technique may work perfectly well on one type of image but not another. You may need to combine techniques, and you'll usually need to fine-tune the mask with careful handiwork.

When extracting fine details, you'll get the best results with sharp, high-quality, high-resolution originals, in which the figure is in contrast to the background. If you plan to take someone's picture for a composite, preparing the lighting, the point of view, and the background are essential to success.

## USING PASTE AND FADE MASKS

Blending modes is one of the best of the features in Photoshop that influence how pixels interact. You find them throughout the program, in the Layers palette; Layer Styles; the Fill, Stroke and Fade commands; painting tools; and Apply and Calculate commands—but not in the Channels palette. Or can you? Shan Canfield introduced me to the following technique, and it taught me how Channels can take advantage of blending modes.

Figure 1



Figure 2



1. Start by inspecting the three color channels to identify the one with the best contrast and tonal definition. In this case, the red channel is the best. Drag it down to the Create New Channel button (*Figure 3*).

2. With the copy of the red channel active, choose **Select>All**, then **Edit>Copy**, and then **Edit>Paste**. It will look as if nothing has changed in the image. Immediately after pasting, select **Edit>Fade**.

**Note:** You have to select **Fade** immediately after pasting or else it will not be active. If your fade is grayed out, you must repeat the select, copy, and paste steps and then choose **Fade**.

The **Fade** command is how the Shan Canfield magic happens. The **Fade** command includes the blending modes. By using a blending mode that builds contrast, you darken the darks and lighten the lighter areas to build a better mask.

3. On this image, use **Color Dodge** (*Figure 4*) to effectively increase the contrast.

4. To exaggerate the contrast even more, repeat Steps 2 and 3 to copy the high-contrast channel 4 and paste it onto itself. Use **Edit>Fade** with **Color Dodge** to create a very high contrast mask, as in figure *Figure 5*.

When using this technique on your own images, you may not have to copy/paste the channel twice; the less aggressive blending modes such as **Overlay** and **Softlight** may be more effective; and adjusting the **Fade** opacity may be helpful.

5. Verify the density of the mask in the **Info** palette. Make sure that the blacks are black and the whites are white. In *Figure 6*, the black density is not 100%. Choose **Image > Adjustments > Levels** and move the black slider to the right until the **Info** palette reads 100% (*Figure 7*).

6. Select the inside of the boy using the **Lasso** tool and fill with white. Then choose **Select > Deselect**. Use a white brush set to **Overlay** to paint over his hair (*Figure 8*) and to create a transition between the selected and filled area and the edges of the figure.

7. In the **Channels** palette, click **RGB** (or **cmd/ctrl + ~**) to return to **RGB**. Activate the mask by pressing (**cmd/ctrl + opt/alt + 4**). In the **Layers** palette, double-click the original **Background Layer** icon, click **OK**, and click on the **Layer Mask** icon to transfer the active selection into the layer mask.

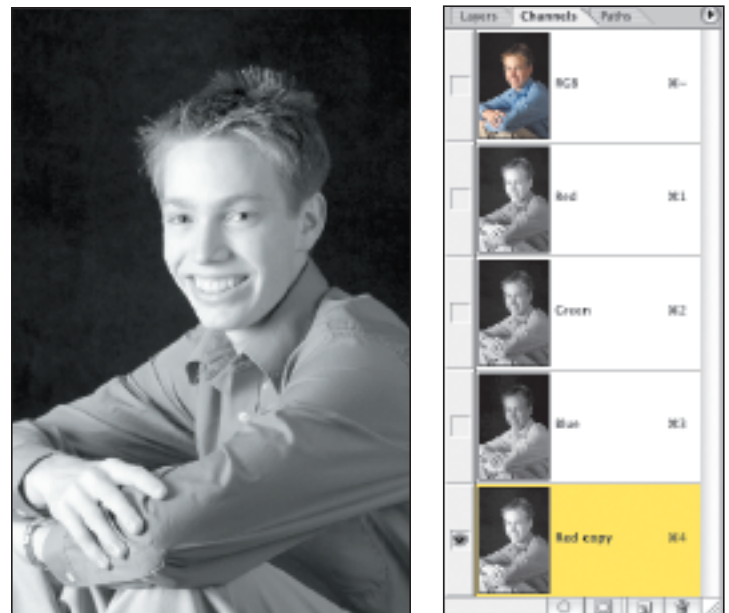


Figure 3. Duplicate the red channel.



Figure 4. Copy and paste the channel, and immediately choose **Edit>Fade** with **Color Dodge** blending mode.



Figure 5. Repeating the copy and paste of the contrast channel and selecting **Edit>Fade** using the **Color Dodge** blending mode further exaggerates the black and white values.



Figure 6. Make sure that the black areas are really black—94% isn't black.

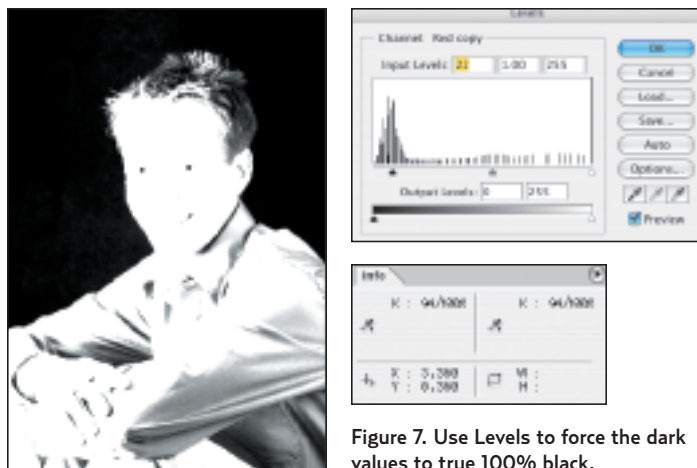


Figure 7. Use Levels to force the dark values to true 100% black.

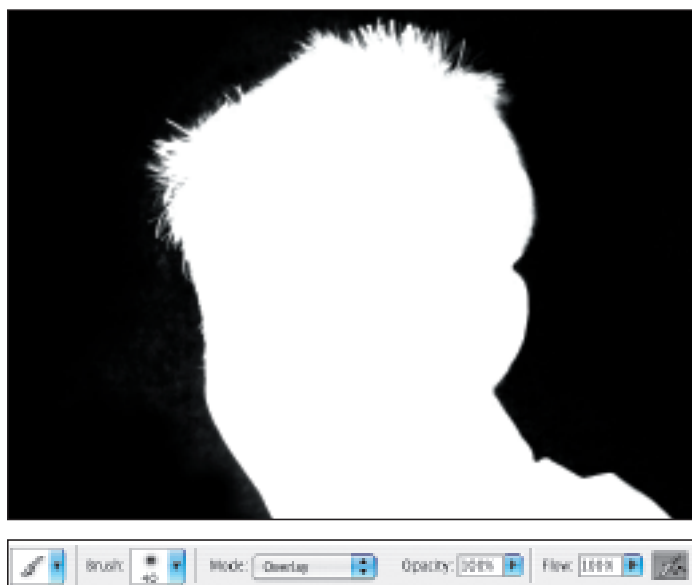


Figure 8. Using a white brush set to Overlay, paint to enhance the edge details.



Figure 9. Use a burgundy-to-black Radial gradient to draw in a new studio backdrop.

8. Add a new layer and place it under the teenager layer.

9. Press *d* to reset the Color Picker to the default colors of black and white, then press *x* to switch the colors so that black is the background color. Double-click on the foreground color swatch and choose a complementary color. I chose a rich burgundy to offset the blue of the shirt.

10. Select the Gradient tool and click the Radial button in the Options bar. Starting in the center of the image, click and pull toward the upper-right corner. *Figure 9* shows the desired effect. The longer you pull, the longer the transition between burgundy and black. If you don't like the first gradient you made, try again. The second gradient will overwrite the original. I often take four or five gradient pulls to get the transition just right.

11. To add a hint of texture to the gradient layer, opt/alt-click on the New Layer icon in the Layers palette and change the blending mode to Overlay. Then select Fill with Overlay-neutral (50% gray).

12. Select Filter>Noise>Add Noise and select Monochrome. The amount of noise you use depends on your personal taste, desired results, and file size. I used a setting of 5. Then choose Filter > Blur > Motion Blur and adjust the Angle and Distance settings as desired (*Figure 10*). Adding a bit of texture is helpful in avoiding the slick computer look.

13. If you see any telltale dark halos around the young man (*Figure 11*), tighten up the mask with a judicious application of Levels and Gaussian Blur. Click on the layer mask to activate it, choose Image > Adjustments > Levels, and adjust the shadow point to the right to tighten the mask (*Figure 12*). Use a very subtle Gaussian Blur of 0.4 to offset the hardness that Levels may introduce. You can repeat the Levels and Gaussian Blur two or three times with decreasing values to tighten the mask and produce a realistic-looking edge.

Now that I know how to take advantage of blending modes in the channels, I use this technique all the time. The blending modes help me achieve very good results, very quickly. For an excellent explanation of blending modes, visit [www.adobeevangelists.com](http://www.adobeevangelists.com) and download Julieanne Kost's article, "Blend Mode Magic." ■

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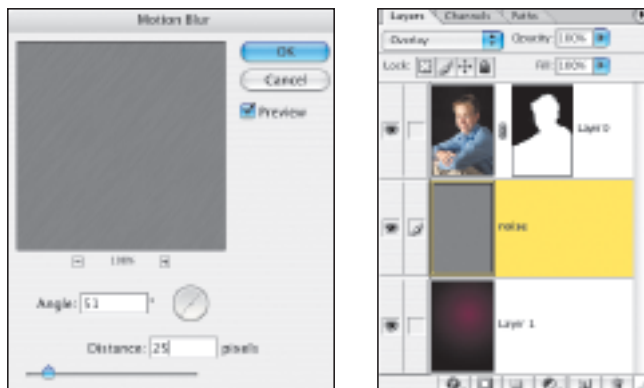


Figure 10. After adding noise, use the Motion Blur filter to create a subtle brushed-aluminum texture.



Figure 11. Study the image for telltale halos or artifacts, visible here along the outside edge of the shirt collar and at the edge of the hair at the left of the subject's forehead.

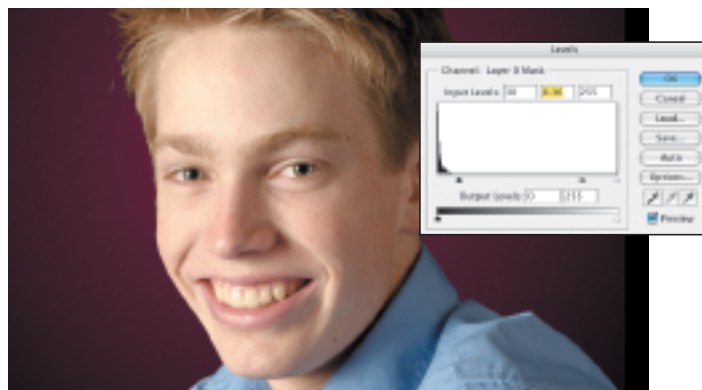


Figure 12. Tighten the layer mask using Levels to remove halos.



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