

## Layer Masks and Gradients

We're going to look at another use of layers, using the mask and moving on to gradients (as promised)

### Layer Mask

This is accessed by selecting the layer being worked on (in the layer palette) and then clicking on the mask icon at the bottom of the palette, or using the route: layer > layer mask > Reveal all.

You'll see another white square to the right of the image in the layer palette – this is the layer mask. Make sure this is active (a border round it) to start working in it.

If it's completely white the active layer can be seen through it. Any black areas on the mask show where the active layer can be 'seen through' to reveal the layer below. We can use this to selectively use or erase parts of the active layer.

By selecting the foreground colour as black and using the paintbrush tool, we simply paint the layer mask to allow the lower layer to be seen. If you make a mistake, flip the foreground colour to white and paint it back in. This is much more controllable and more easily corrected than by using the eraser tool directly onto the image.

We can use the gradient tool to merge gradually from one image into another (I've used this when stitching images together to make panoramas). To use this in the layer mask, select the gradient tool, in linear mode (from the option toolbar) and select foreground to background from the dropdown menu. Now simply draw a line from where you want the gradient to start and drag it to where you want it to finish. We'll look at the gradient tool further into the session.

Other modes can be useful. I find the radial gradient useful if erasing through an area – it gives an easy starting point to work with. The rest of the mask can be added to or subtracted from as required.

### Gradient Map

This is a different beast altogether. It says, "if a pixel is such and such, we'll display it as such and such" – so black to white could become say white to black or red to green. Some multicoloured maps are available which change the colours depending on the 'greyness' of the greyscale. It can give some interesting effects.

It's accessed by selecting the adjustment layer icon at the bottom of the layers palette and then 'gradient map', or by the route: layer > New adjustment layer > gradient map. Select the required mask from the dropdown menu. Dither adds some noise, to smooth out the gradient transformation. Reverse reverses the order of the colour.

The colours of the map can be changed manually, by clicking on the selection on the drop down menu and then the points on the slider to access the colour picker. Click OK to accept the changes.

This is a fun toy which can give some excellent results. Look at trick 'C' at the end of the session.

## **Gradient Fill**

This is a much more useful tool which can be used to create a neutral gradient density filter effect, or to give a gradual change of colour to an image. I've used it to change the colour of the sky etc. while retaining the true colour in the foreground.

To select the gradient fill layer, select the adjustment layer icon at the bottom of the layers palette and then 'gradient', or by the route: layer > New fill layer > gradient.

Select the required mask from the top dropdown menu and the style of the fill from the next dropdown menu. Reverse and dither are the same as for the gradient map. The angle of the gradient can be set using the compass.

Changing the blending mode and / or the opacity settings can give even greater variation in the effects.

## **Gradient Tool**

This is the last of the toolbox tools we said we'd look at (ages ago when everything was sepia).

To access it, select the gradient tool from the toolbox. Select the style required (from the option bar).

Select the type of gradient required, from the drop down menu.

The tool can be used directly onto a layer, or onto a new layer. It's better to make a new layer, as the layer controls give much more latitude in the final result.

To create the gradient, click on the starting point and drag in the required direction to the finishing point. The angle of the gradient is determined by the line you draw.

### **Changing the gradient properties:**

If required, the gradient editor can be accessed by clicking on the sample bar on the options bar. This allows various amendments to the gradient, as follows:

To alter an existing gradient, select 'solid' in the gradient type box.

To alter the colour of the starting point, select the left box below the gradient bar (the triangle turns black to indicate that this point is being amended) and do one of the following:

- Double click the pointer box or the colour selection box, to bring up the colour picker and select the required colour
- Select the colour from the foreground / background or user drop down box. The first two options speak for themselves – the user option creates the eyedropper tool to make a selection from the gradient bar.

The end colour is altered in the same way.

The position of the start and end points can be altered by moving the sliders to suit, or by stipulating how far along the gradient line in the % box.

The small target on the colour control line can be moved to determine the midpoint at which the colours mix.

The boxes above the line alter the opacity of the gradient.

Additional points (and therefore additional colours) can be inserted by double clicking below the line. Additional opacity controls can be inserted by clicking above the line.

Points can be deleted by selecting them and pressing 'delete', or by simply dragging them downwards from the bar.

If you want to keep these settings for future use, enter a name where it says 'custom' and then 'save' or 'new'.

### **A couple of tricks:**

#### **A. Graduated Neutral Density Filter**

1. Open the colour image
2. Make a new layer
3. Make the foreground colour black
4. On the new layer make a foreground to transparent gradient from the top of the image to the distance you want it to grade.
5. Change the blending mode to 'overlay'

And there you have it.

#### **B. Merge two versions of an image**

This can be very useful if you've got an image which has a weak sky, or particularly snow scenes, where the foreground of the image compensates the overall exposure. These images can be saved twice, using different exposures, in RAW editing.

1. Open the first image – exposed for say the dark areas (the bits in shadow)
2. Open the second image – exposed for say the light areas (maybe the sky)
3. On the second image (top layer) hold down Alt and add a mask – this will give a completely black mask, so this layer now has no effect on the viewed image.
4. Select a soft paintbrush and a foreground colour of white.
5. Paint out the areas of sky to make the areas you want show visible.

#### **C. Instant Monochrome**

This gives a high contrast conversion from a colour image to monochrome in a couple of easy steps.

1. Open the colour image and convert to a layer (double click the 'background' in the layer palette).
2. Open a gradient map layer from the adjustment layer icon and select black / white as the gradient, from the dropdown menu.
3. Click OK

Take it further: If you merge up and then hide the gradient map layer, you can then make a layer mask on the monochrome image and just paint out the bits you'd like to keep in colour.