How to use layers

Layers are like stacked transparent sheets on which you can paint or place images, shapes, or text. You can see through the transparent areas to the layers below. You can work on each layer independently, experimenting to create the effect you want. You can adjust a layer's color and brightness, apply special effects, change its opacity, and change its stacking order. If you want to experiment with color, filters, or other adjustments, you can place an adjustment or fill layer above the image and see the affects without making any changes to the layer that contains your image. To remove the effects, simply delete the adjustment layer.

Each layer remains independent until you combine or merge it with other layers. The bottom layer of every new Adobe Photoshop Elements file is called the Background layer, and it is always locked. If you want to move the contents of the Background layer or change its opacity, you must first convert it to a regular layer.

To manage the layers in a file, use the Layers panel (**Figure 1**). If the Layers panel is not visible, open the Window menu and select Layers.

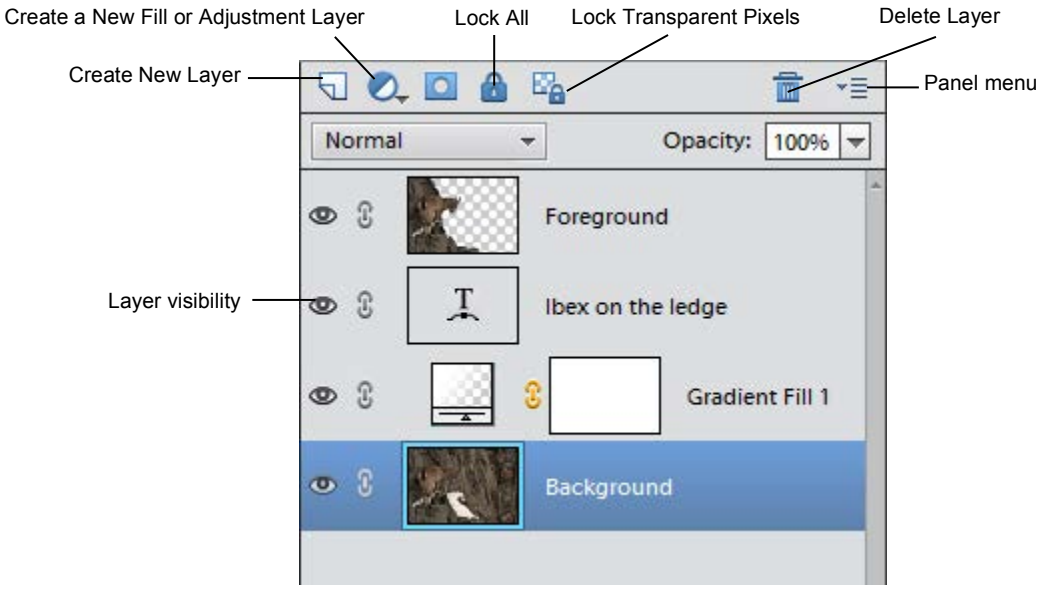

Figure 1 Layers panel

Adding, naming, and deleting layers

You can add a new layer in several ways. When you click the Create New Layer button in the Layers panel, a new layer is placed above the current or active layer. You can open the Layers panel menu and choose New > Layer. When you add new text or create a shape, a new layer is created automatically. Or, if you copy a selection from one layer and choose the Paste command, the pasted content is placed on a new layer. To create an exact copy of a layer, choose Layer > Duplicate Layer.

It's a good idea to replace temporary layer names with more descriptive names. You can remove a layer by selecting it on the Layers panel and clicking the Delete Layer button.

To add, name, and delete layers:

1. Open an image in the Photoshop Elements Editor workspace and select Full from the Edit tab to open the Standard Edit workspace.

   The Layers panel is open on the right. If it is not, choose Window > Layers.

   When you open a photograph, it is automatically placed in the Background layer.

2. Click the Create New Layer button.

   A new blank layer is added above the active layer. It has a temporary name, such as Layer 1 (**Figure 2**).

3. Double-click to select the temporary layer name, type a new, more descriptive name for the layer, and press Enter (Windows) or Return (Mac OS).

   Note: If you double-click the layer icon instead of the layer name, the Layer Properties dialog box opens **(Figure 3)**. Enter a new name for the layer and click OK.

4. To delete a layer, click the layer in the Layers panel to make it the active layer, and then click the Delete Layer button in the Layers panel.

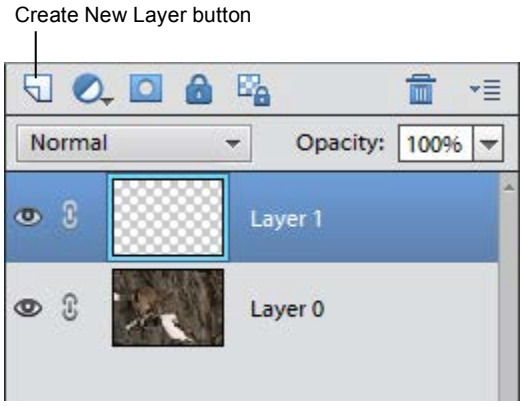

Figure 2 New blank layer

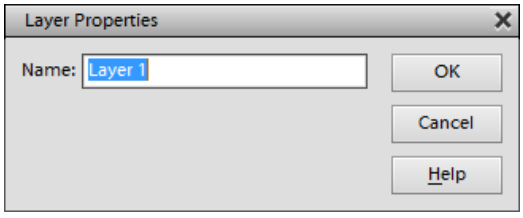

Figure 3 Layer Properties dialog box

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Arranging and editing layers

The stacking order in the Layers panel determines whether a layer appears in front of or behind other layers. To rearrange the order of layers, drag them to a new level in the Layers panel.

Keep in mind that a layer obstructs the view of what is directly below it. Sometimes you will want a layer to be partially transparent. You do this by adjusting the layer's *opacity*.

As you continue to add new layers, it can be helpful to temporarily hide certain layers so you can see the effects of the layer or have an unobstructed view of objects below them. You can hide and show a layer by clicking the eye icon next to the layer in the Layers panel. When you achieve the results you want, you can *merge* two layers, making them a single layer. To protect a layer from being accidentally edited, a good idea is to lock them by using the Lock Layer button in the Layers panel. Type and shape layers are locked by default and cannot be unlocked without first simplifying the layer.

In the following example, a shape layer has been drawn in front of a block of text, hiding the text (**Figure 4**). The shape is intended to go behind the text to help the text stand apart from the background image.

To move a layer:

1. In the Photoshop Elements Editor workspace, select the layer you want to move by clicking its thumbnail in the Layers panel.

   Selecting the layer makes it the active layer.

2. Drag the layer up or down to its new position (**Figure 5**).

   In this example, the layer with the shape is moved below the layer with the text so the text is in front of the shape (**Figure 6**).

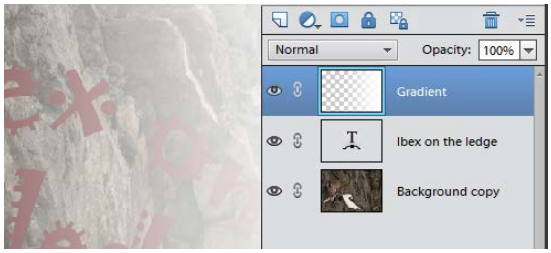

Figure 4 Layers need reordering

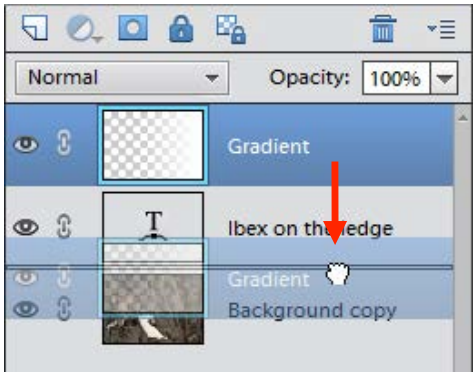

Figure 5 Moving a layer

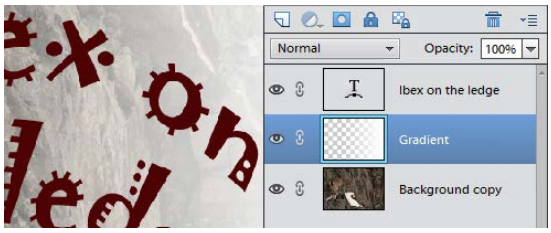

Figure 6 Layers are reordered

The top layer in the Layers panel is the layer in the foreground of the image. You can achieve the same effect as reordering layers more quickly by using a context menu to move objects backward or forward.

To move layers backwards and forwards:

1. Select the Move tool.
2. Right-click (Windows) or Control-click (Mac OS) an object, such as a shape or block of text.
3. Select one of the following options (**Figure 7**):
   - To move the object back one layer, select Send Backward.
   - To move the object all the way back, select Send to Back
   - To move the object forward one layer, select Bring Forward.
   - To move the object all the way forward, select Bring to Front.
4. Observe that the layers rearrange, just as when you drag them in the Layers panel (**Figure 8**).

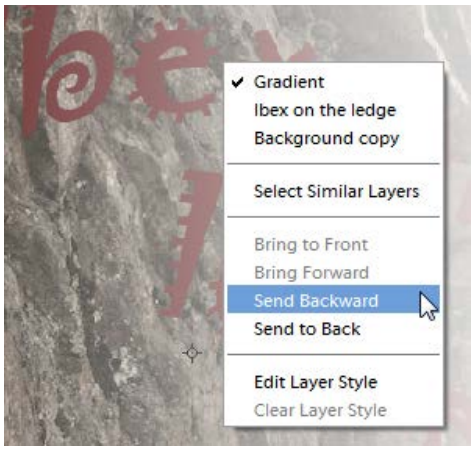

Figure 7 Moving an object forward or backward

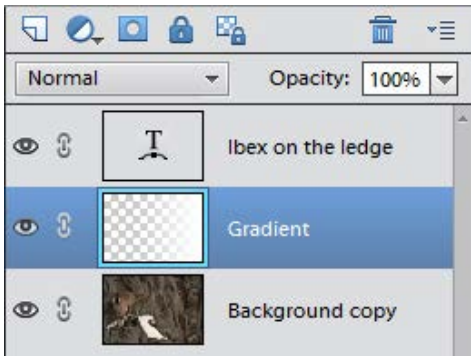

Figure 8 Layer moved back

By default, layers are visible and the eye icon appears to the left of the layer's thumbnail in the Layers panel.

To show and hide layers:

1. To hide a layer, click the eye icon beside the layer's thumbnail in the Layers panel (**Figure 9**).
2. To show the layer, click the eye again.

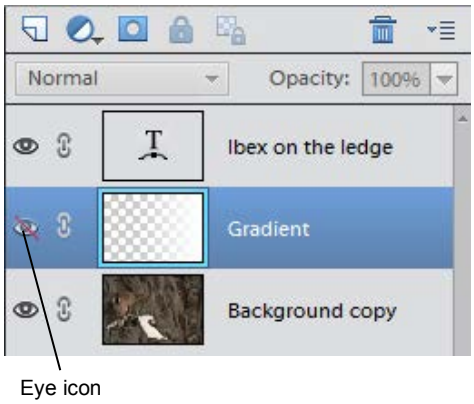

Figure 9 Hidden layer

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You can fully or partially lock layers to protect their contents. When a layer is locked, a lock icon appears to the right of the layer name, and the layer cannot be deleted. Except for the background layer, you can move locked layers to different locations in the stacking order of the Layers panel.

By default, the background layer is locked.

To lock a layer:

1. To lock a layer, select the layer and click the Lock All icon in the Layers panel to lock all of the layer's properties (**Figure 10**).

   A lock icon appears to the right of the layer's name in the Layers panel.

2. To unlock the layer, select it and click the Lock All icon again.

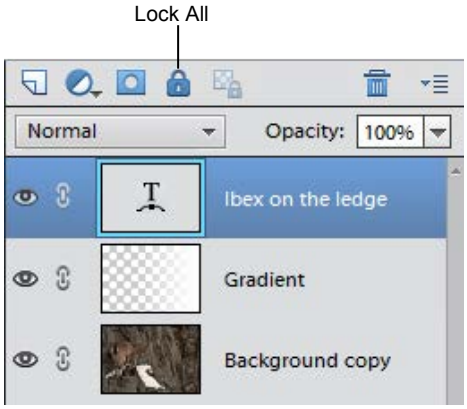

Figure 10 Lock All icon

Duplicating layers can be useful when you are making major changes to a layer. If you are unsatisfied with the changes made, you can simply delete the changed layer and use the duplicated layer.

To duplicate a layer:

1. Select the layer you want to duplicate by clicking its thumbnail in the Layers panel.
2. Choose Layer > Duplicate Layer.

   The Duplicate Layer dialog box opens (**Figure 11**).

3. Enter a name for the layer.

   By default, the layer is named as a copy of the original layer.

   The duplicate layer appears in the Layers panel (**Figure 12**).

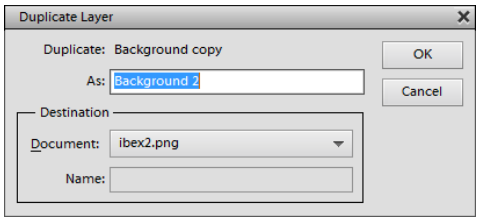

Figure 11 Duplicate Layer dialog box

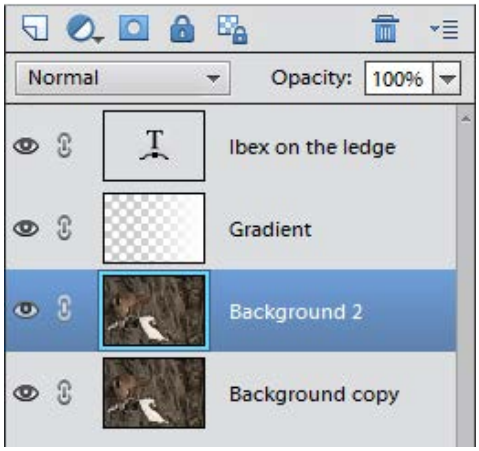

Figure 12 Duplicated layer in Layers panel

Layers can greatly increase the file size of an image. Merging layers in an image reduces file size. You should merge layers only after you have finished manipulating them to create the image you want.

You can choose to merge the selected layers (Merge Layers), all visible layers (Merge Visible), or all layers (Flatten Image).

To merge layers:

1. Select more than one layer in the Layers panel by holding down Ctrl (Windows) or Command (Mac OS) and clicking each of the layers to be merged.
2. In the Layers panel, click the panel menu button, and choose Merge Layers (**Figure 13**).

   The layers are blended together to form a single layer (**Figure 14**).

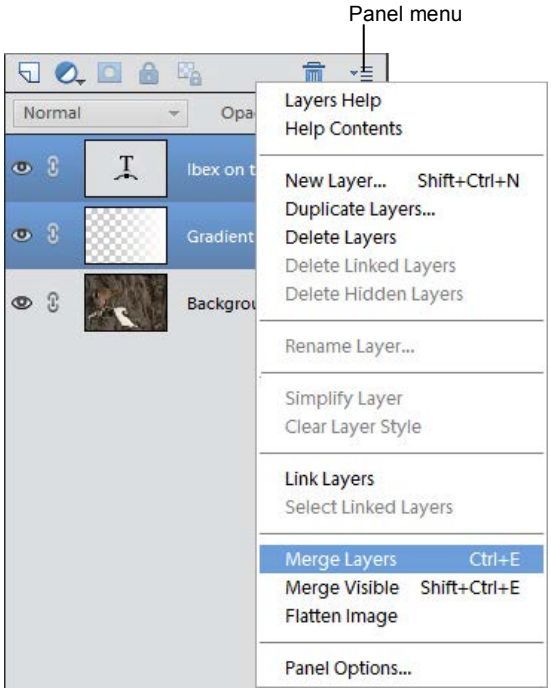

Figure 13 Merging layers

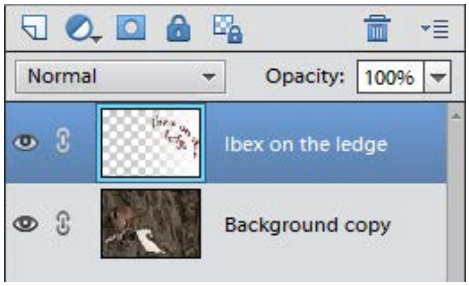

Figure 14 Merged layers

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Using adjustment layers and fill layers

An *adjustment layer* lets you experiment with the color, brightness, contrast, and tone of a photograph without actually making any edits to the photograph. Simply apply and make changes to an adjustment layer, and the changes affect all layers below it. Adjustment layers are also a quick way to apply a photo filter. Once you create an adjustment layer and get the exact settings you want, you can reuse the layer by applying it to other photographs.

A *fill layer* applies a solid color, gradient, or pattern. A fill layer does not affect the layers below it. However, if the fill is a solid color or pattern, the layer will hide whatever is below it, so if you want the fill layer to act as the background to an image, place the image above the fill layer.

To create an adjustment layer:

1. In the Layers panel of the Photoshop Elements Editor workspace, select the topmost layer you want to affect.

   Note: To confine the adjustment to a specific area, you can select the area you want to adjust.

2. In the Layers panel, click the Create Adjustment Layer button to open the Create Adjustment Layer menu (**Figure 15**).

   The first three options in the menu create fill layers. The remaining eight create adjustment layers.

3. Select a type of adjustment layer.

   Options for the type of adjustment layer selected appear in the Adjustments panel (**Figure 16**). In this example, the Hue/Saturation adjustment was selected.

4. Specify options in the panel.

   Note: The Adjustments panel may hide the Layers panel. You can double-click the Adjustments panel to collapse it or double-click the Layers panel to expand it and view your layers again.

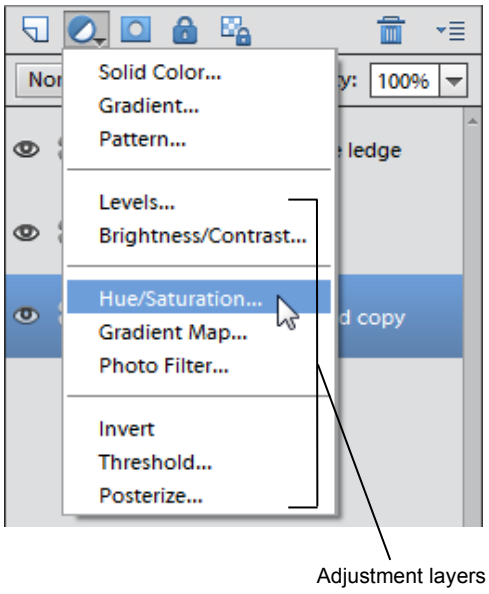

Figure 15 Create Adjustment Layer menu

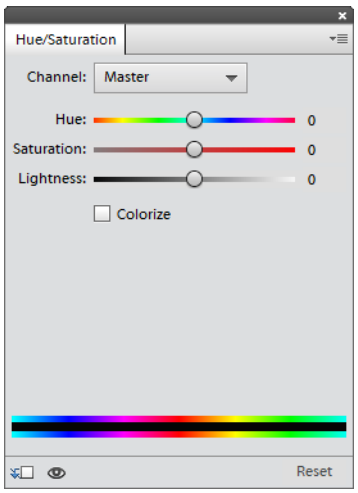

Figure 16 Hue/Saturation panel

To create a fill layer:

1. In the Layers panel, click the Create Adjustment Layer button (**Figure 17**).

   The first three options create fill layers. The remaining eight create adjustment layers.

2. Select a type of fill layer, such as Gradient.

   A dialog box appears with options for the gradient (**Figure 18**).

3. Specify options in the dialog box and click OK.

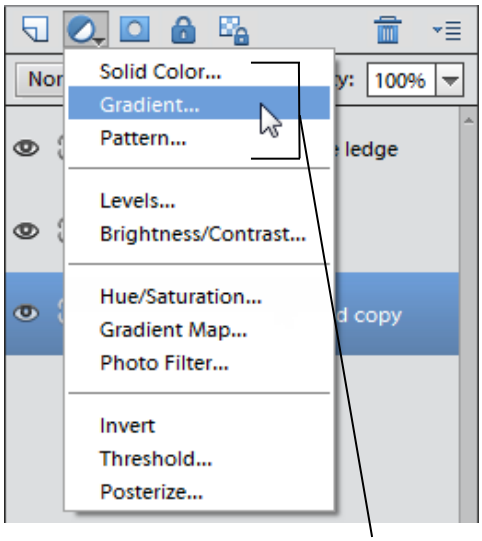

Figure 17 Create Adjustment Layer menu

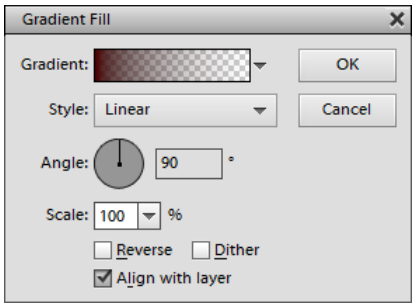

Figure 18 Gradient Fill dialog box

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Pattern fill layers offer a range of interesting possibilities for applying texture and interest to your images.

To create a pattern fill layer:

1. In the Layers panel, click the Create Adjustment Layer button.
2. Select Pattern.

   A dialog box appears with options for the pattern.
3. Choose a pattern from the Pattern picker (**Figure 19**). You can browse the subsets of patterns by using the Pattern menu.

   The pattern immediately appears over your image.
4. Adjust the scale of the pattern until you are satisfied with it.
5. Click OK**.**

   The pattern appears over your image, blocking all layers behind it.
6. With the Pattern fill layer still selected, enter a number in the Opacity box in the Layers panel (**Figure 20**) or click on the Opacity button to open the slider .

   The layer's opacity changes and the pattern appears translucent over the layers below it (**Figure 21**).

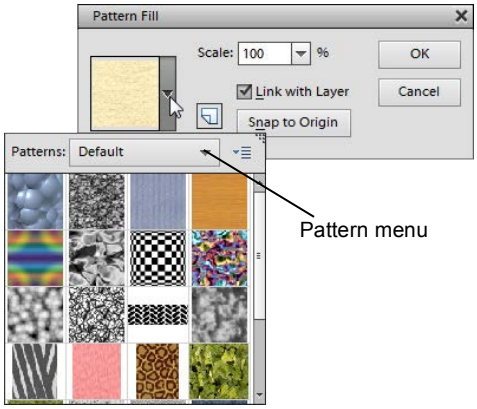

Figure 19 Pattern picker in the pattern Fill dialog box

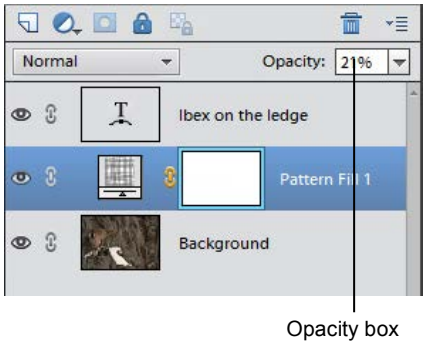

Figure 20 Opacity box

Figure 21 Pattern with opacity set to 40%