The Adobe Photoshop CS4 Layers Book

The Adobe Photoshop CS4 Layers Book

Harnessing Photoshop's most powerful tool

Richard Lynch

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To Violet Tamburrino, who continues to add color to all our lives.

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INTRODUCTION

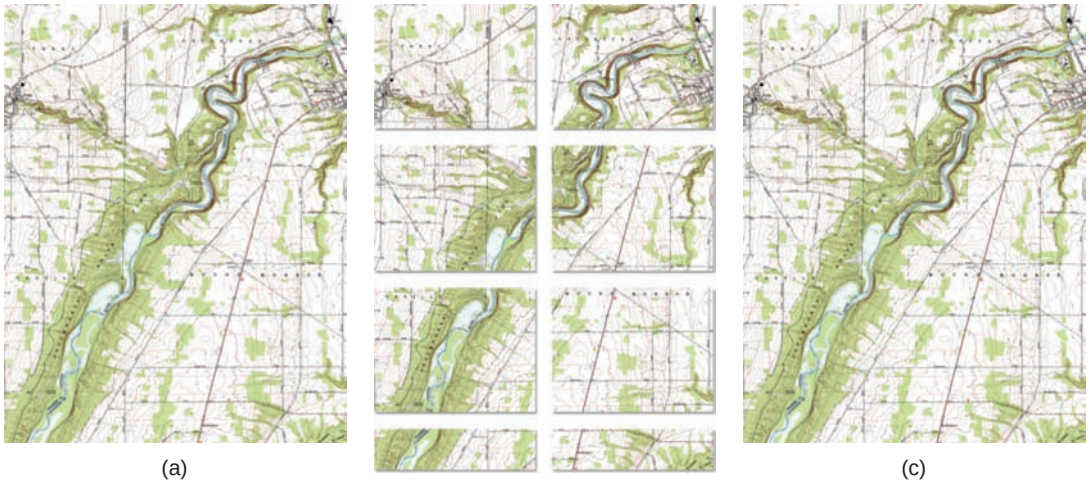
If you've picked up this book, you are familiar enough with Photoshop to know layers are important, and smart enough to know they can help you improve your images. I've been using layers for about 15 years, but I can still remember how I worked before I was introduced to them and found out what they could do for me.

Sometime in early 1993, just before I was introduced to Layers, I was working for a how-to photography book publisher as an editor/designer. We had Photoshop 2.5. I used Photoshop to make adjustments to scanned images and make them ready for print. Photoshop was fairly new at the time; it didn't yet have all of the features that would, not much later, make it the industry standard in image editing. One of the features yet to be adopted was layers.

The project I was working on included topographic maps for a book on waterfalls. The book had been self-published by an author who added the maps to the book to give the reader an idea of the landscape around each of the falls. The author had public domain maps scanned and placed in the book at the original size. At that size, the maps accounted for the bulk of the original book. We made the decision to reduce the size of the maps to a single page in the reprint to save space and make the whole landscape visible at a glance while saving some money in production costs. Regrettably, the author had the original maps, but not the image files from the scans. We had to rescan the maps for the new book. In line with saving costs, we decided to scan the images in-house.

It seemed scanning the maps should have been easy. The maps were way too big for the flatbed scanner we had, but I figured I could scan the maps in parts and put them together in Photoshop. I fit as much of a map as I could onto the scanner and scanned it in even columns and rows, leaving a little overlap, saving the scans to separate files. I'd planned to assemble them all later in Photoshop like a puzzle (see **Figure I.1**).

I made all the scans, then made a new image large enough to hold all the scans, and then started placing them in the image one at a time via copy and paste. Placing the first image was easy, and everything at that point was working as planned. The next image wasn't nearly as easy. The lines for the topographic maps didn't line up very well. I tried moving the image in all directions and doing some rotation, but I couldn't get all the lines to match up at one time, no matter what I did or how I fussed. When I got the lines near the bottom to align, the ones at the top would be off, and if I nudged right or left, it would fix one thing and goof up something else.



(a) (b) (c)

FIG I.1 (a) The topographical map was far too big to fit on the flatbed scanner. (b) The plan was to scan the map in pieces and fit them all together. (c) When reassembled the new map would look like the original whole . . . at least that was the plan.

As it turned out, lining up the pieces of the map was a nightmare. I did the best I could aligning that second piece, and finally decided it would never align perfectly—it seemed I was a victim of scanner distortion in addition to lacking perfect alignment between scans. When I deselected the pasted piece, it merged with the original, misaligned gradation lines and all (see **Figure I.2**). All I could do was Undo and try it again or move on to the next piece. None of the subsequent pieces aligned perfectly, and I was left with many disconnected gradation lines.

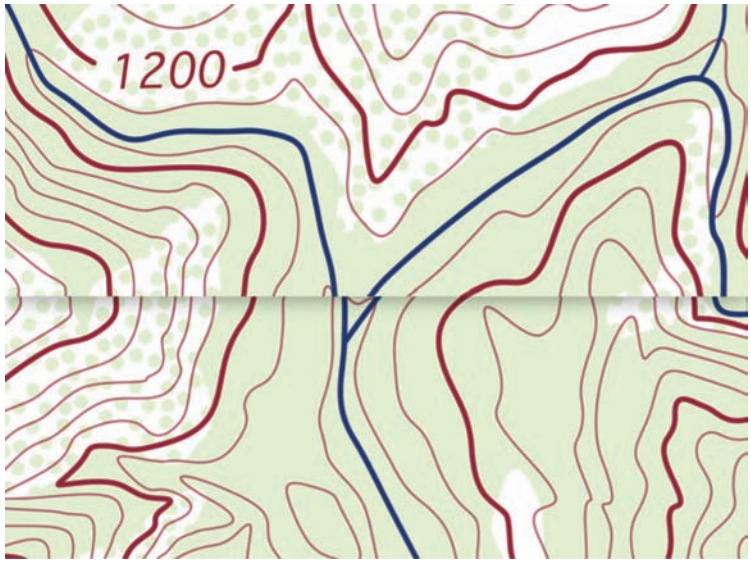


FIG I.2 The gradation lines mismatched every time a piece was put in place.

I continued putting the pieces together and after I was all done I went back and painstakingly corrected every line by manually patching (a technique we'll look at later in this book). It took many hours of additional time to make, finesse, and blend all of the repairs to make the gradation lines look right. When I finished the first map, I went to work on the next map. It took weeks to complete them all.

Several months after the map project, Adobe released Photoshop 3. I read about the new version, which featured Layers as the key new addition. Layers were a way to let you store parts of your image independently in the same image, letting you stack your changes without committing them. Instead of the situation you had before, in which selected parts of the image would automatically merge into a single image plane when deselected, you had the option of keeping the area separate. Layers offered the opportunity to reposition the objects you had on separate layers at any time.

I thought back to the maps and how even that simplistic view of layers would have saved me hours of time. I could have pasted the separate scans to their own layers so I could move each independently even after I had all of the scans in one image (see **Figure I.3**).

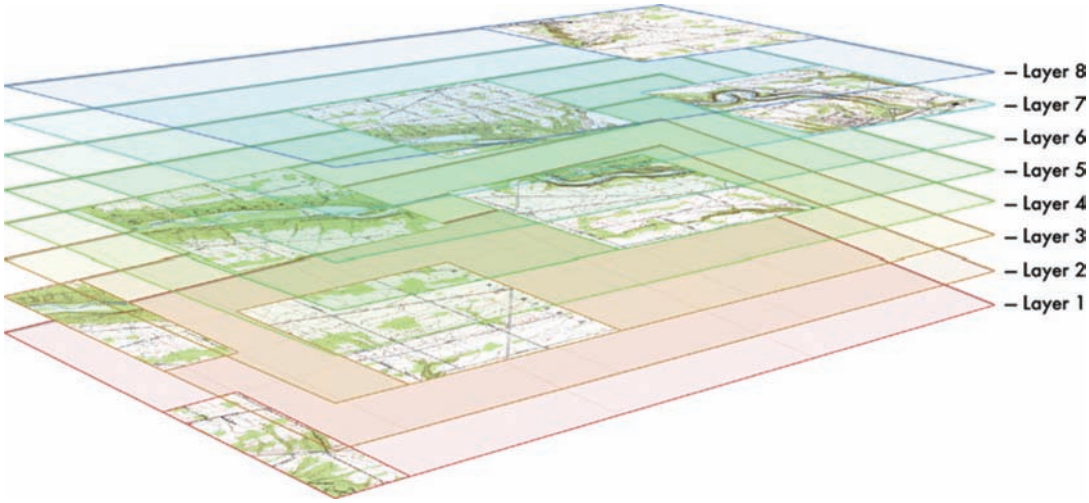


FIG I.3 Layers would allow image areas to remain separated as if each were placed on its own pane of glass in the image.

There were many other advantages to layers that I would discover in the coming months that went far beyond the simple way I first thought of them. I would have power over opacity and could lower it for any given layer (say, to 50 percent) to see through to the content of the layers underneath and see better how the layers might align. I would be able to erase areas of the map that I was adding to blend the overlap optimally and with more forgiveness and lessen or eliminate the need for patching. I could have made patches

for the gradation lines in new layers and greatly simplified blending in those adjustments. In all, the advantages of layers would have cut the work I had to do on the map by days, not just hours.

Over the years and through the next six-plus versions of Photoshop, I would discover many other uses for layers, including:

- Using layers to allow completely nondestructive image editing. Editing images would never lead to loss of the original source.
- Using layers as the center of the image correction work flow. Layers could store every step in the editing process for later examination, changes, or learning about techniques.
- Using layers as an organizational tool for all corrections. Layers can be grouped and structured to organize selective and global corrections.
- Using layers to store multiple versions of an image all in one file. Various versions of an image can be stored in separate groups so there is no hunting for files or unnecessary file duplication.
- Using layers to leverage advantages of other color modes without converting from RGB (red, green, blue). Working on separate image components does not require a mode change when you use layers to isolate color and tone.
- Using layers to create custom CMYK and duotone separations for print, allowing ultimate flexibility and control of print results on printing presses.
- Using layers to mix channels and perform calculations. With infinitely more flexibility than standard tools like Channel Mixer or Calculations, layers are the ultimate in creating masks and black-and-white conversion.
- Using layers for repeatable custom effects. Along with custom color and tone adjustments, custom sharpening, soft focus, and other special effects are all possible.
- Using layers to enhance control of the application of any tool in Photoshop. Filters, painting tools, and all adjustments can be masked, moved, and applied in different modes and opacities.
- Using layers for compositing images, creating panoramas, and extending visual depth with high dynamic range (HDR) effects.

Layers has seen some enhancement, though it was remarkably well matured in that initial release. Layer functionality then and now includes some extraordinary powers that, even now, I have still barely seen mentioned in tutorials and books and even then never explored to potential. In this book we take a look at them all, and focus on those that you will find most useful every day.

Layers—what I consider the most powerful tool in all of Photoshop, a feature in Photoshop used so extensively that it will effect the correction of *every* image—had never been the subject of a book until the first edition of this book appeared in 2007. This is very surprising considering that more esoteric features such as Channels and Actions have books written about them.

Every Photoshop book worth the paper it's written on mentions layers, and some have dedicated chapters to them, but no other book focuses on using Layers as the core of your methodology for obtaining the best images, every time, with the least amount of work. This book paved that new direction and continues to lead the way.

The Goal of This Book

The goal of *The Adobe Photoshop CS4 Layers Book* is to give the reader a complete approach to editing images using Layers as a springboard to better corrections and a complete work flow. This book will show that layers are the catalyst to organizing corrections, solidifying work flow (the holistic process of editing images) and acting as the central component to controlling every image change. Readers will learn professional correction techniques that are viable in any image, and they will become familiar with the power of layers as an organizational, correction, and revision tool. The ultimate goal is to portray layers as the heart and soul of image correction and build a foundation of good practices to help approach correction and enhancement of any image. The book focuses on the correction of photographic images rather than using layers for general graphics; the name of the program is, after all, *Photo*shop. Although the focus is on image correction, the exploration of layer functions and features is comprehensive.

Users need to understand how using layers can have an immediate, profound, and long-term effect on the overall quality of their images. This book shows not only the nuts and bolts of what layers do, but also how they envelop the entire process of image correction and control.

Achieving the Goals

The process of discovering layers starts with the essence of learning what layers are and exploring the Layers interface and commands in detail, then works back through the application of layers in real-life image editing situations using images found on the CD. The approach looks at the fundamentals of images and image editing and shows how layers enable users to make any adjustment to an image in a nondestructive fashion using essential tools and concepts. Nondestructive techniques means enabling users to make image changes that in no way compromise original image information; layers build on top of the original source to alter it, rather than changing it directly, which could lead to losing or permanently altering valuable details.

The techniques provided in this book help you take your corrections to a professional level without hocus-pocus or steps that are impossible to comprehend and apply to your own images. You'll see what happens behind the scenes in step-by-step procedures, and when appropriate, you'll be given the tools—customized actions created just for this book—to move through those steps quickly to set up image editing scenarios.

This book will divulge:

- a process of approaching image corrections (a work flow) centered on layered development with proven methods and a proven, core tool set;
- high-powered editing techniques and scenarios that leverage the power of layers to enhance your ability to make any image adjustment;
- realistic image editing situations with real images by using realistic expectations to get real results;
- timeless techniques that span many versions of Photoshop based on good core fundamentals and essential understanding that can be used with any image.

The book will *not:*

- show you fleeting techniques that emphasize the newest tools just because they are new;
- examine a plethora of rarely used tools in excruciating detail just because they are there;
- show you how to create effects that you may use once in a lifetime—if ever.

Who Should Read This Book

This book is for anyone who is serious about enhancing his or her Photoshop skills and getting better results from all of his or her digital images. It applies to those who use either a digital camera or a scanner with a Mac or PC.

Readers of this book should probably not be absolute beginners with Photoshop. They should at least have dabbled in using layers, perhaps knowing they could make more of them.

It is assumed that readers are familiar with the basic Photoshop tools (or that they are competent to research these in Photoshop Help) and that they have fairly good general computer skills (there is nothing here about program installation, troubleshooting, or the like). This book is written for:

- users who want to understand how to use layers optimally for nondestructive adjustment and organizing image corrections;
- serious hobbyists who want to get more from their investment in Photoshop by leveraging the power of its most potent tool;
- those with some Photoshop experience who are looking for an organized approach to editing any image and getting consistently better image results.

How This Book Is Organized

As you go through the book, you will discover a mixture of practical theory, examples of the types of changes you'll make in images daily, and projects to work on to help you understand the process as well as why it works. Projects are devised so that you see what goes on behind the scenes to help

understand what you have done, not so that you just complete an exercise or press a button and ogle the result. When you understand concepts and techniques, you can apply that understanding to other images predictably—either by using tools provided to drive the processes or by manually applying learned techniques.

The book helps establish a routine so that you set clear goals for editing your images and establish a method of approaching your images consistently. The examples provided ensure that you can see the changes when they have achieved the desired result. This understanding will enable you to apply the techniques you learn to other images so that your images can be improved consistently.

> 🕮 In Photoshop, many tools and functions can be accessed by more than one method. When following along with the book's step-by-step instructions, use the suggested steps for accessing the tools. Using other methods may cause sequences to behave unpredictably. For example, opening Levels with the keyboard shortcut (Command+L/Ctrl+L) will open the Levels dialog box but will *not* produce an Adjustment layer, and this can affect the outcome of a procedure that depends on the Adjustment layers being created.

You will learn multiple color-separation methods to take apart image color and tone, as well as different ways to isolate color components, image objects, and areas. When you can isolate colors and image areas, you can correct those areas separately from the rest of the image and exchange, move, and replace elements to make better images. You can also effect better blending between areas and make more realistic changes. Actions included on the CD are introduced in the exercises and will reveal functional scenarios that can be used with any image and simplify the process of applying what you learn.

The chapters build from one to the next, each using some ideas from the previous chapter(s), building to chapters that follow the image process from beginning to end by using a single image. Chapters incorporate mini exercises that invite the reader to "Try It Now," using a hands-on approach to learning. All images used in these exercises are on the CD so the user can work along, and in many cases completed samples, including the layers used and developed in the steps, are also provided so that you can check your work.

No book of any length can completely explore every facet of every concept, but it should give you a good idea of the possibilities. To that end, each chapter ends with a segment that considers the implications of using the

techniques and concepts you've learned in that chapter. The purpose and content of each chapter are listed below:

Chapter 1: The Basics of Layers: Layer Functions and Creation
Understanding how to work with layers starts with understanding some basics about what layers are, what their capabilities are, what functions are in the Layers palette, and how to locate all that you need to apply basic layer power. Readers will explore the Layers palette, see how all the basic functionality fits into the Layers palette and menus, learn how to create layers, access and apply basic layer functions, and adjust the layer viewing preferences. We'll run through a hands-on no-knowledge-necessary example of using layers and see some simple effects that can be achieved in the world of layers.

Chapter 2: Layer Management: Concepts of a Layer-Based Work Flow
Before readers really become enamored with layers, the flexibility that they offer, and the organization they provide, they need to know their practical application—and then how to use them most effectively. There are reasons to create layers based in the scope of layer capabilities and the changes you want to make; in a similar vein, there are reasons not to create layers, reasons to delete or combine layers, and means of managing layer content such as merging, linking, and grouping. Effectively managing layers and layer content will help keep image corrections on track, will allow users the flexibility to step back in corrections, and will also keep image file sizes from bulking up unnecessarily. This chapter includes a brief discussion of layer types, such as Type and Adjustment layers, linking, alignment, activating, deletes, and duplication. Readers will test out all the layer creation and combining features and will be introduced to the steps of a digital work flow.

Chapter 3: Object and Image Area Isolation in Layers
The core strength of layers comes from their ability to help you isolate change. This chapter begins to look at how to isolate image areas effectively. Sure, you can isolate areas with selection, but selection has disadvantages in that changes are permanent and selected areas are only temporarily isolated, rather than with layers, with which changes remain permanently isolated and can be adjusted. Layers enhance your freedom to correct the image because once areas are isolated, you can make adjustments and then fine-tune the adjustments in ways that are impossible with simple selective change. We'll look at using layers to isolate image areas and objects using copy and paste and applying a simple layered effect using layer styles and manual effects. We'll also look at blending layers using Opacity, compositing images, and controlling composition.

Chapter 4: Masking: Enhanced Area Isolation
Even more advanced means of isolating image areas in layers exist in the form of masking. Masking is making adjustments to the visible image without actually changing or removing image areas; areas are hidden, or masked, in the image based on a masking component, which acts separately from the

pixels. We'll look at masking as it applies to layer transparency, layer clipping, Adjustment layers, and proper layer masks. We'll use layer masking to paint in effects, affect image sharpness selectively, and change image color selectively.

Chapter 5: Applying Layer Effects
With the ability to isolate image areas comes the advantage of applying layer-based effects. We will look at the effect possibilities, practical uses, and applications. We'll consider the difference between Fill and Opacity, and peek around the corner to Chapter 6 and revisit part of Chapter 1, looking at creating layer effects using standard layers. Using concepts from Chapters 3 and 4 to isolate and mask image areas, we consider the advantage of creating effects manually rather than using packaged effects.

Chapter 6: Exploring Layer Modes
People who get involved in using layer modes often just apply them willy-nilly, like filters, and experiment till they see something that they like. There is a better approach to layer modes: actually knowing what they do and when they can be helpful. Not all layer modes are really useful for everyday correction, but some are and they are very powerful tools. We'll look at ways that users can use layer modes every day for image enhancements and improvements. Calculations help make simple separation of images into color and luminosity components, which in turn allow a peek at what modes do and allow useful change. Manual effects like dodge and burn, image comparison, contrast enhancement, and more are all enabled by layers and modes.

Chapter 7: Advanced Blending with Blend If
Photoshop has several advanced blending modes that allow users to blend layers based on components/channels, qualities in the current layer, and qualities in layers below the current layer. This capacity is mostly encompassed by Blend If and component targeting. These powerful tools are often great to use as adjuncts to more familiar layer tools, but we will explore examples of more than one type, in practical examples that use Blend If for image change. We'll also load up some tools that make using Blend If an easy part of everyday corrections.

Chapter 8: Breaking Out Components
As per the previous chapters we will look at ways to leverage the power of layers to separate out image areas into RGB channels. These powerful methods of separating images into components can lead to a plethora of advantages in creating layer-based masks based on specific image qualities and can open the door to a world of creativity in manipulating tone, color, shape, and composition. Custom tools are provided for users to create involved image scenarios that allow layer-based channel mixing of different sorts and target tone and color change in a more powerful way than other channel mixing options or controls offered as standard Photoshop tools.

Chapter 9: Taking an Image through the Process
Now that we have explored the parts of layers and what they can do, we will look at applying layers as a complete process to an image from beginning to end. This chapter offers the opportunity to review every preceding chapter as part of an actual application in image correction, as we explore concepts and changes in a single sample image. The sample offers the opportunity to create focus on the work flow and process and instill the idea of outlining what to do with an image before approaching corrections and shows how to keep everything organized during the process.

Chapter 10: Making a Layered Collage or Composite Image
As an exercise in creativity and an opportunity to break out all the tools that readers encountered in the course of this book, the final chapter is devoted to exploration of compositing and collage work. The emphasis is on considering the idea of collage, and then looking at how to expand your canvas and image depth, working with panoramas and HDR images implemented using the power of layers. Source images are provided from the examples in the book for looking at panorama stitching, composites, and collage and rendering an HDR image. Readers will be encouraged to exercise their layer muscles by using techniques from previous chapters to make a creative collage from a variety of source images and are invited to share those with other readers on the photoshopcs.com web site.

The CD

One of the most important parts of this book is the CD. First, the CD contains all the images from the book so that readers can work through the corrections exactly as they are portrayed. Second, the CD contains a set of custom actions that will help readers set up scenarios in their images and repeat long sets of steps that are in the book but would otherwise be tedious to apply. To use the actions and simplify procedures you'll have to do nothing more than load and run an action. These actions/tools are meant for readers of this book only and should not be shared freely with other Photoshop users. The actions must be installed into Photoshop via the Actions palette to be accessible (instructions are included below and in the appropriate chapter). The CD, images, and actions will operate on Windows and Macintosh computers.

To install the actions, first locate the Actions folder on the CD. Actions in this folder can be dragged directly to the Actions palette in Photoshop, or they can be loaded through the Load Actions function on the Actions palette menu (see **Figure I.4**).

After you've installed the actions, you'll be able to access them in the Actions palette. Open the Actions palette by choosing Actions from the Window menu. The usage of the actions is discussed in this book, and all are described in the Readme file for the actions on the CD. Please make use of the web site for the book and use the online forum to discuss any problems you may be having with the CD. Find links for the forums on the web site: http://www.photoshopcs.com.

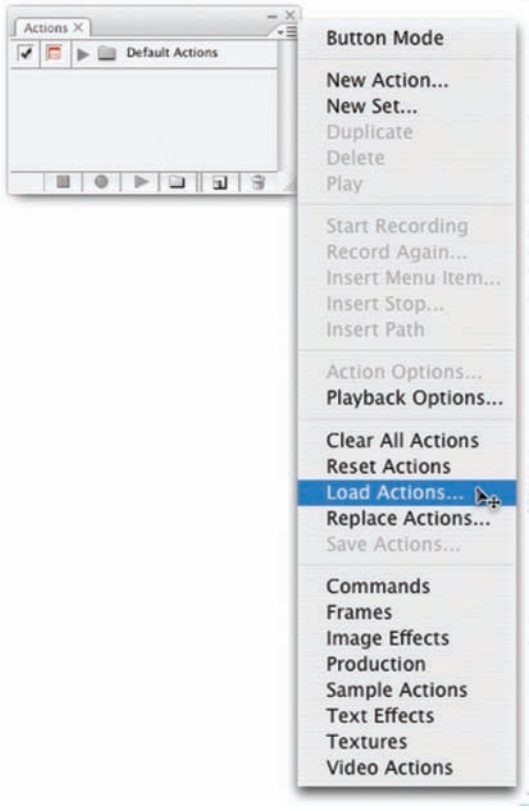


FIG I.4 Open the Actions palette from the Photoshop Windows menu, then choose Load Actions from the palette menu.

The images used as practice files in the book are provided on the accompanying CD so that readers can work along with the exercises. They are mostly provided as .psd files (Photoshop documents) or .tif files, but may be in other formats as appropriate to a particular exercise. These images are copyrighted and for educational purposes only; please use them only in the context of the exercises. Work with the images by opening them with Photoshop directly off the CD, and save them as you need them to your hard drive. The images are all compatible with Macintosh and Windows computers.

Mac and PC Compatibility

The actions and images on the CD are completely compatible with Mac and PC platforms, and they work in the same way within Photoshop across platforms. The greatest difference a user will note in the book is that shortcuts differ between Mac and PC. For example, to open the Levels palette on a PC, the user would press the Ctrl+L keys; on a Mac the user would press

the Command+L keys (Command is sometimes known as the Apple key). Keyboard equivalents on Mac and PC are:

Macintosh	Windows	Example
Shift	Shift	Shift+X
Option	Alt	Option+X/Alt+X
Command	Ctrl	Command+X/Ctrl+X
Control+click	Right-click	Control+click/Right-click

All keystrokes are included in their entirety in the book, first Mac, then PC, separated by a slash (/).

The Leveraging Photoshop Layers Blog

The *Leveraging Photoshop Layers* blog (web log) is like a newsletter that helps keep you up to date on frequently asked questions, tips, and troubleshooting, as well as topics of interest (recent postings before the publication of this book centered on topics of color management). I post the blog so that anyone can read it. Subscribers get notified of all updates and new articles. Subscription is free, and the content is always available online. The frequency of posts and updates will be at least every two months, but may be much more frequent depending on activity on the web site. There are several ways to subscribe. You can sign up on the web site for the method that best fits your needs (http://www.photoshopcs.com) or you can subscribe with feed subscription services (e.g., http://www.feedblitz.com), RSS, or Atom reader.

Changes to Layers in Photoshop CS4

Several changes to CS4 have affected the use of layers, though core functionality remains mostly the same. Features that affect layers include:

- Adjustments palette shows settings for adjustments instead of floating dialogs;
- Masks palette for creating editable, feathered, density-controlled masks.

The Adjustments palette does not directly affect the performance of layers, but it does change the work flow some. You'll find you want to keep the Adjustments palette in a prominent place, like you might keep the Info or Layers palette, so that it will always be in view—or else you won't have a way to view your Adjustment layer settings!

The Masks palette offers some excellent control for masks that goes beyond the call of standard masking. You can blur for blending without affecting the content of your masks, and this can be readily substituted for any blurring mentioned in the exercises in the text.

Contacting the Author

I have been in the practice for years of supporting my books through the Internet via my web sites and forums and through email, which is not a common practice of authors—though it should be. I visit my sites and various forums online regularly. I am glad to answer reader questions and consider it an opportunity to add to explanations in the book and note areas that could use enhancement in future editions.

On the site, I keep a blog to keep readers abreast of questions that I get asked and answered, and I post errata (or a list of any errors and typos found after publication). I have also added a forum since the last version of the book and welcome discussion there. All this is meant to help you through any troubles you might have with the book and techniques. I provide these resources so that you can get legitimate answers direct from the source, rather than having to fish around in other forums or on other web sites where there is likely no one who knows the materials better than I do. However, you'll need to seek me out, as it is much more difficult for me to find *you*. If you have questions, it is likely that other people will have those same questions, too. Please feel free to ask as the need arises. Use the forums at photoshopcs.com.

To catch up on any information having to do with this book, please visit the official web site: http://www.photoshopcs.com. You will find links there to all the resources (forum, blog, troubleshooting, errata, etc.). Although you should visit the web site first as a primary resource, readers can also contact me via email using the following addresses: rl@ps6.com or thebookdoc@aol.com. Depending on volume, I respond personally to email as often as possible, and I look forward to your input.