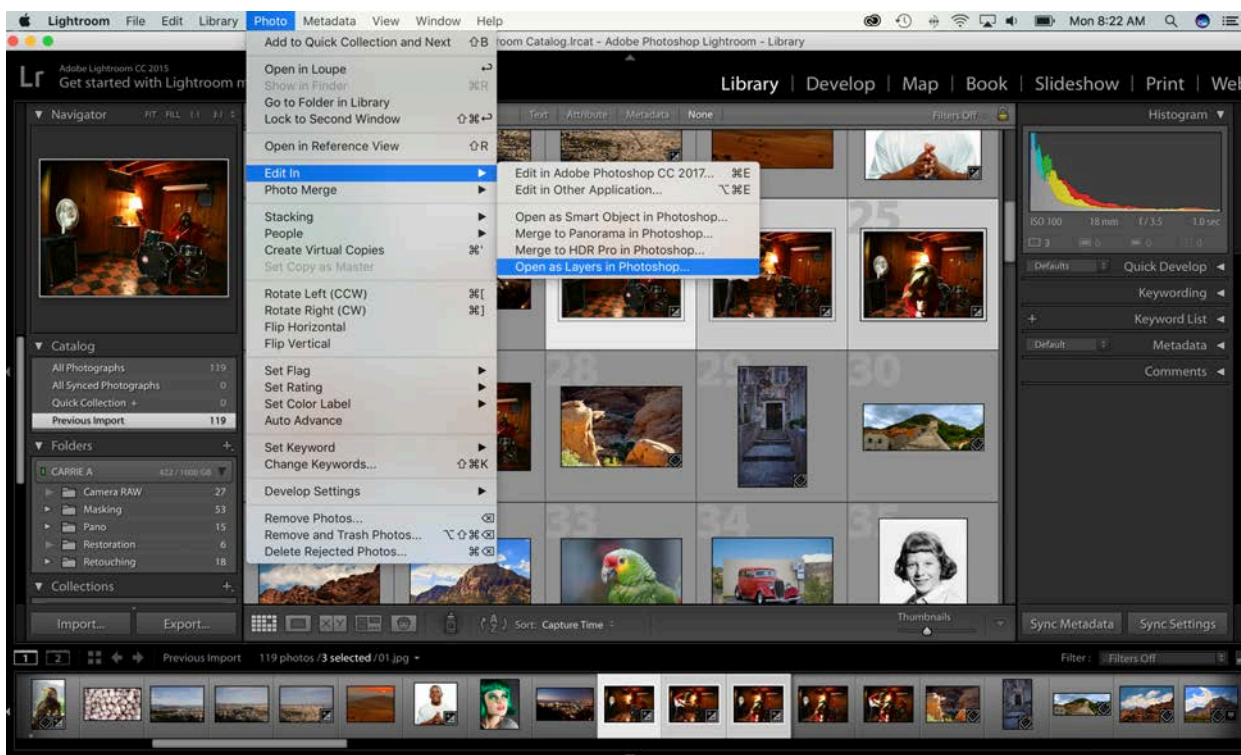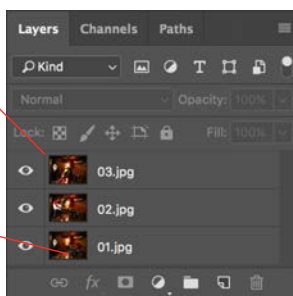# Using Layer Masks Tutorial

Instructions

1. Identify the (minimum of) three photos that you would like to composite into one new image. Select them in Lightroom and go to Photo > Edit In > Open as Layers in Photoshop. This will open the three photos in Photoshop as one file with three layers, one photo on each layer.


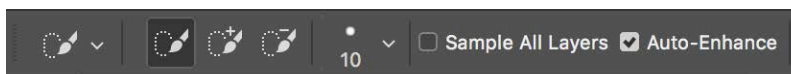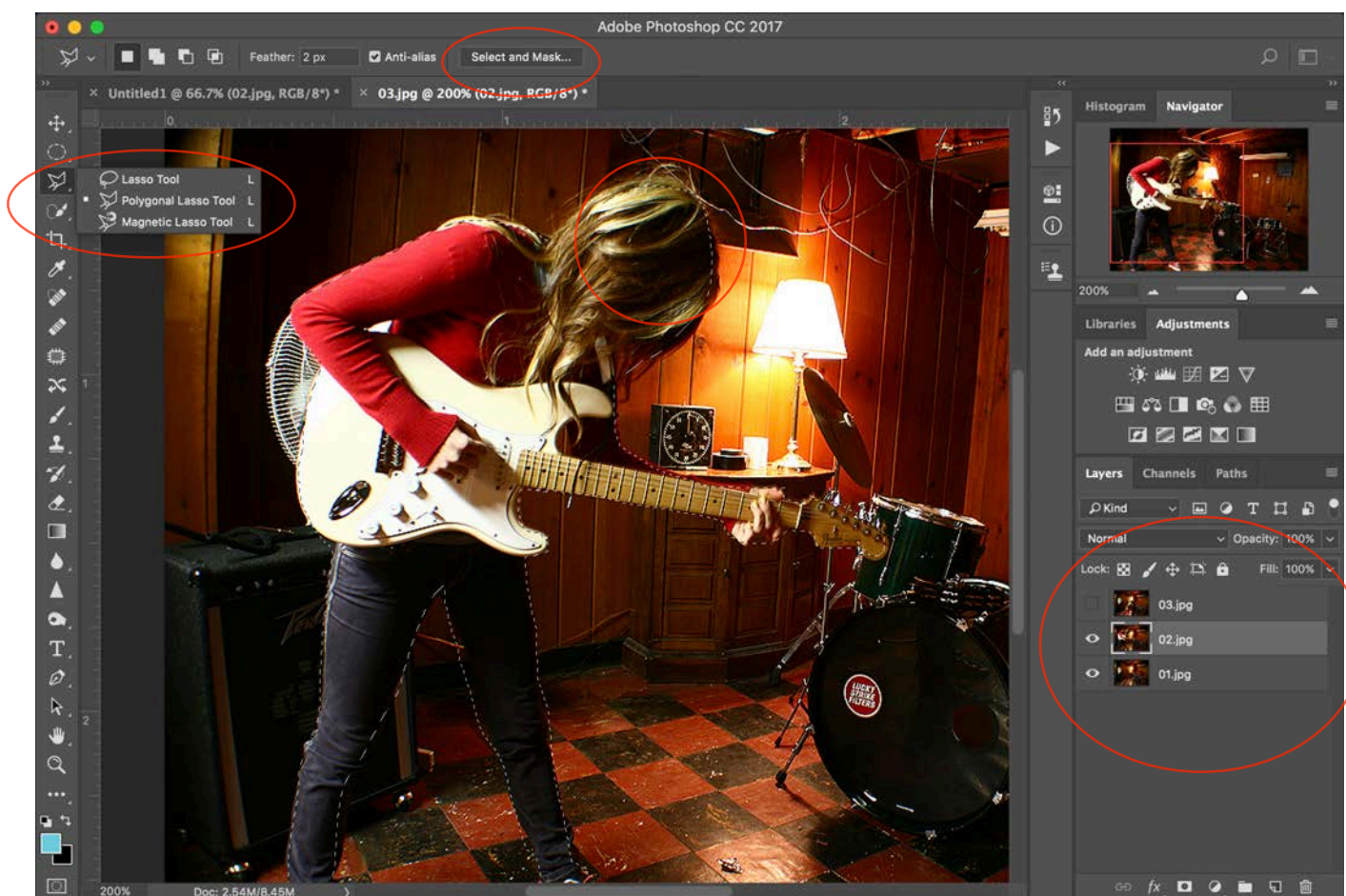Closest to camera

Furthest away from camera

2. Pick one of the photos to be your "Background." This is the photo that will be at the bottom and will not be masked. It makes sense to select the photo which has objects that are furthest away from the camera in them (compared to your other shots). Drag this photo to the bottom of your layer stack in the Layer Palette. Do the same with your other layers: arrange them in order of what subject matter is closer to the camera, with the closest subject matter at the top. This is a good time to save it: Your Name Masking.psd.

3. Next pick which layer you want to start masking, we will approach this one layer at a
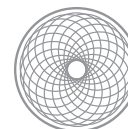
time. Select that layer in the Layer Palette and hide the visibility of all layers above it. This makes sure that you are viewing the layer you are editing, so it isn't hidden by any layers above it.

4. Start with Making a selection. Pick a **Lasso** selection tool. I recommend the **Polygonal Lasso** tool which is like connect the dots. The feather can be set to 0 for now since we will feather the edges later. Zoom in using the zoom tool or shortcut Command + or - / Control + or - to make a more accurate selection close to the edges. Use the space bar to access the **Hand tool** to move around the image while zoomed in. For transition areas, such as wispy

hair that is semi-transparent, keep the selection in the area that is fully solid and has no transparency. See example above.

Quick Select Tool Options

Once you have mastered the polygonal lasso, feel free to experiment with less precise selection tools such as the **Quick Selection Tool** (shortcut W)**.** It works best on areas that are easily grouped together in color or density. Make sure Auto-Enhance is checked when you use it, and use the + or - options to add or subtract to the selection.
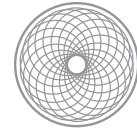
5. Once you are done, go to **Layer > Add Layer Mask > Reveal Selection**. You've made your first layer mask! Note that the area in white of the mask is the part of the layer that is `visible. The area in black indicates the part of the layer that is hidden. Right now this mask should look pretty sharp edged and rough so we will need to *refine the edges.*

6. Double Click on the Layer Mask. This will open the **Select and Mask** dialogue. Check out a great video tutorial of this dialogue here: http://blogs.adobe.com/jkost/2016/06/select-and-mask-taskspace-in-photoshop-cc.html) This is a beefed up version of the Refine Mask dialogue from previous versions of Photoshop. At left are a few new tools for editing masks and selections. At right are all the editable properties via this dialogue.

new
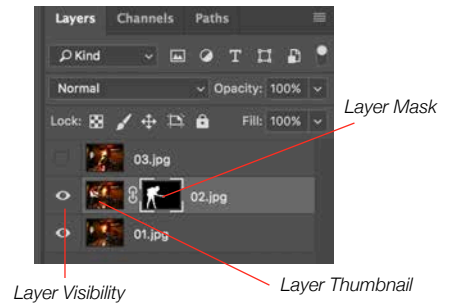
there

Layer Mask

Layer Visibility

Layer Thumbnail

a.
b.
c.
d.
e.
f.

Select and Mask tools

7. Start with the **View Mode** at top right.   This offers several different ways to preview your mask. Onion Skin (before/after transparency blended with the bottom layers), Marching Ants, Overlay (red), On Black, On White, Black and White, and On Layers (final result blended with other layers). The image below shows a preview over black, with the opacity of the overlay set to 45%.
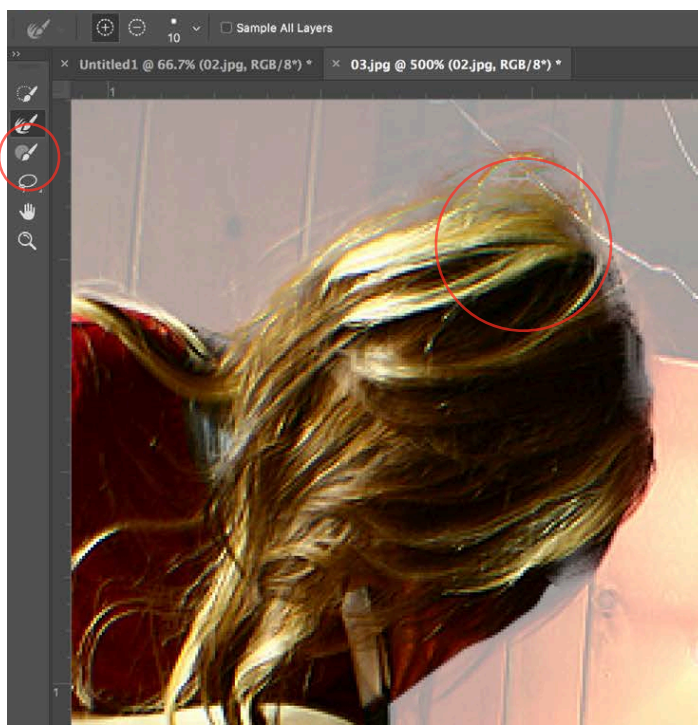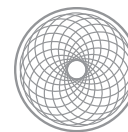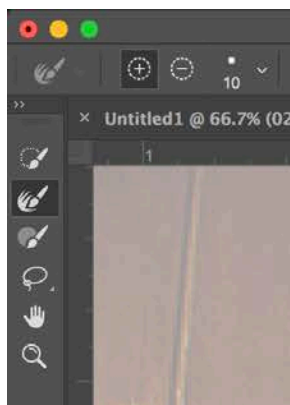
Refine edge brush painting on wispy hair.

Lasso tool options

a.
b.
c.
d.
e.
f.

Select and Mask tools

8. Next, Check out the tools on the left; you can hover over their icons for their names. They are Quick Select Tool, Refine Edge Brush Tool, Brush Tool, Lasso Tool, Hand Tool, and Zoom Tool.

a. The **Quick Select Tool** allows you to make quick selections based on the similarity of the surrounding pixels.

b. For transition zones, or semi-transparent areas like hair, the **Refine Edge Brush** allows you to target specific areas and brush a zone that defines the transition area. The tool will then try to find the edges
within that area, picking out small details like the pieces of hair at left. Note that above the tool bar there are options for each tool. For Refine Edge Brush Tool, you can choose to add to what's visible in the mask with the plus sign, or subtract from the mask with the minus sign, as well as select a size. The shortcut of the bracket keys allows you to quickly size up or down with the brush.

c.The **Brush Tool** allows you to directly edit the visibility of the mask without any edge detection. The same plus or minus options are also available for the tool options.

d. The **Lasso tool** offers the regular Lasso or the Polygonal Lasso, and also edits the mask by adding or subtracting from it. This has different option symbols that show two squares joining together, or subtracting from one. The last one intersects with the current selection, revealing the just the overlap of the selections.

e. The **Hand Tool** allows you to move around the zoomed in image.

f. The **Zoom Tool** allows you to zoom in or out of the image. Always view at 100% for edge work. Being zoomed out often makes the edges look better and more accurate than they really are.
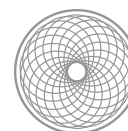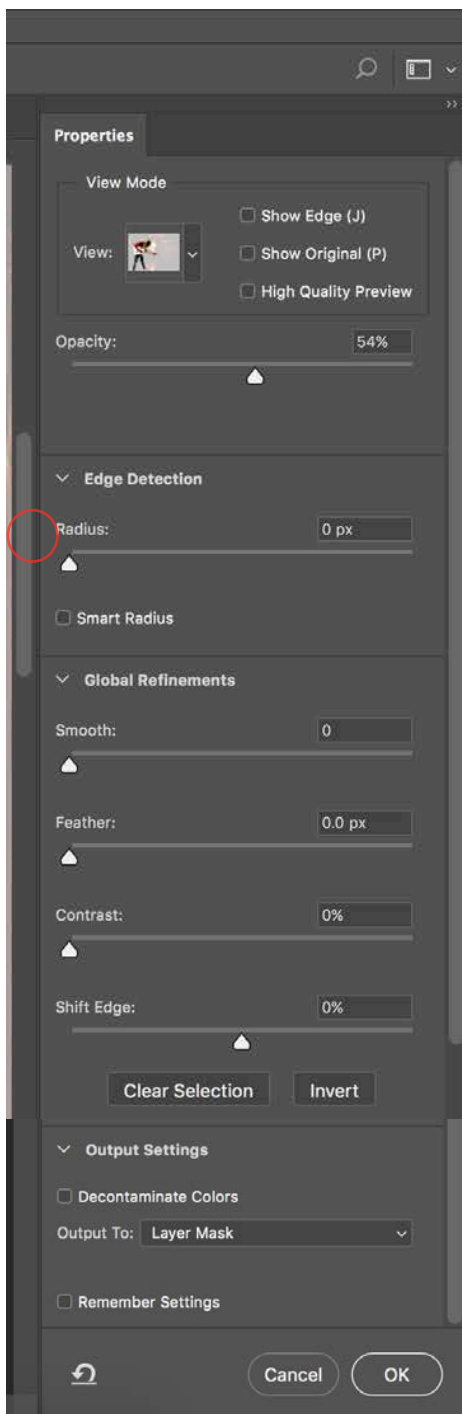
Select and Mask Properties Palette

Beginning Digital Photography

9. On the right of the dialogue are the editable **Properties** for Select and Mask.

a. **View Mode** offers several viewing options for previewing your mask, which we already covered.

1) **The Opacity** adjusts how this view is blending with the original layer.

2) There are also toggles to only **Show Edge**, **Show Original**, or request a **High Quality Preview** (for viewing the edges close up).
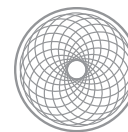
b. **Edge Detection**

1) Use the **Radius** to adjust the pixel-width size of the refinement area for the entire edge of your mask. It's best to use this sparingly to unless the edge of your entire mask is semi-transparent, such as the edges of hair. For spot areas, I recommend the brush over this setting.

2) Check **Smart Radius** to have Photoshop better guess what is an edge and what is not. This automatically adjusts the edges to the image radius.

c. **Global Refinements**

1) **Smooth -** smooths jagged edges

2) **Feather -** softens the transition of the mask edge

3) **Contrast -** increases the hardness of the mask edge

4) **Shift Edge** - brings the edge of the mask inward or outward

d. **Output Settings**

1) **Decontaminate Colors** - removes color from the fringe of the mask, requiring it to be output to a new layer + mask

2) **Output to -** offers several options of where to output the changes from this dialogue to: a selection, your layer mask, a mask on a new (duplicate) layer, and then masks or selections in a new document altogether. For this assignment, make sure it is set to **Output to: Layer Mask.**

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10. When you are done using this dialogue, you can select **OK** at the bottom right. To cancel everything, hit cancel, and to reset the workspace hit the curved arrow. Once you OK and exit, the changes are applied to the mask. You can continue editing the mask outside of the dialogue, or double click the layer mask thumbnail to re-enter Select and Mask.

11. **Repeat the process with the second layer you need to mask.** Experiment with doing most of the mask editing with the brush tool, using the lasso tool combined with a feather, or any other combo you can imagine. When you think you're done with a mask, take a look at the edges of the mask at 100% zoom minimum. The sharpness and blending of the mask into the background image should match the original edges on your bottom layer. If not, go into Select and Mask and adjust accordingly.
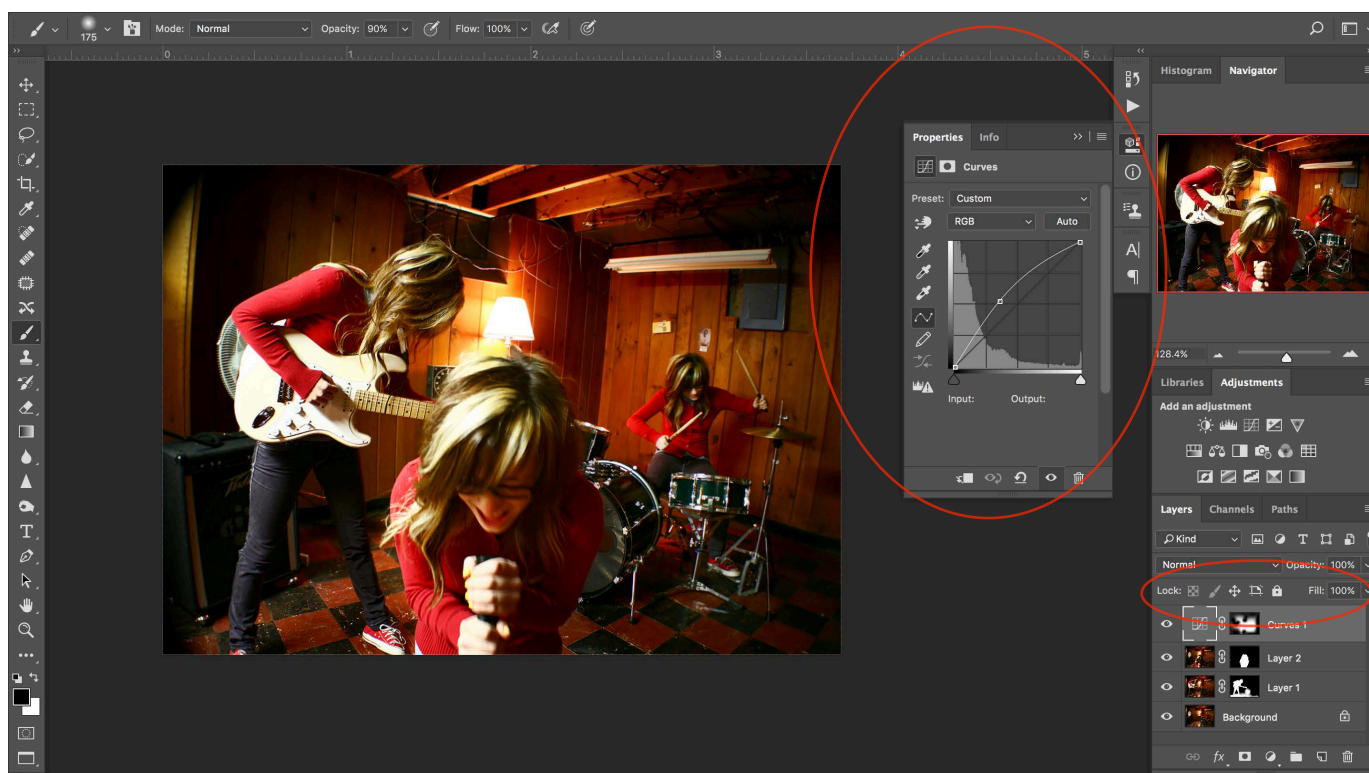

A Curves adjustment layer at the top of the layer stack. The layer mask is used to target only certain areas with the adjustment.

12. Use **Adjustment Layers** to make final adjustments to the color, contrast and tonal range of your image.   An adjustment layer affects ever layer below it in the layer stack, so if you want to to affect your entire image, make sure it is at the top of all the layers. Every adjustment comes with a linked layer mask which allows you to edit the visibility of the adjustment. Outside of Select and Mask, layer masks can be edited with any painting tool but only in shades of black and white. Use a soft brush and **paint with black to hide the adjustment**, or **white to reveal** the adjustment.
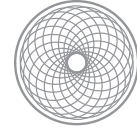
Adjustment Layer Icon
double click to edit the adjustment

Link - *links the movement of the adjustment or layer to the layer mask*

Layer Thumbnail - *if this is selected, you are editing the layer itself*

Layer Visibility
toggles the visibility of the layer on/off
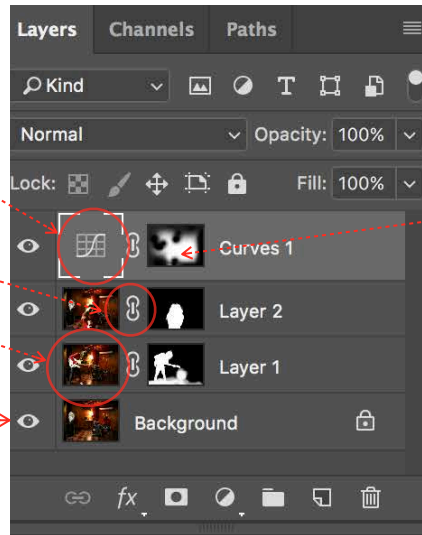
Layer Mask Thumbnail
if this is selected, you are editing the layer mask

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Use your brush opacity to vary how intensely each brush stroke paints on the layer mask. For example, I often go in increments of thirds (approximately) with painting opacity: 30%, 60%, etc. This is much easier to me than selecting different shades of gray since it is more easily quantifiable.

Use your brush opacity

a)   A quick shortcut to change your opacity while in the brush tool is by selecting a number. 4 changes the opacity to 40%, 9 to 90% and 0 to 100%.

b)   A shortcut to to toggle between your foreground and background color is X. You can also click on the arrow above the color swatches.

11.   In this example, I used the Curves adjustment to brighten the area around the people, but leave the surrounding areas dark. Look at the **Adjustment Layer Mask** and see that the white areas match up to the areas where the adjustment is visible. When you're working with an Adjustment Layer it is helpful to **toggle the visibility** on and off to see the before and after of your adjustment. See the diagram at top.

12. **Are you done masking?** Always check your craftsmanship before you quit. Technically, per this assignment, you should have a minimum of two layer masks with the layers fully intact. In other words, the layers were not cut out or trimmed with an eraser or selection tool before masking. The edges of the layer masks should blend naturally with the rest of the composition in that the edge's sharpness and blending should match that of other edges in the photo. Make sure you didn't accidentally mask out arms/legs, reflections and shadows. (If you did - add them back in!) Double check that the contrast, tonal range and cropping is good. If it could be improved, use an adjustment layer to correct it.

After all this checks out - you're all set!