Photoshop advanced

You could easily spend a term on advanced Photoshop techniques, and it would be helpful to you in whatever you do in later life. Photoshop is one of those applications that is used everywhere for everything. There are entirely too many advanced controls in Photoshop to go over here - If you are interested in knowing more I would recommend "Adobe Photoshop for Photographers". It is a good text in a sea of junky gee-wiz Photoshop books. I would also recommend you learn more about image sizing and color settings.

INTRODUCTION

You may have heard me say this before: Photoshop is a program nobody knows everything about. The combination of techniques possible make an almost infinite number of possibilities. What is covered here are some techniques that can lead to other techniques that can lead to an understanding of the breadth of the program.

CHANNELS

Believe it or not, but Photoshop is really only a black and white program. Each color image is made up of several (at least three) black and white images. These images are called "channels", and can be accessed and manipulated separately through the channels pallet.

A quick experiment can verify this - keep all the channels visible, but select only one and move the image with the move tool. See? Not only can you move these separately, but you can do anything else. For instance, sometimes the only way to correct color in an image is to use the levels command on only one channel. Try other things -how about a filter on only one channel? Or different filters on different channels?

The practical use of these channels may elude you at first, but a knowledge of them will help you in the future, if only because you are looking at the underpinnings of Photoshop.

ALPHA CHANNELS

When you save a selection (in the Select menu), what you are doing is actually saving another channel - that is right, selections are just black and white images. Go to the channels pallet and see for yourself! The black parts of this alpha channel image mean that part of the image is not selected, the white parts mean that the area is fully selected. The grey areas are partially selected in the amount of the lightness of the grey.

The implications of this are enormous, although they may elude you at first. One little experiment - save a selection (any selection), then deselect and activate your "alpha channel" in the channels pallet. Using the gradient tool, make a gradient with white at the center fading to black at the edges. Now activate the RGB channel and load the selection. Don't worry about where the marching ants are - ants are dumb and don't know what to do with all that grey. Now run a filter - a radial blur filter would be a good one. See? The filter acted most on the white areas in the middle, and not at all in the black areas, with a smooth transition in the grey areas.

There are many other uses for alpha channels, and most applications recognize the ones you saved when importing Photoshop files. Many use them as masks to show the image only in the parts of the alpha that are white (or partially show them in grey areas).

CHOP SUMMARY

Many things you can do in Photoshop with channels are handled automatically - drop shadows are simply blurred offset selections used to darken part of the image to give the impression of a shadow. The color options in the levels (and other) dialogue boxes just select one of the channels to act upon. Still, channels are darn useful things when it comes to doing just about anything that is not an "off-the-shelf" Photoshop effect. Photoshop monkeys (excuse me) even have their own name for channel operations - Chops (as in "that image needs some chops", or "oops, I just made chop suey" [okay, that last one I made up]).

PATHS TO GLORY

Photoshop is a bitmap program, but there is quite a lot you can do with paths. Some people use them for making selections, other use them to import into Illustrator or import from Illustrator into Photoshop. They are not usually immediately useful, but can come in handy. Save a selection and you are increasing your file size by a third, save a path, and it takes only a smidgen more file size. And how else are you going to make that banana-shaped selection in Photoshop?

EXTRACT

You have probably looked at the Extract filter and then backed out quicker than leaving the dentist. Go back to it - it is a very high-end way of putting Aunt Flo in front of that erupting volcano. You are going to have to use the help menu to get you extracting on the right road, but a hint is to have your background on the background layer and have what you want to isolate and put onto that background on layer 1.

LAYER BLEND OPTIONS

If you double-click on a layer, you will get the layer styles dialogue box. On the left side is a bunch of stuff you probably know. On the right side are some important controls you should know. These determine how the current layer will mix with the layer under it.

Most interesting are the "blend if" controls at the bottom. Slide a little pair of triangles and only the highlights of the top layer show (and etcetera). Best of all is a secret option - hold down the option key and you can split those little pairs of triangles to blend smoothly from one layer to the next. It takes some getting used to, but like the blend modes they can do some things that you can't do any other way. Well, you could do them using chops, but you wouldn't want to...

PS SUMMARY

To emphasize a point - learning Photoshop has no end - there are always more ways to skin the cat, and even the experts are not expert about everything. A few years ago some high school kids visited the Jlab and showed off some things they could do combining filters. Just filters. It was incredible - they just started with a blank canvas and a dozen or two filters later they had amazing images.

There is much you can learn by just playing with the program, trying some things, getting some direction, and playing some more. Or by working hard to understand one aspect thoroughly. The entire manual is in the help menu.