

Apogee Photo Magazine



The Power of Adjustment Layers in Photoshop

by John Watts, Watts Digital Imaging

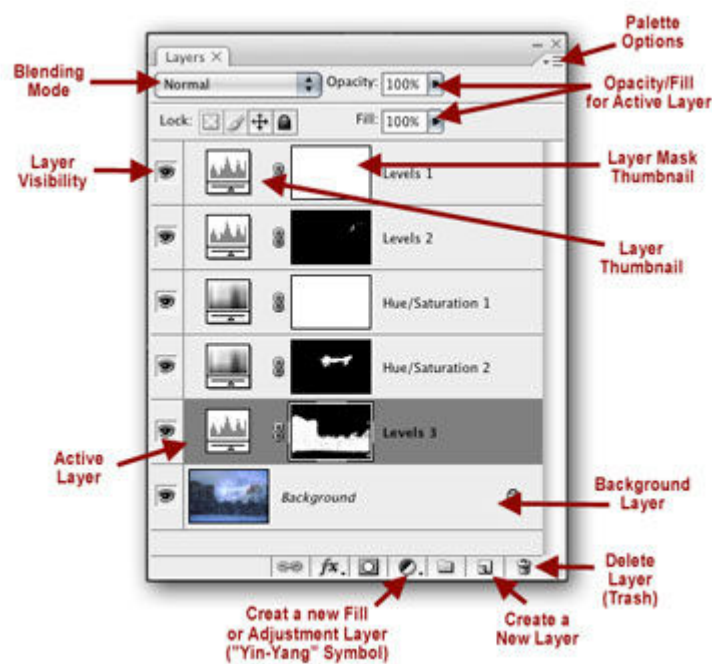
[Printer Friendly Page](#)

Adjustment Layers are one of the more powerful features of Photoshop. The purpose of Adjustment Layers is to allow you to make adjustments to your image, both globally and locally, in a non-destructive manner. By the way, I define “destructive” as causing pixelization and posterization to your digital image, resulting in bad prints.

Think of Adjustment Layers as “clear plastic overlays” over your original image, with each layer giving you the ability to control a particular aspect of your final image, such as contrast, color correction, and so on. In addition to “global” control, you can define what “localized” area a layer will control by using Selections and/or Layer Masks (see [this post](#) on my blog for more on Layer Masks).

You work with adjustment layers in the Layers Palette. If you set your workspace up using the default workspace, then your layers palette will be near the bottom right-hand corner of your screen. If not, simply go to the “Window” menu, put a check mark beside “Layers”, and drag the palette to your desired location.

*Let's explore
some of the
features shown
in this
diagram:*



Copyright © John Watts

*****Bold red text refers to red text and arrows in the diagram.**

A **Background Layer** (bottom right) is the image you bring into Photoshop. This layer should generally be left alone. Most of the time, no work should be done to it.

The **Active Layer** (bottom left) is the layer that you are working on, and is highlighted in gray.

You can control your **Layer Visibility** (2nd down left) by toggling the “Eye” on and off. This will help you see the effects of a particular layer on your image.

The **Blending Mode** (top left) lets you control the way pixels are blended together. The various blending modes that are available can be seen in the drop-down menu. By the way, the vast majority of time, your Blending Mode will be “Normal”.

To access the **Layers Palette Options** (top right), just click on the button shown in the diagram above. Here you can quickly delete a layer, duplicate a layer, flatten your image, and so on. If you go to “Palette Options” at the bottom, you can change the size of the thumbnails displayed in the palette (A personal favorite, as my eyes are getting older). By the way, each Palette (not just this one) has a different set of options.

You can control the opacity of a particular layer by moving the **Opacity Slider** (2nd down right). 0% Opacity means that none of the effects of that layer will show through: 100% Opacity means that all of the effects of that layer show through.

The **Layer Thumbnail** (4th down right) is a visual representation of the tool you’re using in an adjustment layer. Double-clicking on the layer thumbnail will open the dialog box for that tool. The **Layer Mask Thumbnail** (3rd down right) is a visual representation of the selection

or layer mask for that tool. There's lots more information on Layer Masks on my blog [here](#).

You can **Delete a Layer** by dragging it to the **Trash Icon** (bottom right).

Two Ways to Create a New Layer:

1. You can create a new Adjustment Layer by clicking on the **“Create a New Adjustment Layer”** button (bottom row left). An Adjustment Layer comes “pre-loaded” with a tool or function, as well as a **Layer Mask** (see [this post](#) and [this post](#) on my blog for more on Layer Masks). You will create your new layers with this button most of the time. By the way, even though this button is not a true “Yin-Yang” symbol, it is common slang in the Photoshop community.
2. You can create a new layer by clicking on the **“Create a New Layer”** button (bottom row right). A New Layer is “empty”. You'll create a tool or function that will be active in this layer manually.

To Edit an Existing Layer:

To edit, double-click on the **Layer Thumbnail** (4th down right)--it is the box on the left in an Adjustment Layer, **not the Layer Mask Thumbnail on the right**. Once you double-click on the Layer Thumbnail, the Dialog Box for that particular tool will pop up.

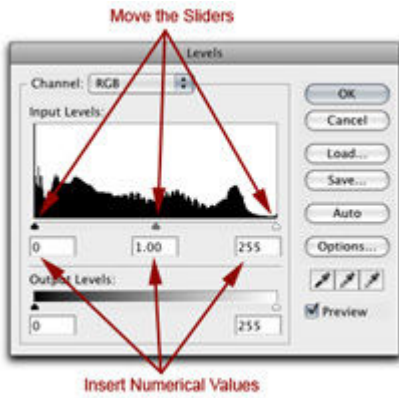
Layer Order:

The topmost layer in your layers palette will affect all of those below it. By moving the layer order around, you can see the effect of layer order. To change the layer order, simply drag your layer to the desired location.

Three Ways to Change the Numerical Values in an Adjustment Layer:

The three ways to change the numerical values in most (not all) adjustment layers are:

1. **Move the desired slider** to increase or decrease the value. This works well for coarse adjustments.
2. **Insert numerical values** with your keypad manually in the appropriate box. This works well, if you have a particular numerical value in mind.



Copyright © John Watts

3. With your cursor placed in the numerical value box, use the arrow keys to make small incremental changes. This works well for fine adjustments.

To Reset your Values to the Default Settings in an Adjustment Layer:

Did you make a mistake in your input? Are you not happy with the results you're getting? Want to start over, without closing the Adjustment Layer and reopening it?

With the dialog box still open, simply hold down the **“Option”** key on your Mac (**“Alt”** in Windows), and the **“Cancel”** button turns into a **“Reset”** button. **Press “Reset”**, and Voilà! You're back to the default values.

Now that you know more about the power Adjustment Layers, a whole new world will open up to you in Photoshop – Enjoy!

And until the next column, have fun and stay safe!

~~~~~

Visit John's website at <http://www.wattsdigital.com>.

If you'd like to know more about this subject, contact me at [john@wattsdigital.com](mailto:john@wattsdigital.com).

Sign up for my [Free Photoshop / Color Management Newsletter here](#).

Feel free to visit my Digital Imaging Blog at <http://www.wattsdigital.com/blog1>.

You can also sign up for my [Free Photoshop Webinars](#) here.

[To purchase my Book/eBook on Photoshop.](#)

**To find other articles on Photoshop, just type Photoshop in the Search Box.**



 Apogee Photo Magazine

[To Apogee Photo Home Page](#)