

## TIPS AND TRICKS FOR MAKING COLLAGES

This presentation is not designed to be a complete tutorial on making collages. It is rather a collection and documentation of my thoughts on what and how to do it, with details on the various elements of producing the collages, using Photoshop. This material is obviously slanted toward the specific collages I refer to below. But most of the general steps will be applicable to other collages. It is assumed that the reader has a fundamental working knowledge of Photoshop. While I used Photoshop CS, the procedures involved should all be applicable to many earlier versions also.

I recently embarked on a project of producing a series of collages. The first were to be collections of images chronicling the lives of our two daughters, both of whom are in their 50's. Since I had never before done any collage activity, I was starting from scratch on all fronts. The images involved were from many sources. There were scanned prints from the distant past, and scanned negatives and slides over the ensuing years. And there were digital images from the recent years.

Fortunately, the library of images that I would use as my material had already been edited and retouched in Photoshop. The images involved were all used in digital slide shows I had generated, and the total library available numbered into the 1000's of images. They were of varying sizes, aspect ratios, shapes and resolution. Some of the questions I needed to answer were -

1. How big should the overall collage be, and how would it be framed?
2. Approximately what typical size would the individual picture elements be?
3. From a practical point of view, what was the largest print size that I would be printing? My new Canon i9900 color printer can handle up to 13x19 inches. So, assuming the collage would be larger than that, how many sections, of what size and shape, would be needed.
4. Once these three questions were answered, the decision had to be made regarding the overall time period in years, that would be encompassed by each collage?

Obviously everyone will have different needs and requirements for such a project. But, I will define my choices for the above, and hopefully this can help serve as model and guide for others.

1. I found a nice simple poster frame that was 20x30 inches overall, and decided that this was ideal for my needs. The frame edges were ½" wide, and this would give me a visible area of 19x29 inches.
2. If I used 4 sections, this would make the individual print size 10x15 inches. Using 11x17 inch paper would be appropriate for this. Since each of the four sections would have two edges which lost ½" because of the frame, I had to keep this in mind when doing the layouts. I didn't want to make the actual section size smaller. Keeping it at 10x15 would remove any problems of alignment, and having an unwanted white edge strip show up on the outside edges.
3. I wanted to have a "respectable" size for each picture in the collage. If there were 12 images in each section, this would provide about 12 square inches for each picture, or typically 3x4 inches - and this seemed fine.

4. Based on the previous decisions and choices, the total number of images in each collage would be about 48. And considering the amount of images I wanted to present, I decided that each collage would cover a period of 25 years.

Now that all the ground rules were established, it was time to get down to work.

## **SELECTING THE IMAGES TO BE USED**

Believe it or not, this is actually the hardest part of the job, but using Photoshop's browser made the job a lot easier. My digital images are pretty well organized, and stored in a complex tree of folders. And all the images involved here have had their filenames set up such that the first six characters are the date of the image in a format of YYYYMM. An image from June 1986 would therefore have a filename starting with 198606. This was important, as the flow of images in each section of the collage was to be chronological.

Using the Photoshop Browser, I reviewed the potential image candidates. When I found a candidate, I selected it. As I did the selections, I copied those image files I into a new folder setup for the specific collage being created. After the first pass, I checked the number of images in the collage folder. I wanted 48 or so, so I added or deleted as necessary to get me in the right ballpark.

Any suitable image browser is fine for this task. So if your version of Photoshop is 6 or lower, and doesn't have the new browser, you may want to use your favorite browser. The important thing is to have thumbnail views of the images being searched. Selecting without seeing a thumbnail can be difficult.

## **PREPARING THE BLANK "TEMPLATE" TO CONTAIN THE IMAGES**

I decided to use a resolution of 200 ppi, so I generated a new blank image which was 15"W X 10"H, and 200 ppi. I then saved this as a read-only master for future use. Then I saved the onscreen file with a descriptive collage name for the collage at hand.

## **ADDING THE IMAGES**

The work flow to insert the images into this basic starting doc is as follows.

1. With the blank starting collage doc open, open the file browser.
2. Select the first image to be placed at the upper left of the collage, and double click it while holding the ALT key. This will open the image, and close the browser simultaneously.
3. Do the following steps, with the focus on the just opened image layer.
  - a. With the "MOVE" tool active, drag the image into the main collage image
  - b. This will generate a new transparent layer, with the pasted image on that layer. Leave the focus on that new layer.
  - c. Go into Transform mode (CTRL+T), and then hit CTRL+0. This will center the just added image, and show all four corners, ready for changing the size by dragging. This step makes the task of adjusting the size of each inserted image much simpler.
  - d. Resize the image proportionally by holding down the SHIFT key while dragging a corner. This keeps the aspect ratio of the image unchanged.
  - e. Once the image has been resized, it can be dragged it to its preliminary location. While still in the transform mode, the move tool does not have to be active to move the image. When the

- image appears to be more or less properly sized and positioned, hit ENTER to accept the transformation process. Leave the focus on the new layer which has just been created.
- f. CTRL+T can be used again at any time to change the size and position of any image. Its position can also be changed at any time by putting the focus on that layer, and dragging as desired, when the move tool is active.
  - g. This completes the insertion of image number 1 in the collage.
  - h. If it is desired to crop any of the image layers in the collage, put the focus on that layer, use a selection tool of any kind to define the portion of the image that is desired, and then click on the layer mask icon at the bottom of the layer palette. This will automatically “crop” (non destructively) the visible image to the selection made. This can be done at any time, during the initial insertion of the image, or later on.**

This completes the insertion of the first image. This process is repeated for all the images in this collage group. Don't worry about fine tuning the image sizes and placements. This will be done shortly.

## **HOW TO HANDLE IMAGE SIZE, SHAPE, AND ASPECT RATIO**

If one were assembling images which were perfect squares of 3"x3" into a 9x12 inch area, the job would be easier. Everything would fit perfectly. Unfortunately that is not the real world, nor should it be. The collage should have placements which show overlaps, different sizes, and a “randomness” to keep it from looking like a sheet of postage stamps. Most collages will be a mix of all different shapes and sizes, and some will be in a portrait aspect ratio, while others will be in a landscape aspect ratio. Listed below are some of the ways to cope with this.

1. Crop the image either directly, or by using overlaps, which will definitely be involved in the final layout.
2. Use the layer mask tool noted earlier to generate any desired shape/size for an image. Remember, the layer mask is a non-destructive way to crop, allowing an easy way to modify/restore things later.
3. While I like to keep images in chronological order in each section of the collage, it is sometimes necessary to violate this rule for layout convenience, which is certainly no tragedy.
4. Change the position order in the layer stack. This moves images forward or backward, and impacts the overlay of things. Just drag a layer to a new position. Remember, any image (layer) can be temporarily removed from view by simply clicking its eyeball at the left of the layer.
5. For a very difficult image, it may have to be removed permanently from the collage. Or, for something like a tall image that just won't fit, consider letting it take up “2 spaces” in the overall scheme of things.
6. Remember, there's nothing magic about having exactly the same number of images in each collage/section.

The task of final sizing and positioning is an individual thing, and the rules are wide open. Personal taste, and how much time and effort one is willing to spend on things are of course a factor. Remember to save the composite image regularly, as a Photoshop psd file, during the course of doing things. This will keep all the layers available for any future changes or tweaks. Even when you feel that the image is absolutely done, it's nice to have the “security blanket” of all the original material. If you are short on hard drive storage space, consider burning things to a CD-R, or copying to an external USB drive for safekeeping.

## **DOING THE OTHER SECTIONS**

In this specific project, there are total of four sections. The procedure is exactly the same for each of the

remaining sections. The one small difference in this example is that the 2 edges of each section that are under the lip of the frame are different for each section. The caveat here is simply to make sure that nothing critical in an image is in the edge area covered by the frame.

## **ADDING A BORDER AND DATE TO EACH SECTION**

I decided that I wanted a thin border around each of the four parts of the final collage. And, I wanted a small text insert with the time period noted in each of the sections. These are all personal choices of course, and each user can take whatever approach is desired

The time period text I used was simple such as "1950 - 1961". This was of course on a separate type layer, and formatted to be readily readable against a dark, and/or light image background, as it may well span both types of areas. Using the available text layer styles in Photoshop offers many choices here. Experimentation is a good route to take. Dark text color, with a light colored outer color is easy to read over any background.

Once that date has been added, and that layer is well positioned on the section, the overall image can be flattened, and saved as a JPG final file. Now a simple border can be added to the outer edge of the image. I personally feel that this is an attractive way to break up the total collage, and of course keep the date text applicable to the proper group of images. This border will only have a visible "cross" in the center of the final composite collage, once all four images are combined and framed, as the outer edge borders will be hidden by the frame. I created the border by using the EDIT>STROKE command after selecting the complete image. I used a stroke width of about 30 pixels. The width and color is up to each user's personal taste.

## **COMBINING THE FOUR SECTIONS**

Last but not least is the process of combining the four sections into a single unit. Since a lot of time and effort has gone into the prior processes, the word here is "**DO IT CAREFULLY, AND TAKE YOUR TIME**". Make sure that your printer is functioning properly, and has no clogged nozzles. And, make sure that the color output is a good match. Whether you use profiling or whatever, a bad color cast can negate all the good intentions you had for the project. Unfortunately, the aspect of "proper color" is outside the scope of this presentation.

Once all the sections have been printed, let them dry thoroughly (assuming an inkjet printer is used) for at least 24 hours

It is very important to do a good job of trimming and combining the 4 sections. After all, the goal is to make the final collage look like single print. The best way to trim each section is with a good paper trimmer, such as the Rotatrim. If I had realized just how good the Rotatrim trimmers are, I would have gotten a larger unit. They are expensive, and until you use one, you can't appreciate how good they are.

My unit is a 15" model, so I can trim the 11" ends off the 11X17 paper used here. Then I have a page which is 15" long, and my Rotatrim can just manage that also. An Exacto knife is always a possibility, but it can never do the job of a Rotatrim unit.

Once all 4 sections have been trimmed, place them face down on a smooth clean surface. I carefully align the 4 sections, and then use very small pieces of Scotch to hold things together. Then I use longer pieces of tape to do the final job. If the trimming was done well, and the taping was done carefully, the collage will appear to be a seamless picture.

Then insert the collage into its frame, stand back, and give yourself a pat on the back for a job well done. The following page is a display of the collage produced by the process presented.



**THIS COLLAGE WAS CREATED USING THE TECHNIQUES AND PROTOCOLS PRESENTED IN THIS TUTORIAL**