

Photoshop Clipping / Work Paths and/or Isolation of Objects

By Trudy Karl

Please note: I have *attempted* to include references to both Windows and Mac keys, when applicable. I admit, I use a PC (Mac world, *please* forgive me!), so I might not always be correct about the equivalent key.

Assumptions

We are assuming you are reading this tutorial because you are interested in creating decent, fairly crisp-edged image isolations and clipping / work paths that work. These are different things, by the way. Image “isolation” means you are surrounding the object by all white or black. A work or clipping path is a path that can be saved *within* a JPEG image, which you can use to create a selection and then a mask. This is not a tutorial for creating soft edged isolations, creative masking, or loosely approximate work paths. Work paths are not a perfect science, and as you create them and test them, you might agree with me.

This tutorial is created with the user in mind who may be new to selecting and masking in Photoshop. We will not be covering image “editing” (actual pixel pushing), but will be keeping the image intact in the working PSD file using these methods.

Before you get started

If this is your first, or near first attempt at creating a Photoshop work path, also known as a clipping path, might I suggest choosing to work with an image that has an object with a definite edge. For the success of a couple steps below, I recommend creating a new image layer, by right-clicking on the image layer in the layer palette (off the thumbnail) and choosing *Duplicate layer*. If you accidentally edit, delete, or paint on the actual image, you have the original image to go back to. Now create a new color fill layer in between the original image and your new image layer for testing your selection and clipping path later. Create a new color fill layer by clicking on the *Create a new fill or adjustment layer* button at the bottom of the layer palette, choose *Solid Color*, and then choose black or white (or whatever you want – you can change this at any time). Click *OK*. Drag this new color fill layer underneath your new duplicate image layer, and above the original image layer, if it’s not already there. You are ready to start selecting. However, **first**, save your image as a new PSD file!

Preferred method of selecting

Some people use the magic wand tool. I do not prefer this method, as your line will be messy, and you can miss that you have silly little stray single pixel selection areas up in a far corner of your image. DON’T DO IT! For the purpose of this tutorial, it is usually not an appropriate choice. Some people also like the magnetic lasso tool. I find it clunky for the most part, and edges are not always smooth, but if that’s really your thing, go for it. Depending on the contrast of the edge, I may not get precise control using the magnetic lasso tool and have to go back and edit again anyway, so...

I prefer to use either the polygonal lasso tool or the standard lasso tool (using lasso tool tip #1 below). For this first explanation, we will stick to the polygonal lasso tool, just to get acquainted, with anti-aliased checked, and zero feathering. Some people *don’t* like to use any

anti-aliasing at first (anti-aliased unchecked) with zero feathering, and will modify the selection later by feathering 1 pixel (top *Select* menu / *Modify* / *Feather*, etc.). You can play with what works for you, and you will get a sense of this after a few (or a number of) tries. I find that having anti-aliasing turned off and later feathering by 1 pixel creates a bit too soft of a line. It may be just me, but that seems to feather a teensy bit more than the anti-aliased setting alone to begin with.

Next, we will start selecting around the object in the image that we want to either isolate or create the clipping path for.

Selection tips

The polygonal lasso tool can seem to have a mind of its own by closing your selection without you telling it to, all on its own. If you are a seasoned “selector” and this has never happened to you, then you are perfect. Congratulations. But for the rest of us imperfect souls, this can be such a pain *if* you are not ready for this.

Side note: Lasso tool tip #1 below can solve this problem, if you are ready for that.

So, I suggest zooming in to about 200% to 300%, and selecting what you want in *chunks*, instead of all in one selection. To close the selection, either come back to where you started (you’ll see the little circle telling you are back) and click within the circle, OR, double-click, and it will close the selection from where you last clicked. Use Photoshop’s polygonal lasso tool feature of adding to your selection by clicking the “Add to selection” button up near the top of your screen, and each time you close a selection, it adds that new selection area to what you had selected before.

You also may have to select with a ton of clicks around the item. If you want a nice, smooth curve, instead of a choppy curve, you will need to make more selection clicks around that curve. There are a lot more tips I could include here, but this document will be 20 pages before I am done with it. Experiment with it. Convince yourself that you are having an exciting adventure and reward yourself when you are done. The reward part is up to you. I choose bitter-sweet chocolate. Oops! I digress.

If you have one available, using a graphics tablet can help with your selection, as well. I have a fairly large, 9 x 12 Intuos tablet by Wacom, which is my *best friend* (yeah, I’ve got to get a life). With each tap of the pen, it sets a new selection point (or see Lasso Tool Tip #1b, at the end), which is easier than using the “block of soap” mouse-click. If you only have your mouse, you can still do a fine job. Some people actually prefer the mouse for this. Hmm... well, that’s their tomato, okay?

The polygonal lasso tool (as well as the standard lasso tool) also has the capability to subtract from the selection area by choosing that appropriate button *Subtract from selection* up at the top (next to the *Add to selection area* button), which is helpful for fixing or trimming down too ambitious of a selection area. You just have to keep track of what side of the selection you are working on, adding or subtracting. That can twist your head up until you get the hang of it. So hang in there!

Selection Line

My selection line is generally somewhere in the middle of the line or edge of the object (photos hardly ever have a hard, definitive, positive / negative line at the edges of objects. There is a fuzzy, one, two or three pixel wide area that defines the edge. The tough part about this is if your image has soft focus at the edge of the object. What to do? This can be a dilemma. I find it best to generally isolate or create work / clipping paths on crisply focused objects. You can create the illusion of sharp focus, however any techniques for soft-focus objects go beyond the scope of this tutorial!

Solution for selecting in really dark sections

Here is a trick for those incredibly dark areas that you want to see better while you are selecting. You ought to pay me money for this idea. 😊

Create a curves adjustment layer to lighten up the image temporarily for those dark patches. Go to Layer / New Adjustment Layer / Curves, name the new curves layer Temp curves, and then drag that adjustment line up toward the top left. Really crank up the adjustment if you have to, to see the detail of where the object ends and the background begins. With each selection “chunk” that I described earlier, you can set an adjustment to this layer so you can SEE what you are selecting.

Testing your selection

Once you have the first selection around the item, if you haven't done so already (in my “Before You Get Started” step), convert your image to an editable layer by double-clicking on the layer in the layer palette, so you can test the selection. Some people copy and paste the selection area of the image to another layer, making the area around the object in new image layer not just seemingly transparent, but that area is **gone**... you then have a layer that is permanently altered, **and** you lose your selection. Not to worry; you have the history palette. You can step back to the step before you pasted. Selection recovered! The method I use is to create a mask on the image from the selection, so you can bring the selection back when you need it, to edit some more.

To create the mask, with the copied, editable image layer chosen in the layer palette, click on the *Add layer mask* button at the bottom of the layer palette. Now your image is masked, and you can see how accurate your selection really was. If it looks no different than before, you probably did not create that new fill layer in between your image layers (as directed above, in “Before You Get Started”). You might go ahead and do that, and drag it in between. Additionally, it may appear you have lost your selection. Don't worry, you can get your selection back, if you need to make adjustments. You are also just testing the selection here, not what the work path will actually turn out to be, by the way.

You can really get a good idea of what your selection job is like, if you alter the color fill layer to different colors by double-clicking the color thumbnail in the layer palette and choose another color. Zoom in on the image and see what your edges are like. If you originally had an object against a white background, test it above a black fill layer... the litmus test for selections. If you see a white halo or glow around your image, you have a bit more work to do on refining your selection. And vice versa, if you originally had an object with a black or dark

background, test it above a white background. Is there a black glow (okay, black does *not* glow) or smudge? There is more work to do. Save your file!

Getting your selection back and continuing on

If you feel you are close to the ideal selection mask, bring your selection back from the mask by right-clicking on the image layer on the black and white mask thumbnail, and choose *Add Layer Mask to Selection*. Your selection is back. To save the selection as a channel, go to *Select / Save Selection* (menu at the top) and save your selection, choosing *New* from the Channel menu and give it a name. You can save multiple versions of your selection this way. Whenever you want to bring back a saved selection, go to *Select / Load Selection*, and choose the desired selection from the channel menu. By saving one or more of your selections, you will have them to go back to. This step is devised from my “Trudy’s school of hard knocks.”

As a nice alternative to saving multiple selections in the *Select* menu, you can also duplicate the first working mask (without the image, to save file size). After you bring the selection back, with the selection active, create a new solid color fill layer. You now have a masked solid color fill layer that you can pull that selection from a lot faster as you are working. Make this masked color layer not visible by clicking the eye on the left side of the layer in the palette. Now go back to working on your original masked image layer.

Bring the selection back from the mask again. Temporarily disable the mask by right-clicking on the mask thumbnail and choose *Disable Layer Mask*. The mask is not gone permanently. You just can’t see it. You may then continue to fine tune your selection from within that same layer, adding and subtracting, keeping in mind how it looked above the fill layer. You might also choose not to disable the layer mask, so you can still see what is masked while you are adjusting your selection, however, I find I can’t always see how I need to adjust my selection when I don’t see the entire image.

Choices are endless for the best work flow for you. This is the part that takes playing with it.

Once you feel you have a better selection than the one that is stored in the image layer mask and you no longer want the old mask (you have it saved anyway in the selection channel or in a masked color fill layer) you could discard the mask by right-clicking on the mask thumbnail and choose *Discard Layer Mask*. It is gone, and you now can mask the image with your new selection, and go through testing it, as described above. You may have to repeat some of these steps.

I know this all may sound tedious, but after a while, you will get a sense of what to do next, and you will write a better tutorial! This one is long! There are more techniques you can do for selections by painting in the mask area using a hard edged brush with either black or white (very tricky to keep a crisp, but not jagged edge line), and I think I’ll cover that in another tutorial on masking. The mask, by the way, is totally editable, with feathering capabilities... Oh, I’d best not get started!

Making the Work Path

Okay, you have a great selection, and successfully tested against different color backgrounds. Save this selection in the top Select menu, calling it “final” or create an additional solid color fill masked layer. Rename that new masked color layer “final” by double-clicking in the layer name to edit, and set it to not visible. You may want to come back to this later and bring back the selection to isolate... hint. That is covered below. Save your file!

You are ready to make your *test work / clipping path*. Re-activate your selection, bringing it back from the mask. With the Paths palette visible, Alt+Click on the *Make work path from selection* button at the bottom of the palette. The Make Work Path options box will pop up, giving you options on the pixel tolerance for the path. Play with that. The number depends on the complexity of your selection. I use 1.0 quite often, or a little more or less, depending on the complexity of the selection. The smaller the number, the more anchor points you will have in your path (could be a good or bad thing). The more anchor points you have results in a more detailed, but larger file size path; less anchor points is a simpler path line, and smaller file size. You will need to determine this... and we **will** be testing your path! You are not done! I know, I know... but this will be worth it! Your reward is waiting. ☺

Once the path is created, you are going to test it by creating a selection from this path. In the Paths palette, right-click on the actual path layer, and choose *Make selection*, which will make a new selection from the path to test. Check the box for anti-aliased, feather radius at Ø (zero). Back in the Layer palette, make an additional duplicate image layer from the original, drag it to above the color fill layer, and have the rest of your layers not visible, except for the fill layer. Make sure you have the new duplicate image layer selected, and now use this new selection from your work path to mask the image to see how it turns out. Test it with the different background fill colors, as well as compare the mask from the clipping path to what you had masked from the selection in the other masked image layer.

I am usually saving the PSD file all along the way in this process, and now save it again. Now you have your layers, your selections, your masks and your path all saved.

More Tips on Altering Paths or Masks

If you have more work to do, you can follow more of what you have done before, selecting more or less with the polygonal lasso tool, until you get it just right. You can also edit the path itself, by choosing the pen tool and Ctrl+Click on the anchor points to tweak them or their direction points. Check out Photoshop’s tutorials on this. Editing paths in Photoshop is a bit tricky, but this might be just what will fix that selection. You can also use the painting in the mask technique, which can either refine that edge just enough, or if taken too far, can actually set you back. You can accidentally soften your edge. However, while I want to stick with an initial tutorial on selections, painting within the actual mask area can produce very detailed and successful results for isolating and possibly for clipping paths (hair, etc.).

If the path is a good working path, with smooth edges where you want them to be smooth, detailed edges where you want your corners and small curves, etc., you are happy. ☺ Save your PSD file! It’s almost time for chocolate (or whatever turns your crank)!

Save as JPEG

Now you are ready to save your file as a JPEG. First, you have some options here. If the image calls for it, you might get a nice “isolated” object out of this whole process if you keep the mask. If you do choose to isolate, then you might choose to use the last successful *selection* to mask your image, not the selection from the path. The last, refined selection is probably better, as paths are usually tweaked ever so slightly with the conversion to vector from the selection. That was why I mentioned earlier that paths are not perfect... but they are still such a delight to the designer, as they can be embedded in a JPEG, and they *save time*.

If you want to isolate, simply bring back your best selection from the appropriate mask layer, or from the saved channel, and mask the image, as described earlier. Change the color fill layer underneath the image layer to white, flatten the image, and save as a JPEG (highest possible quality, if it is for iStockphoto).

If you are not isolating, disable the mask in the visible layer, flatten the image, and save it as a JPEG (again, highest possible quality, if it is for iStockphoto). Your clipping path is intact. Life is good! NOW you celebrate! Bitter-sweet chocolate is calling... wait! I have more.

Lasso Tool Tips – Scenario approach

1. You are experiencing that pesky, annoying problem of accidentally closing the selection because your clicks are too fast. Try this for your next selection:
 - a. Choose the standard lasso tool, and hold down the Alt (Windows) or Option (Mac) key, and you will have the polygonal lasso tool, without the annoyance of accidentally closing the path by clicking too fast. Careful, though, you release the Alt key and your mouse and your selection is closed.
 - b. While using the standard lasso tool, in the tip above, you can alternate between curved lines (without the Alt or Option key pressed) and straight lines (with the Alt or Option key pressed), during the same selection. If you have a graphics tablet, you can “draw” the curved part of the selection even easier.
2. You are in the middle of making your selection using the polygonal lasso tool, or using the standard lasso tool using the Alt key tip mentioned above, and you don’t like the last few clicks you have made. You can delete the last anchor point you selected by pressing the Delete key on your keyboard, and if you continue to press Delete, more anchor points will be released.
3. You are in the middle of making your selection, and discover you don’t want to be selecting at all. Press the Escape key. It’s gone.
4. You are zoomed way in on your image and are in the middle of making your selection with either the standard or polygonal lasso tool. You don’t want to close your selection yet, but you can’t see the rest of what you want to select. You can do one of two things (hang in there with me here, this is a little hard to explain, and you will need to experiment):
 - a. Alt+Spacebar gives you the zoom out tool without closing selection (if in standard lasso, keep mouse click down).
 - b. Spacebar alone gives you the hand tool, so you can move the view of the image to where you can see what you need (if using standard lasso, keep mouse-click down).

This should all be enough to keep you busy for a while. Keep at it!

One last thing... if your image is still rejected due to the quality of your isolation, all you have to do is return to your saved PSD file and edit one of your already saved selections. This was where I actually found that an earlier saved selection, not the final, was actually easier to go back to and correct.

I hope this has all helped! I don't know about you, but I'm headed for a cup of espresso and a chunk of bitter-sweet chocolate!



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