Basic Steps for Compositing Images in Photoshop

1. Either properly scan or convert your RAW files so that each image appears in Photoshop at the proper resolution and dimensions. Also be sure that color modes and bit depth match for all files.

2. Chose the image that will make up the majority of the final composite and be sure you can see the image. For our purposes, we'll call this the "**background file**".

3. Open one of the files that contains an element to be dropped onto the background. We'll call this the "**new element file**".

4. Choose the Move tool, and select the "**new element file**". Be sure you can see both your files at the same time and then drag the entire image into the image area of the "**background file**". A new layer will appear in the Layers Palette in the "**background file**".

5. You can now close the "**new element file**" since you've already moved it's image to your "**background file**".

6. Select your new layer in the "**background file**", and use the selection tools (such as lasso) to select the object(s) you wish to keep on this layer. Use the Select>Refine Edge... command to enter that dialogue box. Tweak your selection to get the most accurate results, then click OK when you're ready to continue. You will still see your selected area.

7. With your now refined selection, click the small New Layer Mask button at the bottom of the layers palette to apply a layer mask with that shape.

8. Will notice the Layer mask icon appear next to your layer thumbnail. Now it is possible to edit the mask for that layer or the layer itself. Be aware that the layer's palette tells you if you are painting in the layer or in the mask by checking the following:

    a. Seeing your new mask:
       Your selected shape is converted to a mask where on this layer, white areas are visible and black are transparent.

    b. Painting in the mask - Click the mask icon:
       Just as above, Notice the outline on the mask icon. Edit masks by painting with black, white, and grayscale.

    c. Painting in the layer - Click the layer icon:
       Notice the outline on the layer icon. You can paint the layer in color without changing the mask.

9. Be sure that you have the mask icon selected, and using the paintbrush tool, with the right size brush and hardness setting to remove or show parts of your layer.

    a. Paint with black to hide parts of your layer.

    b. Paint with white to hide parts of your layer.

    c. Painting with gray can partially reveal or hide parts of your layer with a translucent effect.

10. You will see the instant change in the image area as you paint the mask. You'll also see a change in the mask icon in the layers palette.

11. Rename your layer and repeat these steps for each new element you wish to add to your composite.

Color Correcting Composites

Unlike photographs with a single "Background" layer, composited images will contain a number of layers that may need to be color corrected individually without affecting the rest of the image. If an adjustment layer is placed on top of several layers, all the layers will be adjusted unless you use the following technique to isolate each layer and it's corresponding adjustment layers.

1. In the Layer Palette:
   Click a layer (renamed YellowFish in this example) you'd like to apply an adjustment to.

2. At the bottom of the layer palette, click the "Create a New Group" icon [icon].
   (You'll see a new folder appears just above the layer).

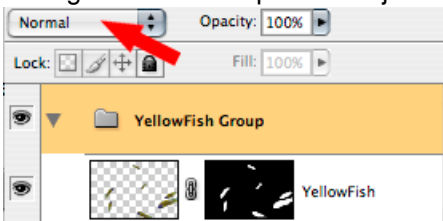

3. Rename the group with a descriptive name.

4. Drag the Layer into the group icon and you'll see it appears indented just below the group icon.
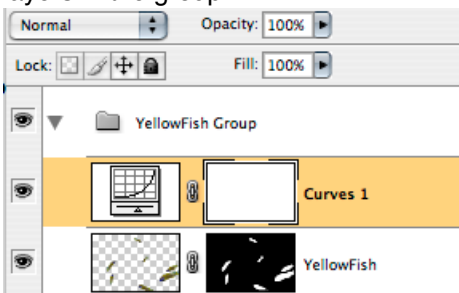   This means that the layer is now part of this Group.

5. Click on the Group icon and then change the blending mode from "Pass Through" to "Normal" at the top of the Layer Palette.

   Change to Normal to prevent adjustment layers from "passing through" to layers outside the group.

6. You can now add adjustment layers for Levels and Curves knowing that these will also be part of the group and only affect layers in the group.

7. Repeat these steps for each part of the composite you wish to color correct.

Helpful hints and shortcuts for Compositing

1. Double-click a layer's name to change it. This will help you keep things organized.

2. Change brush sizes quickly with these keyboard shortcuts:

   a. Pressing **[** (left bracket) decreases the brush size

   b. Pressing **]** (right bracket) increases the brush size

3. Change the default paint colors quickly with these keyboard shortcuts:

   c. Pressing **D** will set the foreground/background colors to black/white respectively.

   d. Pressing **X** will switch the foreground/background colors back and forth.

4. To draw straight lines with the Paintbrush tool:

   e. Click and release the cursor where you would like the line to start.

   f. Move the cursor to where you would like the line to end.

   g. Hold the **Shift key** and click on that point.
   (A straight line is drawn from the start to the end point)