AN INTRODUCTION TO LUMINOSITY MASKING

FOR LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHERS

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WHAT YOU ARE GOING TO LEARN IN THIS GUIDE

Hello there!

My name is Steve Arnold and congratulations on downloading my intro to luminosity masking.

If you haven't learned about luminosity masking before, or how it will help you improve your landscape images in Photoshop, then this guide is for you!

In the first part of this guide, I'll explain a little bit about what luminosity masking actually is and how it can benefit your photos when you use it.

And then in the second part I'll run you through an example that you can follow along with to create your very first luminosity mask – and more importantly, so that you can understand it and start to use it on your own images too!

At this point right at the start of a guide like this, the “normal” thing to do would be to tell you about myself and the 51,000+ other photographers who receive my regular email updates and have benefited from my Photoshop tutorials, videos and courses ;-)

But I figure you probably want to just get right down to the nitty gritty and see what this Luminosity Masking thing is all about and how it can help YOU...

So let's get started!

WHAT IS LUMINOSITY MASKING AND WHY SHOULD I USE IT?

Let's start out with a general overview before we get into the REALLY interesting technical stuff.

Luminosity masking is a layer masking technique that gives you extremely precise levels of control over the individual adjustments you make to an image.

If you're already familiar with layers and layer masks in Photoshop, then you may think of luminosity masking as the turbo-charged version of "regular" layer masking.

> *(If you're not yet up to speed with layers and masking, then I encourage you to check out my "introduction to layers and masking" by clicking here on this link... When the link opens, scroll about half way down the page and you can watch the "Chapter Zero" video for free)...*

Because every time you've ever used a layer mask to restrict an adjustment layer to affect only part of an image, or to blend two or more exposures together by hand to create a high dynamic range composite, or for ANY other purpose, there's a good chance you *could have* done it with greater accuracy by using luminosity masking techniques instead.

This additional accuracy comes from the "luminosity" part of the term "luminosity masking".

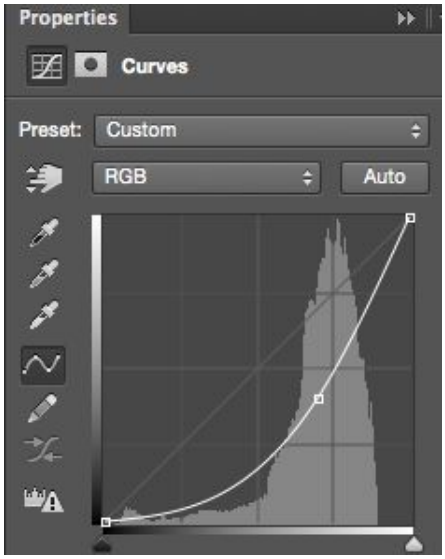
Luminosity refers to "brightness" and it is the key to the whole thing.

Because it allows you to create layer masks which are **based on the brightness** of the pixels in your images. Not just basic brush strokes...

Let's look at an example...

Let's say in this shot, we want to darken the sky a bit without darkening the already-dark rocks.

A good way to do this could be to add a curves adjustment layer like this to perform the darkening effect:



Then we could use a black brush in the layer mask to hide the effect from the areas that we don't want to darken (i.e. the rocks which are already dark)...

Here's what that could look like (look closely at the “difficult” part along the edges of the rocks):

The thing about doing it this way is that it's REALLY hard to avoid painting over the lines when using a normal soft brush in the layer mask.

Notice how there's a bright halo along the edge of the rocks...

Let's take a look at the layer mask itself to see why...

No wonder there are halos around the main rock in the middle, right?

How accurate can you *really* be using just a soft-edged round brush??

If you're looking at this and thinking "*I can create a more accurate layer mask than THAT, even with just a regular soft-edged brush*"...

Then you're probably right... Because the above is an example that I'm showing you to try to get the point across – I kinda went a little bit over the edges on purpose :)

But while it is possible to do this slightly more accurately by zooming right in and getting the brush tight up against the edges of that rock and brushing ever-so-carefully around it pixel by pixel... firstly, that could take HOURS to do well...

and secondly...

... no matter how accurate you *think* a regular brush might be inside of a layer mask, I challenge you to compare it to a luminosity mask for accuracy and precision...

Like this one...

In this screenshot we can see that the layer mask is darker in the dark rocks (therefore restricting the adjustment), and it is brighter in the bright sky and water (thus letting the curves adjustment "show through" the mask).

This is because the layer mask was created and **based on the brightness of the pixels** in the image... i.e. it's a "luminosity mask".

And when we look at the effect this adjustment has on the image when the luminosity

mask is used, we can see the sky has been nicely darkened and that there are no obvious brush strokes or marks around the edges of the rocks that stick out into the sky:

So to quickly summarise what's just happened here:

- A curves layer was added to darken the sky
- The darkening effect of the curves layer was “brushed out” of the dark rocks with a regular soft-edged brush in the layer mask
- This led to the dreaded “halo-effect” around the rocks because it's so difficult to be precise when using a regular brush like this.
- On the second attempt a different type of layer mask was used... One which was created directly from the brightness levels of each individual pixel.
- This “luminosity mask” allowed us to accurately mask the curves adjustment out of the shadows whilst letting it “show through” in the highlights.
- Therefore the sky and water was darkened effectively without negatively affecting the already-dark rocks... And all without creating any halos or dodgy brush marks in the image.

HOW TO CREATE YOUR FIRST LUMINOSITY MASK

OK, time to get down to business...

Let's look at HOW you can actually create your first luminosity mask for yourself...

> *You can run through these steps on your own shot, or you can download my RAW file by clicking here...*
>
> *If you want to use your own, pick a shot that's kinda similar for the purpose of this demo – i.e. a bright sky with a dark foreground.*

First step, open up the image in Photoshop and activate the Channels panel.

(Either click in the sidebar if it's there, or choose "Window > Channels" from the menu)

The Channels panel shows us 4 channels. There is a lot more to learn about channels, but that's a larger topic for another day.

For now, lets just run through the steps you need to follow to create your first luminosity mask...

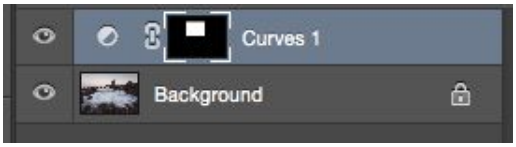
Actually, before we do that... Let me take a quick step back and give you a bit more background...

The “normal” way to create a selection in Photoshop is to draw a shape into the image with the Marquee tool. Everything inside that shape is part of the selection, regardless of brightness, colour, or anything else. If it's inside the marching ants, it's part of the selection...

Now, when you add any kind of adjustment layer (curves, saturation, levels etc) to an image and you have a selection active at the time, then that selection will be automatically loaded into the layer mask that is attached to that adjustment.

For example, if I create a “regular” selection around the rock using the rectangular marquee tool, the marching ants will look like this:

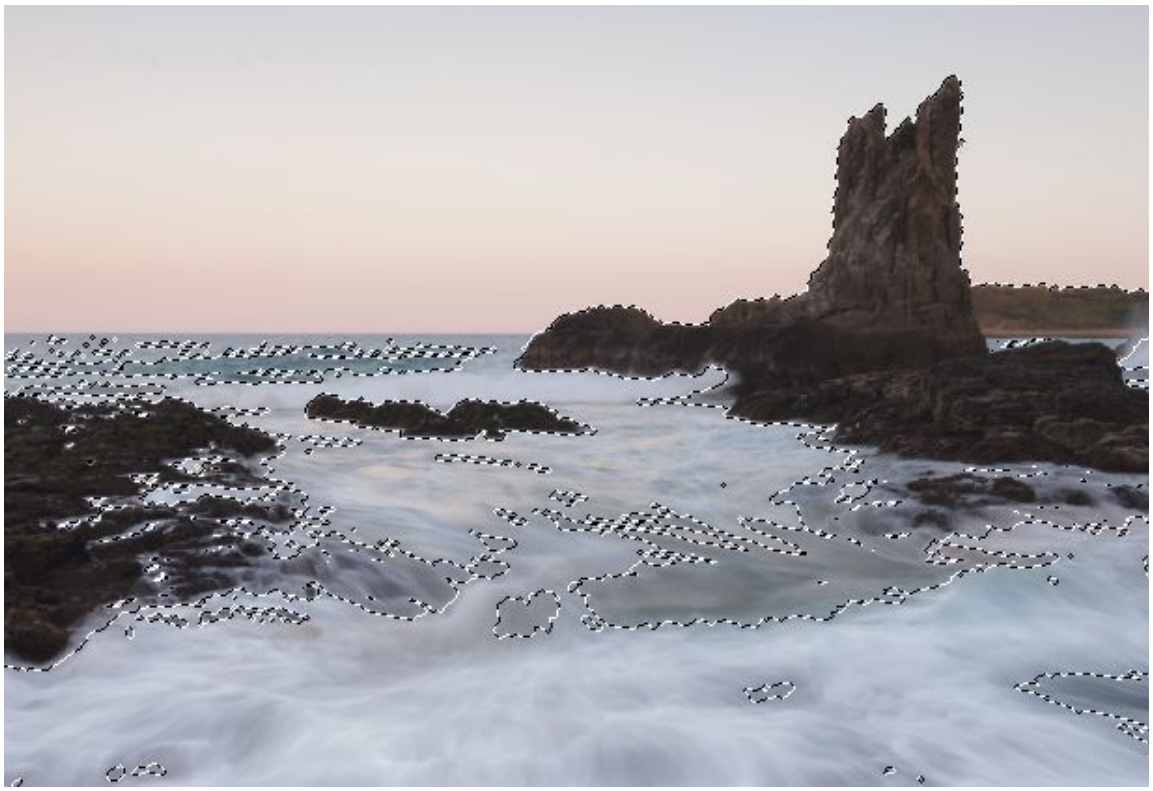
Then if I add a curves adjustment layer, it will automatically start out with a layer mask that looks like this:



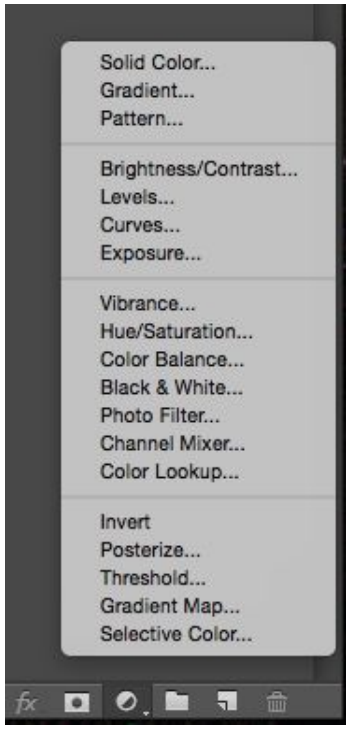
And if I use that adjustment to darken the image, the layer mask will restrict the effect to inside of that rectangle...

So knowing this, let's get started by creating a selection which is based on the brightness of the pixels in the image...

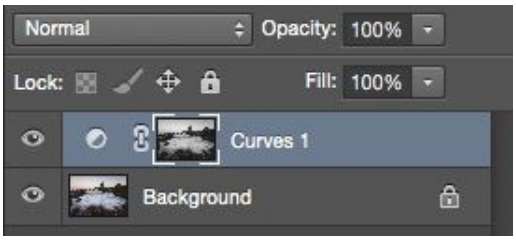
To do that, hold the command key (mac) or ctrl key (pc) and click once on the RGB thumbnail in the channels panel. This will load the brightness values of the RGB channel as a selection and you should see “marching ants” all over the image in the main window.



Next, go back to the Layers panel *(“Window > Layers” from the menu)* then add a curves adjustment layer...



You should then see your new curves adjustment layer has been added with a “ready made” layer mask attached:



The selection (which was based on the image brightness) has now been loaded directly into the curves' layer mask.

Because of this, any adjustments you make to the curve will be applied to the image according to what the layer mask will allow to “show through”.

Remember, white = reveal, black = conceal.

And the brightest parts of the image (sky/water) are the whitest parts of the layer mask...

So open up the curves adjustment properties panel (double-click the curves thumbnail in the layers panel), then drag the curve downwards to create a darkening effect.

Then see how the brightest parts of the image are being darkened more than the

darkest parts... i.e. the sky and water will be darkened more than the already-dark rocks... And with ZERO halos or dodgy brush marks! YAY!

Congratulations – you've just created your first luminosity mask!

"But wait!" I hear you say...

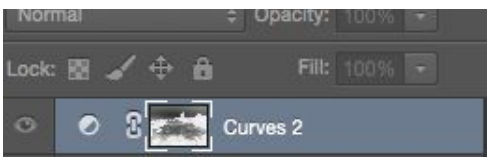
"That's great if I want to create a mask that allows me to adjust the brightest parts of my image... But what if ***I want to adjust only the darkest parts****?"*

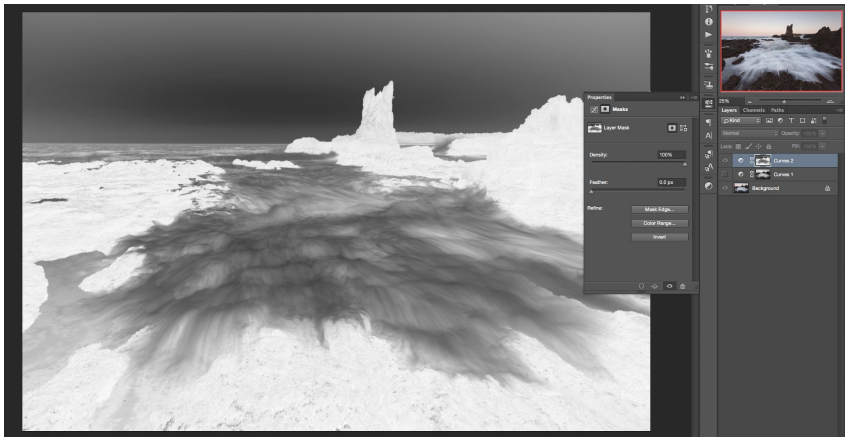
Well, that would just take one extra step.

If you want to create a luminosity mask that affects only the darkest parts instead of the brightest parts of a shot, then you can follow the exact same steps as above... Then invert the layer mask...

To do that, click once on the layer mask in the layers panel, then hold command (on mac) / ctrl (PC) together with the letter "i" on the keyboard to invert the layer mask *(or alternatively go to "image> adjustments > invert" in the menu)*

This will give you a curves adjustment and layer mask that looks like this:





And when you adjust the curve, it will affect the shadows more than the highlights, thanks to the inverted mask.

Which is great if you want to brighten the shadows without affecting the highlights:

This technique can be used in exactly the same way on any other type of adjustment layer, whether it's curves, levels, saturation, exposure and so on...

Because the essence of this particular technique is that you're using brightness levels of the image itself to create the layer mask and restrict where the adjustment is shown.

Want to saturate the highlights of an image without saturating the shadows?

Or increase the contrast in the shadows without increasing the contrast in the

highlights?

Then just follow the exact same steps as the example we've just worked through but pick the appropriate adjustment layer instead of the curves adjustment that we used.