Tricky Transparency, Part One–Complex Photo Mask Potential

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Tricky Transparency, Part One

Complex Photo Mask Potential

by Jen White

Train your eye to spot a potentially great complex photo mask. In Part One of my Tricky Transparency series, I'll show you how to pick out maximum potential for a complex photo mask for your next digital project.

Part One includes:

- Defining a Complex Photo Mask
- 4 Characteristics of a Potentially Good Complex Photo Mask
- How to "See" a Complex Photo Mask Without Color

For this tutorial you will need:

- A computer program capable of desaturating an image, like Photoshop Elements or Adobe Photoshop
- A small assortment of masks (**download the examples I'm using–23.5MB**)

Defining a Complex Photo Mask

The term "photo mask" is a very broad term. In the digital world, a photo mask anything you clip a photo to.

To learn more about clipping basics, check out this class: Qwiklearn Photoshop and Photoshop Elements Class.

Most generally, a **photo mask** is simply a shape like these that you can clip a photo to:

But in this tutorial series, I'll be talking about **complex photo masks** that look like this:

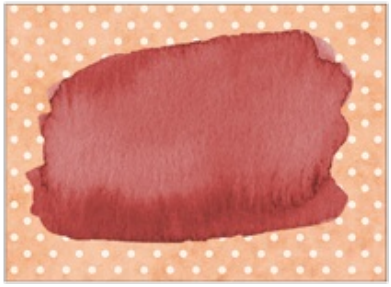
4 Characteristics of a Potentially Good Complex Photo Mask

Characteristic 1—White or Transparent Background

When looking for a potentially good complex photo mask on the web (more about where to look in Part Two of this series), or even when looking for one in your own stash, the very first thing you need to be aware of is the background.

The three images below have **bad potential**. Why? The background behind the shape (potential complex photo mask) **is not** white or transparent.

Note: The gray outline represents the image's boundaries.



- The first example has a GREAT shape in the middle of it, but the background is orange polkadot. Bad potential.
- The second example also has a great shape in it. It may or may not matter that there is a photo already clipped to the shape. What does matter is that the background behind the shape is lavender. That makes this example have bad potential.
- The third example might look promising, but the background behind the green shape is not actually white, it's a textured white paper. The texture of the white paper is going to complicate things. So, this is also an example with bad potential.

The three images below have **good potential**. Why? The background behind the shape **is** white or transparent.

Note: The gray outline represents the image's boundaries.


In all three images above, the shape (potential complex photo mask) is surrounded with white or transparent pixels. When you see this, you've found an image with great potential to be a complex photo mask.

TAKE QUIZ #1 — Which of these images (below–example1, example2, example3) has good potential and which has bad potential?

To take a closer look, you will find these example images in the download offered above.

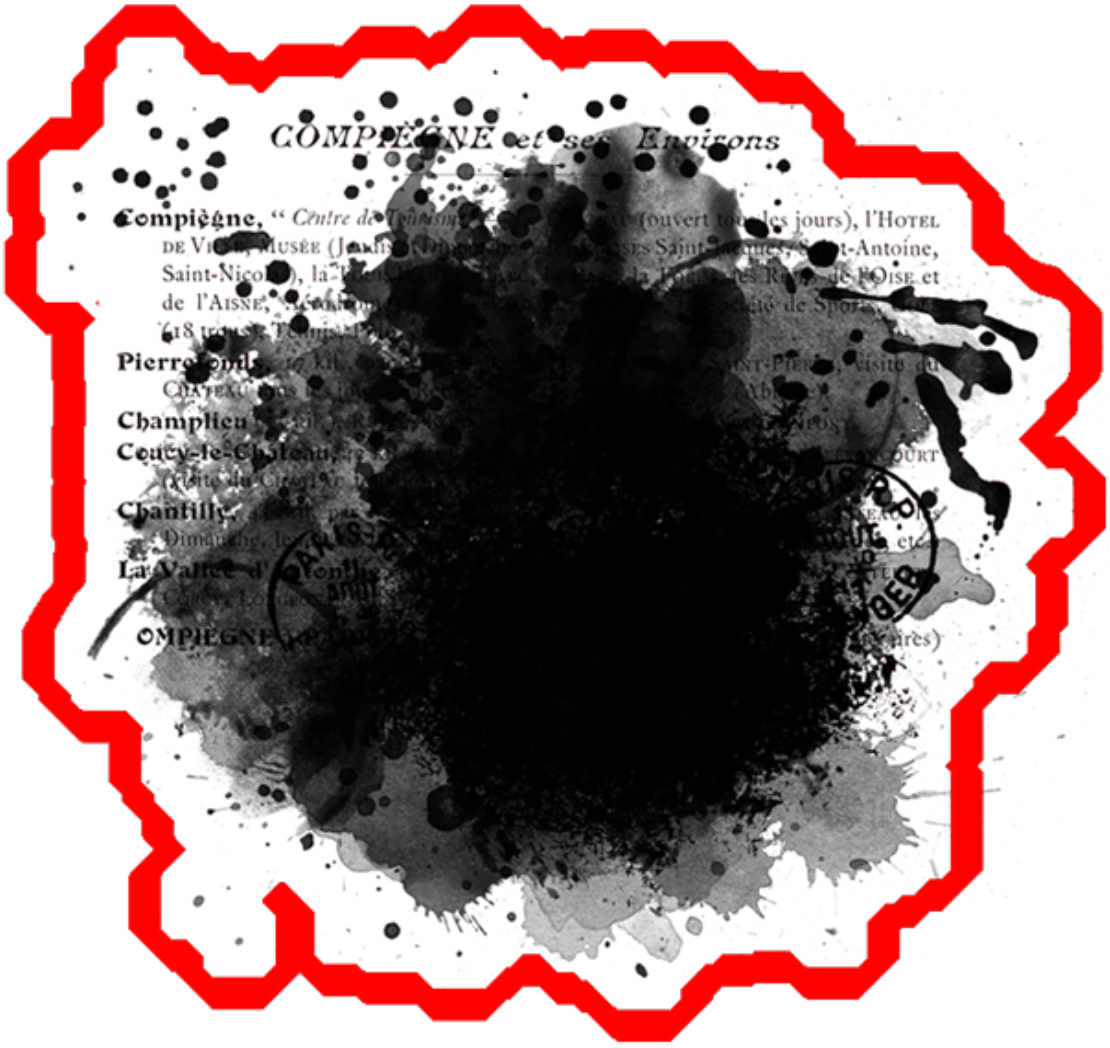
ANSWERS: You'll find the answer to the quizzes at the bottom of this tutorial.

Characteristic 2—Varied Edges

When I say "edges," I'm referring to the perimeter of the shape (potential complex photo mask).

In the image below, I drew a red line to indicate the basic edges of this shape. Notice how they appear very random or varied. There is no symmetry or straight lines.

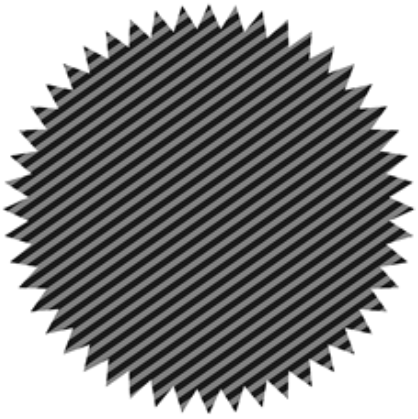
For an image or shape to have potential to be a good complex photo mask, it should have varied edges.

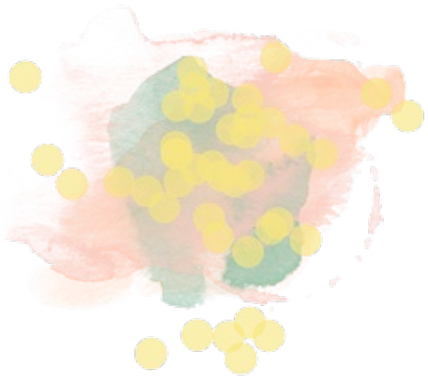


TAKE QUIZ #2 — According to varied edges, which of these images (below–example4, example5, example6) has good potential and which has bad potential?

To take a closer look, you will find these example images in the download offered above.

ANSWERS: You'll find the answer to this quiz at the bottom of this tutorial.



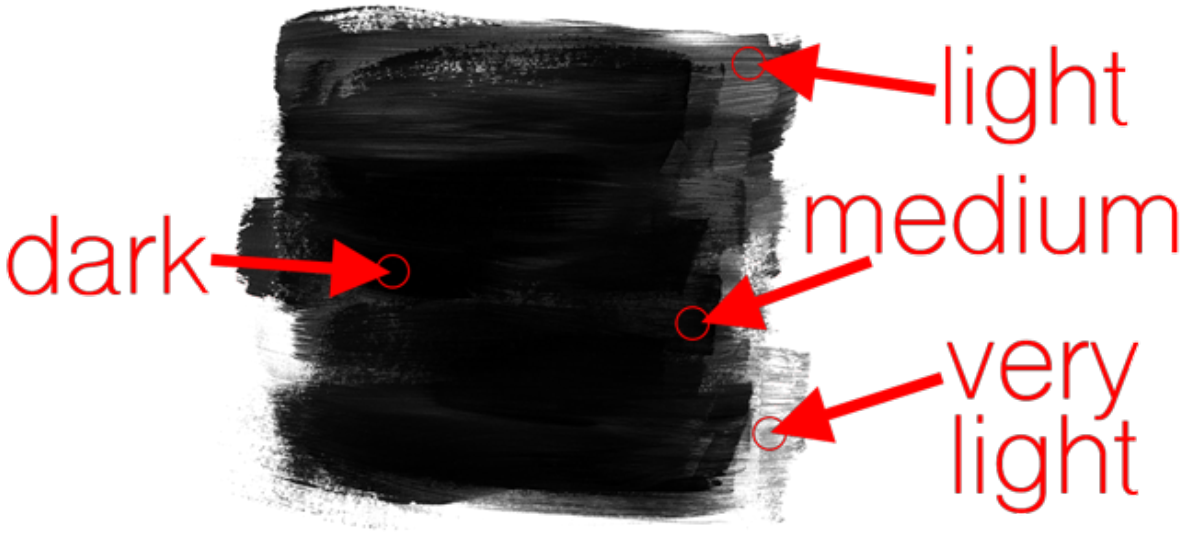


Characteristic 3—Varied Saturation

This characteristic is all about how dark or light the pixels are within the complex photo mask. It doesn't matter what color the pixels are (here they are shades of gray), it only matters how dark the color is.

- Dark pixels will be less transparent (less see-through) in a complex photo mask.
- Light pixels will be more transparent (more see-through)

The more range of dark pixels to light pixels (remember, color doesn't matter) you have in a complex photo mask, the better it will look when a photo is clipped to it.



How to "See" a Complex Photo Mask Without Color

THE SEEING TEST

To get a better idea of the saturation levels (dark to light) in a potential photo mask, put it to the test. This test is especially helpful for multicolored masks.

- Open a potential photo mask (File > Open).
- In the Layers panel, click on the Create New Fill or Adjustment Layer icon and choose Hue/Saturation.
- In the Hue/Saturation panel, click and drag the Saturation slider all the way to the left.

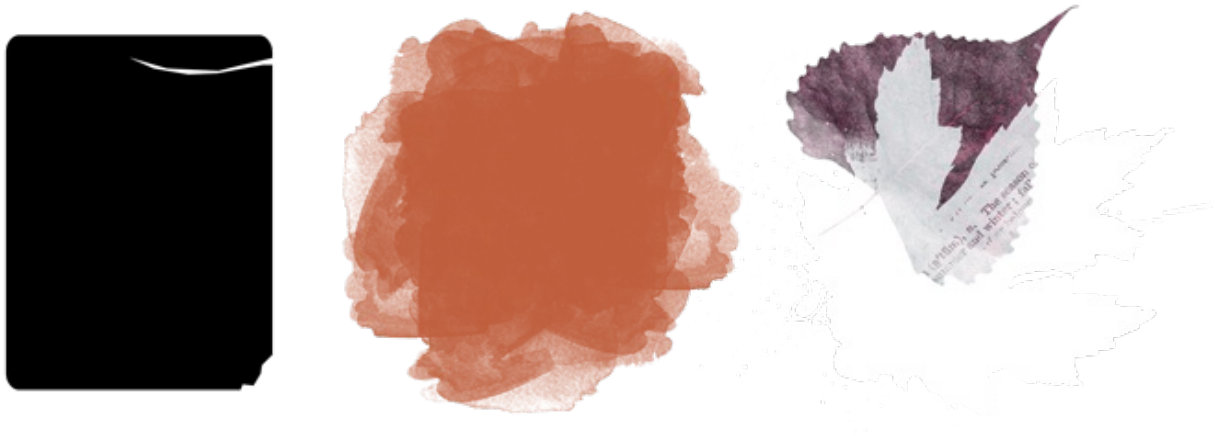
Does the image have a good variety of saturation? Does it contain dark grays, medium grays, and light grays? If so, then it has varied saturation.

> When finished, close the image without saving.

TAKE QUIZ #3 — According to varied saturation, which of these images (below–example7, example8, example9) has good potential and which has bad potential? Try putting example9 to the Seeing Test above to get a better idea of what it looks like.

To take a closer look, you will find these example images in the download offered above.

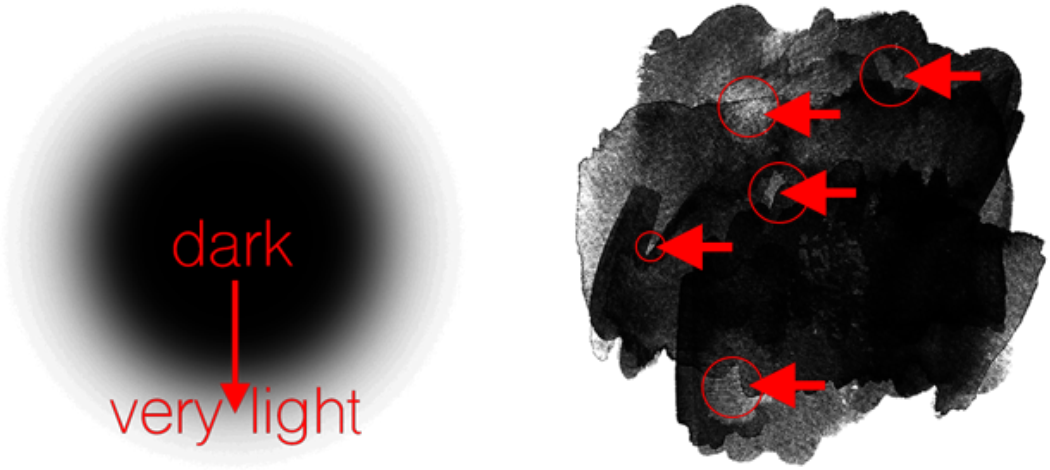
ANSWERS: You'll find the answer to this quiz at the bottom of this tutorial.



Characteristic 4—Varied Insides

This characteristic is not nearly as important as the first three, but it can make a big difference.

- In the example on the left (below), the pixels go from dark to light symmetrically. The result is very dull.
- In the example on the right, there are areas of light pixels mixed in with areas of dark pixels.



Get Ready for Part Two

With these four characteristics in mind, take a travel through your stash and see what you can come up with.

- Make a folder on your desktop called "Complex Photo Masks."
- Copy and paste any potentially good masks into that folder.

In Part Two of this series we'll explore more places find potentially good complex photo masks. Then in Part Three, we'll take a look at the key to a good complex photo mask—transparency.

All that and much more is coming up. See you then.

QUIZ ONE Results

Example1: It has **good** potential The pixels around the shape (gold paint) are transparent, although they may look white to you in this blog post.

Example2: It has **bad** potential. The pixels around the shape (the blue gray paint) are cream colored. You could make this into a complex photo mask, but the process would be very complicated.

Example3: It has **good** potential. The pixels around the shape (rainbow watercolor) are white. It doesn't matter that parts of the shape go off the sides of the image. This would make a great mask for a greeting card.

QUIZ TWO Results

Example4: It has **bad** potential. The symmetry in the shape makes it a bad (dull looking) complex photo mask.

Example5: It has **good** potential. The edges are extremely varied.

Example6: It has **good** potential. The edges are extremely varied.

QUIZ THREE Results

Example7: It has **bad** potential. It only has one level of saturation.

Example8: It has **good** potential. There are multiple levels of saturation, dark through light.

Example9: It has **good** potential. There are multiple levels of saturation. A lot of the mask is white, but we'll see in Part Two why that doesn't matter.
