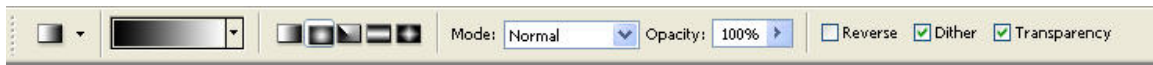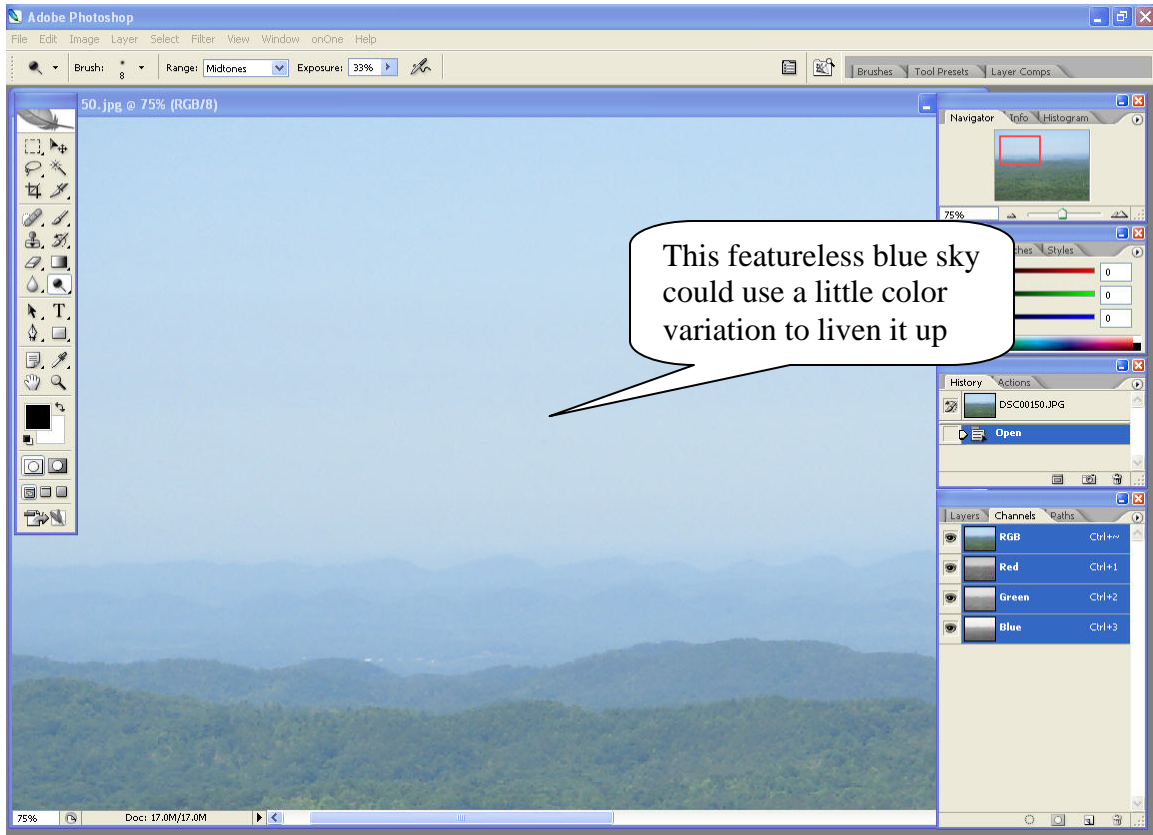# Quick Masks

Photoshop quick masks are probably one of the most underused and underappreciated aspects of this software. Masks, just to clarify, allow a layer (or part of a layer) to be isolated so effects applied to an image are not applied to the masked part, which is held static. If you take a poll of Photoshop users, most know how to create and use custom-defined masks. But, surprisingly, few know about "quick masks", one of Photoshop's simplest tools.

Quick masks are triggered using the "Q" key, which will display a set of options across the top of the Photoshop window:


Quick masks are applied to the entire image, and use predefined shapes chosen from the drop-down gradient menu. These effects can be altered using the other control on the option strip, but as a general rule quick masks are entire-image tools.

The first thing to do with quick masks is see how they can be used for simple but effective shading effects. This is easiest to demonstrate on a simple image where we can add some color variation to a uniform sky. In the image below, there's no variation in the sky to add appeal or draw the eye, and the uniform colors of the upper two thirds of the shot make this a "snapshot" image:

When the photo file is open, create a quick mask by pressing the "Q" button. You won't see anything on the screen, but the history will show "Enter quick mask".

Now, select the gradient tool. The top of the Photoshop window shows you the options you have for mode and other effects, as well as a drop-down tool for the way the gradient is applied:
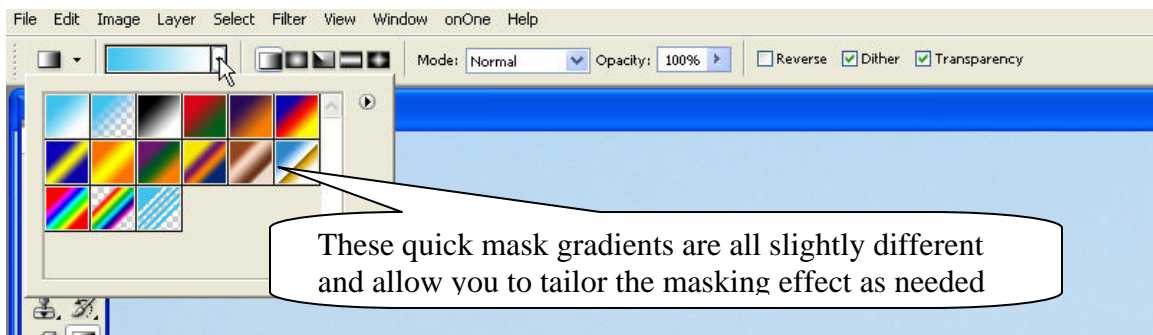

In this case, we'll use the third gradient, which is a foreground to background gradient. To apply a gradient to the image, use the mouse and click in the top left corner, then drag to the bottom right corner. This will superimpose a little pinkish gradient color on the image from top left fading to bottom right (unless you chose a different mask type):
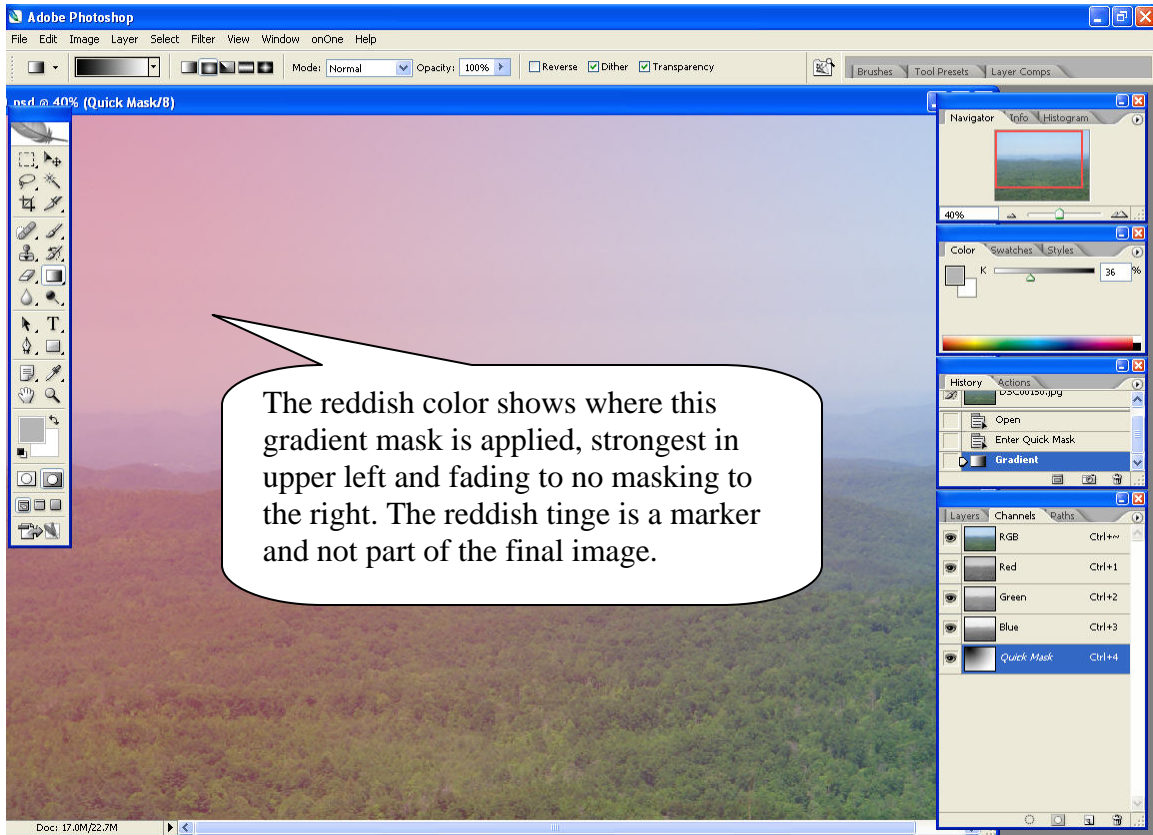
Don't worry about the actual reddish tinge at this point because we're creating a mask, not the finished image! The reddish tone shows where the mask will be applied, so when changes are made to the underlying image, the areas with reddish tinges are less affected than those which do not have the reddish tinge. Note that this is a gradient, fading from left to right, so the most effect on the image will be on the right (where there is no mask).

Now, exit quick mask mode by hitting "Q". The reddish tinge disappears. A dashed line shows roughly where the edge of the mask is located (this depends on the gradient and mask type, of course, and is an approximation based on the gradient density):
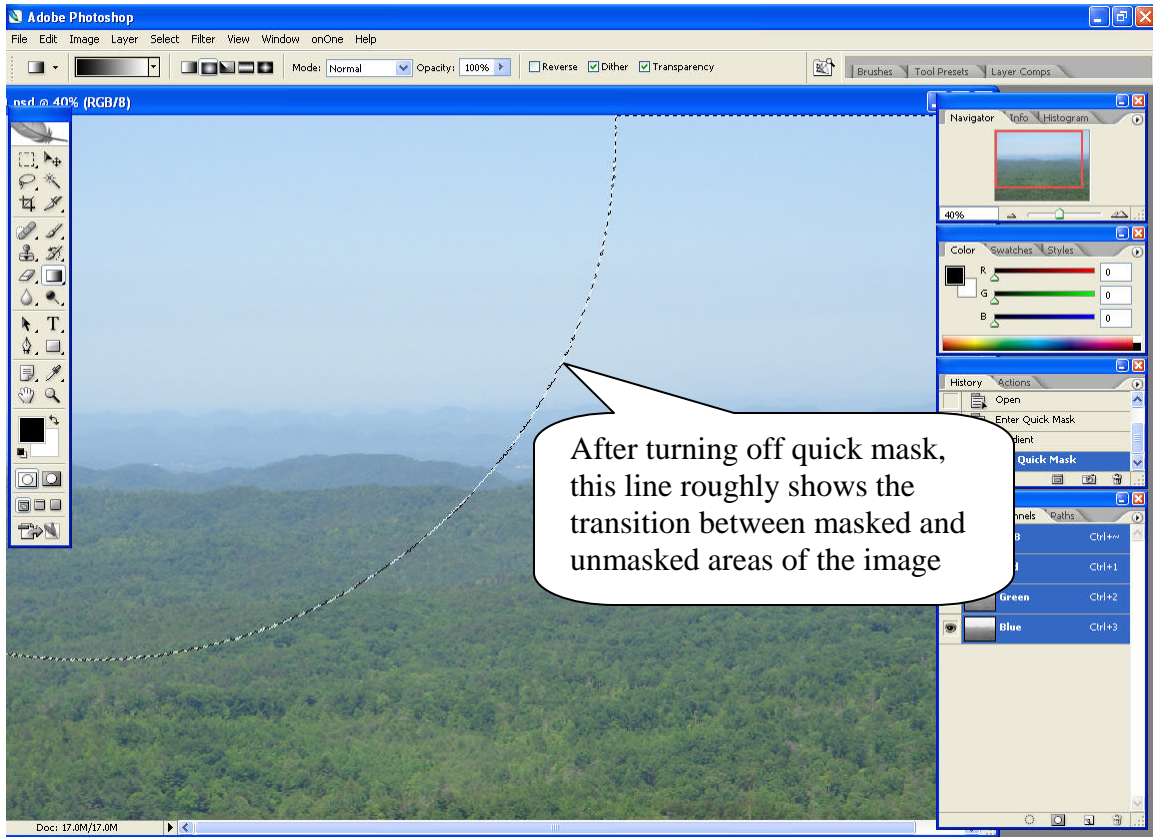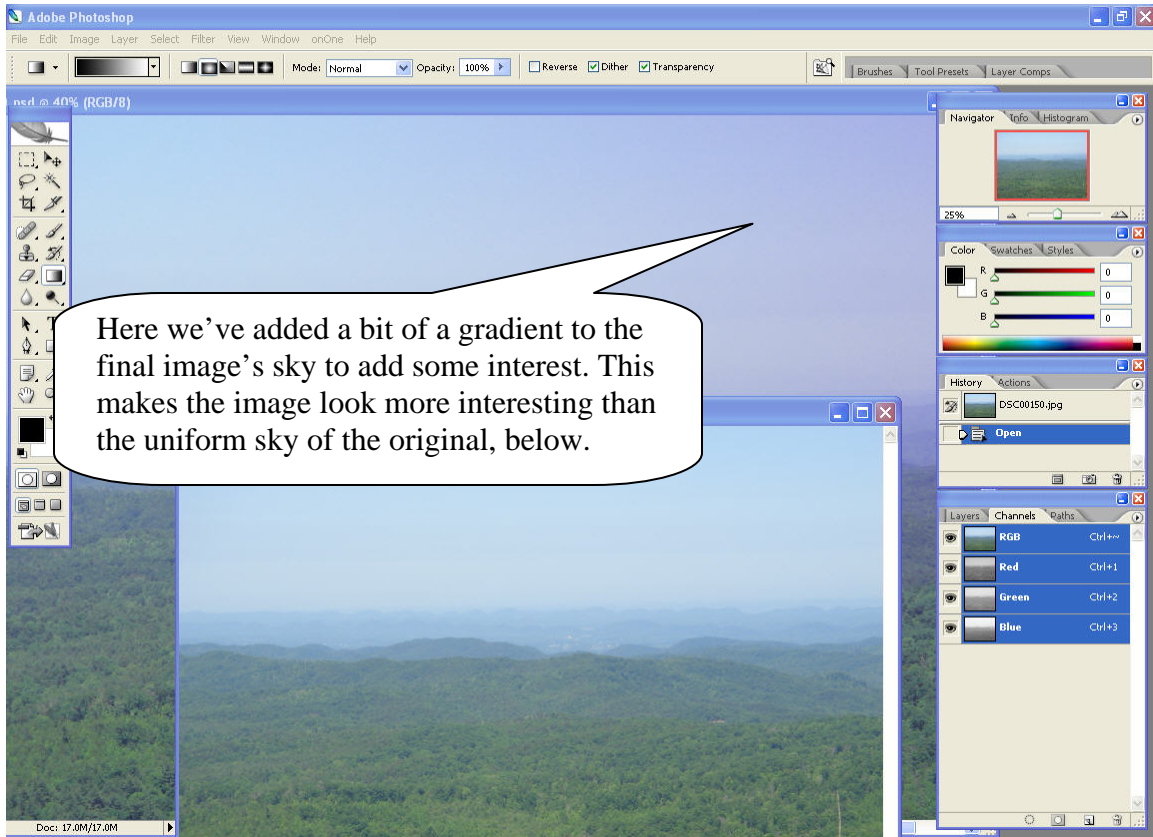
To adjust the base image sky color, use the Image -> Adjustments -> Hue and Saturation option to apply some variation to the unmasked areas:
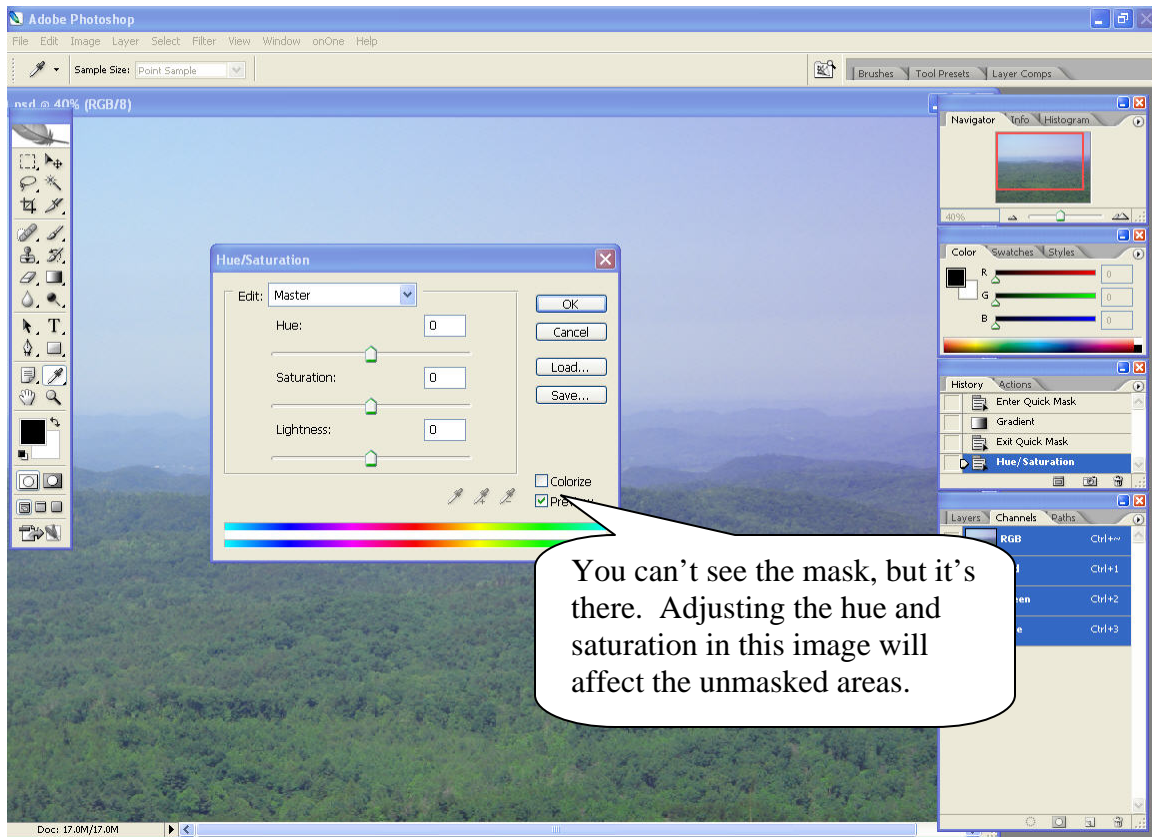
When you are happy with the effect, which you see in real-time on the image, close the Hue/Saturation window. Then, deselect the image ("Ctrl-D"on Windows, "Command-D" on Macs). The changes you've made will now show on the screen.

In the example below, we've added a subtle coloring effect to the sky, applied more to the right than the left (where the quick mask masked the image). The same technique can be used to add drama to sky, add color intensities that simply were not there, or add a highlight as needed. You can see the effect even with this simple adjustment by comparing the original image (foreground window) with the new image sky in the background:

Here we've added a bit of a gradient to the final image's sky to add some interest. This makes the image look more interesting than the uniform sky of the original, below.

And there you have it…a simple way to use quick masks. While you can't use quick masks the way you would standard masks for working with layers, quick masks can add a bit of interest and pizzazz to any shot with a relatively featureless expanse such as sky, water, leaves, and so on.