

Photoshop Retouching & Compositing — Workbook

This workbook accompanies the Photoshop Retouching & Compositing course. Use it to practise each technique on your own images, document your settings and decisions, and build the repeatable professional workflow that separates one-off experiments from consistent results. Complete each section after finishing the corresponding course module.

Non-Destructive Foundations & Raw Processing

Apply correct file structure and raw processing habits before any retouching begins.

Exercise: Build Your First Non-Destructive Stack

Open any portrait or product photo as a Smart Object in Photoshop. Build the seven-layer non-destructive stack from the lesson (Background > Healing > FS High > FS Low > D&B > Colour > Global Grade). Add a placeholder Curves adjustment layer at each step — even if it is set to no change. Save as .PSD.

- What does your layer stack look like at this stage? List each layer name and its blend mode.

- What would happen to your composite if you had applied Healing directly to the Background layer instead of a stamp copy?

- At what point in the stack would you place a creative vignette, and why there rather than somewhere else?

Worksheet: Raw Processing Decisions Log

Process a raw file in Camera Raw as a Smart Object. Record the exact setting values you applied so you can reproduce this starting point on future similar shots.

File name

Camera model + lens

Shooting conditions (daylight / studio / mixed)

White Balance method used (as-shot / kelvin / grey card)

Kelvin value set

Exposure adjustment (EV)

Highlights recovery value

Shadows lift value

Luminance Noise Reduction value

Lens Profile applied (Y/N)

Chromatic Aberration corrected (Y/N)

Notes — what problem required the most adjustment

Checklist: Raw Processing Quality Gate

- Histogram shows no pure-black or pure-white clipping in any RGB channel
- Skin tone reads 180–230 on the Red channel at 100% zoom
- Shadow areas show no visible colour noise at 100% zoom
- Lens distortion corrected using embedded or manual profile
- Chromatic aberration removed (check at high-contrast edges)
- Camera Raw opened as Smart Filter (not flattened into pixels)
- File saved as .PSD, not .JPG or flattened .TIFF

Skin Retouching: Healing, Cloning & Frequency Separation

Practise blemish removal, frequency separation construction, and Dodge & Burn sculpting on a portrait image.

Exercise: Frequency Separation Build and Retouch

Choose a portrait with visible skin texture. Build the frequency separation stack manually (do not use an action). Retouch the low-frequency layer with a large soft Healing Brush to even skin tone, then use the high-frequency layer and Clone Stamp to relocate skin texture where needed. Toggle your FS layers off to compare before/after.

- What Gaussian Blur radius did you use for the low-frequency layer, and how did you determine this was correct for your file resolution?
- Describe one area where retouching the low-frequency layer alone was not enough and you had to also work on the high-frequency layer. What did you do?
- How did your result differ from simply blurring the skin using a surface blur filter? What is preserved in FS that is lost in a blur approach?

Worksheet: Frequency Separation Setup Record

Record the exact technical settings used for each frequency separation setup so you can reproduce the correct configuration for different file sizes.

Image file name

File dimensions (px width x height)

File resolution (dpi)

Camera / capture source

Gaussian Blur radius applied to Low Freq layer (px)

Apply Image settings: Layer used / Blending mode / Scale / Offset

High Freq blend mode set to

Did the composite match the original exactly after setup? (Y/N)

If not — what differed and how was it corrected

Time spent retouching Low Freq layer (minutes)

Time spent retouching High Freq layer (minutes)

Checklist: Skin Retouch Quality Checklist

- All blemishes removed without visible smearing or pattern repetition
- Skin pore texture preserved — test by zooming to 200%
- No colour patches or tonal mismatches visible at 100% zoom
- Healing Brush never sampled across a lighting zone boundary
- Dodge & Burn layer uses 50% grey overlay (not direct Dodge/Burn tools on pixels)
- Highlights and shadow sculpting look three-dimensional when layer is toggled on/off
- Overall skin tone looks natural and consistent — no over-retouched plastic appearance

Exercise: Dodge & Burn Sculpting Practice

On a portrait, create a 50% grey Overlay layer. Using only a soft white brush (Dodge) and soft black brush (Burn) at 8–12% opacity, sculpt the face for 20 minutes without looking at a before/after. Then toggle the layer off. Describe what you see.

- Which areas did you lighten, and why? Which did you darken?

- Where did you over-do the effect, and how did you correct it?

- At what layer Fill opacity does the effect look most natural on your image?

Precise Selection & Masking

Build and refine accurate masks for hair, hard-edged subjects, and sky-to-land transitions.

Exercise: Hair Mask Extraction Comparison

Take a portrait shot against a background that is NOT a clean studio seamless (ideally outdoor or textured background). Extract the subject using three different methods: (1) Select Subject alone, (2) Select & Mask with Refine Edge Brush, (3) manual mask painting on the output of method 2. Place each result on a neutral grey background and compare at 200% zoom.

- Which method produced the cleanest edge at the hairline? What specifically was better about it?

- Did Decontaminate Colors improve or worsen the result at the hair boundary? What colour fringing was visible before applying it?

- What is one area of the mask that no automated tool got right, and how did you fix it manually?

Worksheet: Masking Method Selection Guide

For each of the following subject types, record which masking method you used, how long it took, and your quality assessment. Use this as a personal reference for choosing the right tool on future projects.

Subject type

Method used (Select Subject / Select & Mask / Pen Tool / Luminosity / Channel / Manual paint)

Background type (clean studio / outdoor / complex)

Time taken (minutes)

Edge quality rating (1–5)

Issues encountered

How issues were resolved

Would use same method again? (Y/N / Partially)

Checklist: Mask Quality Inspection Checklist

- Mask inspected at 200% zoom against grey, white, and black backgrounds
- No colour fringing visible at hair or fur edges
- No missing strands or hard-cut edges in fine hair areas
- Hard edges (product, geometric shapes) are pixel-sharp with no grey halo
- Semi-transparent areas (veil, glass, thin fabric) retain correct opacity
- Shadow cast by subject preserved or rebuilt on a separate layer
- Mask saved as a named channel for future retrieval

Multi-Layer Compositing & Final Delivery

Plan, build, and deliver a complete composite image with matched light and a production-ready export.

Exercise: Composite Light Analysis

Choose two images you plan to composite together. Before opening Photoshop, analyse both images on paper (or a notes app) using the four light properties: direction, quality, colour temperature, and intensity ratio. Document your analysis in the worksheet below, then build the composite with targeted corrections addressing each mismatch you found.

- What was the single largest light property mismatch between the two images, and what correction technique did you use to resolve it?

- How did you add a shadow to ground the pasted subject? What blend mode, colour, and opacity settings did you use?

- After applying the global colour grade, describe what changed visually — and whether the two elements now read as part of the same scene.

Worksheet: Composite Pre-Production Light Analysis

Complete this worksheet for EVERY composite project before opening Photoshop. It prevents the most common compositing mistakes.

Project name / client

Background image file name

Subject / element image file name

Background: key light direction (angle in degrees from camera)

Subject: key light direction (angle in degrees from camera)

Direction mismatch — correction needed?

Background: light quality (hard / soft / diffuse)

Subject: light quality (hard / soft / diffuse)

Quality mismatch — correction method

Background: approximate colour temperature (K)

Subject: approximate colour temperature (K)

Temperature correction applied (Curves channel adjustments)

Background: key-to-fill ratio estimate

Subject: key-to-fill ratio estimate

Ratio correction method

Shadow construction: layer blend mode / colour / blur radius / opacity

Global grade applied (describe)

Checklist: Final Delivery Checklist

- [] Output sharpening applied after final resize — not before
- [] Correct colour space assigned: sRGB for web, CMYK + ICC profile for print
- [] File exported at correct resolution: 300 dpi for print, 72 dpi for screen
- [] Copyright and creator metadata embedded in File Info
- [] File named using consistent convention with date stamp and version number
- [] Client archive master saved as layered PSD/TIFF in 16-bit with original colour space
- [] Soft-proof viewed and gamut-warning checked before print delivery
- [] Exported file opened in a fresh Photoshop window to confirm it looks correct

Your Action Plan

1. Set your monitor calibration target to D65 / 6500K, gamma 2.2, 120 cd/m2 and calibrate before starting any paid retouching work
2. Create a Photoshop Action that builds the full non-destructive seven-layer stack automatically — run it as the first step on every new image
3. Build a personal Frequency Separation Radius Reference table: process one image at each common resolution (6 MP, 12 MP, 24 MP, 45 MP) and record the correct Gaussian Blur radius
4. Open one portrait and practice Dodge & Burn for 20 minutes using only 8% opacity — compare before/after and assess whether you held back enough
5. Extract the same hair subject using three methods (Select Subject, Select & Mask, Pen Tool) and compare results at 200% zoom to build intuition for when each method is appropriate
6. Composite two images from completely different shoots and diagnose the light mismatches using the four-property analysis before applying any correction
7. Configure three Photoshop export presets: Print (CMYK TIFF 300 dpi FOGRA39), Web (sRGB JPEG 80% 72 dpi), and Archive Master (ProPhoto RGB 16-bit PSD all layers)
8. Complete the Composite Pre-Production Light Analysis worksheet for your next three composite projects before touching Photoshop
9. Review your last five retouched images at 200% zoom and identify one recurring flaw — choose one technique from this course to specifically address it
10. Deliver a complete project (retouch + composite) using every checklist in this workbook as your quality gate before sending to a client or printing

