STRETCHLEARN · WORKBOOK

Photo Compositing & Digital Manipulation — Workbook

This workbook turns the course into reps. You will plan composites, audit your own work against the four tells, and keep a reusable source library so every future project starts faster. Work through one section per module, then run the action plan to ship a finished concept image.

The Compositing Mindset and a Non-Destructive Setup

Lock in a reversible document and learn to screen source images before any cutting begins.

Exercise: Spot the Four Tells in the Wild

Find three obviously composited images online (movie posters and surreal stock art are easy targets) and one you think is convincing. For each, write down which of the four tells — light direction, color temperature, edge quality, missing contact shadow — gives it away or holds it together.

• Which single tell most often exposes a fake composite in your examples?

• On the convincing one, how did the artist handle the contact shadow?

• Pick one failed image: what is the one fix you would make first, and why?

Worksheet: Source Image Match Sheet

Before pairing two plates, fill this out for the background and the element you want to add. If two rows clash badly (for example opposite light direction), reject the pairing and find a better source.

Background plate: filename and source site

Element plate: filename and source site

Camera height / horizon (eye-level, high, low)

Approximate focal length or look (wide / normal / telephoto)

Key-light direction (left / right / front / back)

Light quality (hard sun / soft overcast)

Resolution and visible noise level

Verdict (compatible / fixable / reject)

Checklist: Non-Destructive Document Setup

[ ] Set document to 16 Bits/Channel (Image then Mode)
[ ] Background plate placed on the bottom layer
[ ] Each added element converted to a Smart Object before scaling
[ ] Every element sits in its own named group with a mask
[ ] All layers and groups renamed (no Layer 1, Layer 2)
[ ] Adjustment layers clipped to the element they affect

Selections and Masking: Cutting Things Out Cleanly

Practice matching the selection tool to the edge and refine masks until no halo survives.

Exercise: Three Edges, Three Tools

Extract three subjects, each demanding a different method: a person with loose hair (Select and Mask), a product or mug with hard edges (Pen Tool), and a bare tree or glass against a bright background (channel masking). Output each as a layer with a mask, never a deleted background.

• Where did Decontaminate Colors visibly remove a fringe on the hair extraction?

• How did the pen-path edge compare to an AI selection on the hard-edged object?

• Which color channel gave the cleanest separation for the tree or glass?

Worksheet: Mask Refinement Log

After each extraction, record the settings that worked so you can repeat them. Leave the quality score blank until you zoom to 100 percent and judge the edge yourself.

Subject and edge type (hair / hard / translucent)

Tool or workspace used

Shift Edge value

Feather / Smooth values

Decontaminate Colors (on / off)

Output setting used

Edge quality score at 100 percent (you fill: 1-5)

Checklist: Clean Extraction Standards

[ ] Selection converted to an editable layer mask, not erased
[ ] No leftover background fringe visible on On Black view
[ ] Hair checked with Decontaminate Colors enabled
[ ] Hard edges traced with the Pen Tool, not Quick Selection
[ ] Translucent areas (glass, smoke) keep partial transparency
[ ] Mask refined at 100 percent zoom, not fit-to-screen

Sky Replacement and Environment Blending

Replace a sky honestly and use haze, light wrap, and contact shadows to seat elements in space.

Exercise: Honest Sky Swap

Take one of your own flat-sky photos and replace the sky two ways: once with Edit then Sky Replacement, and once fully by hand using Color Range to mask the sky and a new sky layer underneath. Compare the horizon and the light cast on the foreground.

• Did the new sky match the original sun direction, or did you have to flip it?

• Where did the automatic horizon mask fail (branches, fences, wires)?

• What Temperature and Lighting Adjustment made the foreground feel lit by the new sky?

Worksheet: Depth and Placement Planner

For a composite with at least three depth layers, plan the haze and placement before painting. The more distant the element, the more haze. Leave any opacity you have not tested yet blank.

Element name

Distance band (far / mid / near)

Haze layer opacity to apply (you fill in)

Sits on horizon line (yes / no)

Scaled against which known object

Contact shadow added (yes / no)

Cast shadow angle and softness

Checklist: Believable Blending Pass

[ ] New sky obeys the original photo's light direction
[ ] Horizon mask refined by hand over tricky edges
[ ] Atmospheric haze applied more heavily to farther elements
[ ] Light wrap added on subject edges against bright backgrounds
[ ] Standing figures have eyes near the horizon line
[ ] Every grounded element has a tight contact shadow under it

Color, Light, and the Surreal Concept Image

Unify color and light across all plates, then take an original concept from sketch to export.

Exercise: Concept to Shot List

Write a one-sentence surreal concept and sketch a thumbnail with a light-direction arrow. Turn the sketch into a complete shot list naming every plate you need, then note where each plate will come from.

• What is your one-line concept, and where does the key light come from?

• List every plate required: background, hero subject, secondary elements, sky.

• For each plate, is the source already matched to your light arrow?

Worksheet: Final Believability Audit

At 100 percent zoom on your finished composite, score each tell and note the fix. Leave the overall score blank until every row is filled, then judge readiness yourself.

Light direction consistent across all elements (pass / fix)

Color temperature unified by a global grade (pass / fix)

Edges free of halos and hardness mismatch (pass / fix)

Contact shadows anchor every grounded element (pass / fix)

Single grain layer applied over the whole image (yes / no)

Sharpening applied last, after resizing (yes / no)

Overall readiness score (you fill: 1-5)

Checklist: Color, Light, and Export Finish

[ ] Each element matched to the scene with clipped Curves or Color Balance
[ ] One global grade (Soft Light color fill, ~10-15 percent) over everything
[ ] Dodge and burn on a 50 percent gray Soft Light layer reinforces the key light
[ ] Subtle vignette pulls the eye to the hero subject
[ ] Layered master saved as PSD or 16-bit TIFF
[ ] Web copy resized to a fixed long edge and sharpened as the final step

Your Action Plan

1. Set up a 16-bit, non-destructive document with named groups and masks for every element.
2. Screen your source plates with the Source Image Match Sheet and reject hard mismatches.
3. Extract each subject with the right tool: Select and Mask for hair, Pen for hard edges, channels for translucency.
4. Refine every mask at 100 percent zoom and kill halos with Decontaminate Colors and a slightly negative Shift Edge.
5. Replace or place the sky so it obeys the original light direction, refining the horizon by hand.
6. Stack depth back to front, adding atmospheric haze to distant elements and light wrap to subject edges.

7. Anchor every grounded element with a contact shadow and a correctly angled cast shadow.
8. Match color per element, then bind everything with one global grade and a dodge-and-burn light pass.
9. Stamp the composite and apply a single unifying grain layer across all plates.
10. Run the four-tell audit, save a layered master, then export a resized, sharpened-last web copy.