

Method 3: Using A Layer Mask

The third way we'll look at for blending two images in Photoshop, and by far the most popular way, is by using a **layer mask**. Unlike the layer opacity option or the blend modes which blend entire images as a whole, layer masks let us control exactly where the two images blend together. There's lots that we can do with layer masks, more than we could cover in a single tutorial. So here, we'll just learn the basics.

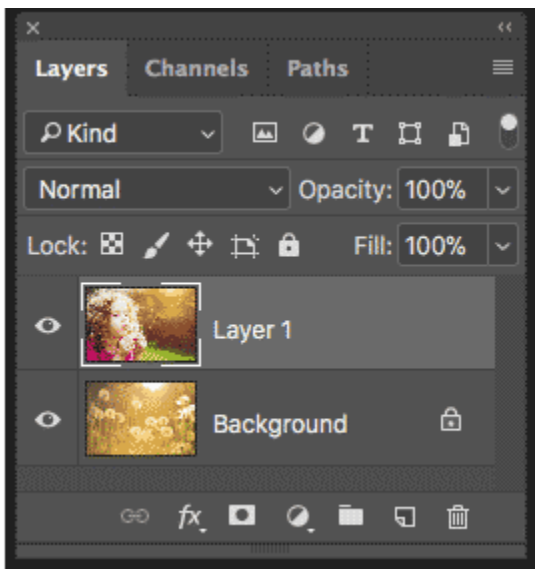
Here's the first image I'll be using:



And here's the second image:



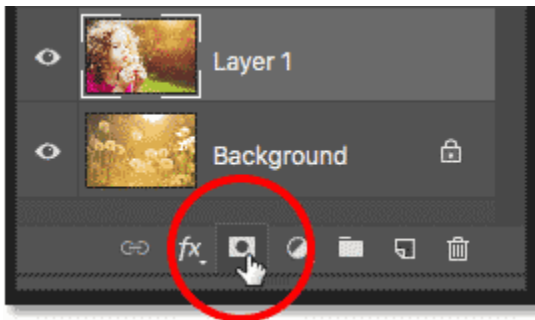
Again looking in the Layers panel, we see each photo on a separate layer. The dandelion photo is on the Background layer and the girl is on "Layer 1" above it:



Each photo is on a separate layer.

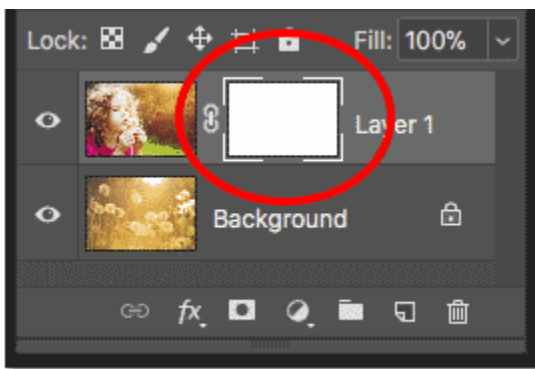
Adding a layer mask

To add a layer mask, first make sure the top layer is selected. Then, click the **Add Layer Mask** icon at the bottom of the Layers panel:



Clicking the Add Layer Mask icon.

A **layer mask thumbnail** appears next to the layer's preview thumbnail:



The new layer mask thumbnail.

How a layer mask works

Layer masks control the transparency of a layer, just like we saw with the Opacity option in the Layers panel. But while the Opacity option affects the transparency of the entire layer as a whole, a layer mask lets us add different levels of transparency to different parts of the layer. In other words, we can use a layer mask to show some areas while hiding others, making layer masks perfect for blending images.

They work by using black and white. Any part of the layer where the layer mask is filled with white remains visible. And any part of the layer where the mask is filled with black is hidden. Let's see how we can quickly blend our two images together by drawing a black-to-white gradient on the layer mask.

Selecting the Gradient Tool

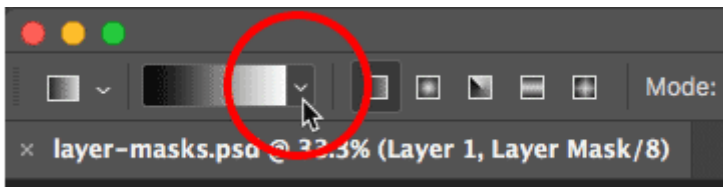
Select the [Gradient Tool](#) from the Toolbar:



Selecting the Gradient Tool.

Choosing the Black, White gradient

With the Gradient Tool selected, go up to the Options Bar and click on the down-pointing arrow next to the gradient swatch:



Clicking the arrow beside the gradient swatch.

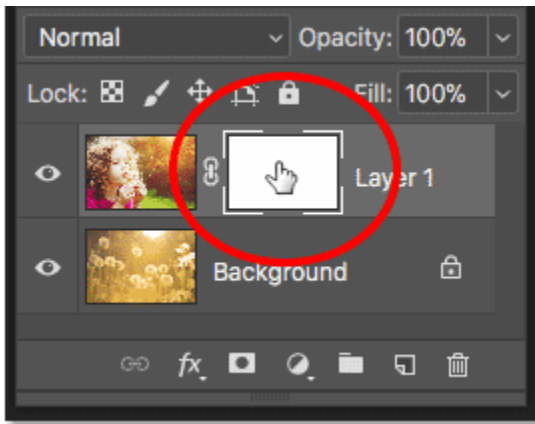
In the Gradient Picker, choose the **Black, White** gradient by double-clicking on its thumbnail (third from the left, top row):



Choosing the Black, White gradient.

Blending the two images together

Make sure the layer mask, not the image itself, is selected by clicking on the layer mask thumbnail. You should see a highlight border around it:



Clicking the thumbnail to select the layer mask.

Then, click on the image and drag out a black-to-white gradient. Remember that black will hide that part of the layer, and white will show it. In my case, I want to keep the left side of the photo (the part with the girl) visible, so the left side of the mask will need to be white. I want the right side to be hidden, which means the right side of the mask needs to be black. Since the gradient will start with black and end with white, I'll click on the right side of the image and drag horizontally over to the left. Press and hold your **Shift** key as you drag to move straight across:



Drawing a black-to-white gradient on the layer mask from right to left.

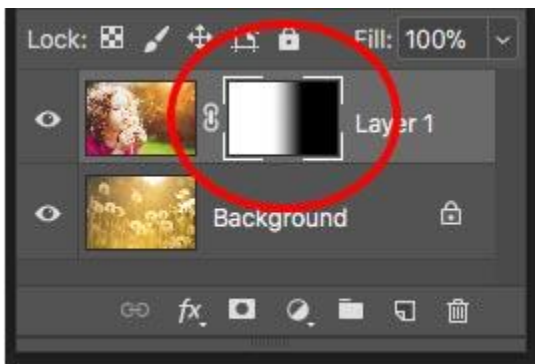
When you release your mouse button, Photoshop draws the gradient on the layer mask and blends the two photos together. Here, we're seeing the girl from the top image blending into the dandelions from the bottom image. If you're not happy with the first result, simply draw another gradient on the mask to try again:



The two photos are now blending together.

Viewing the layer mask

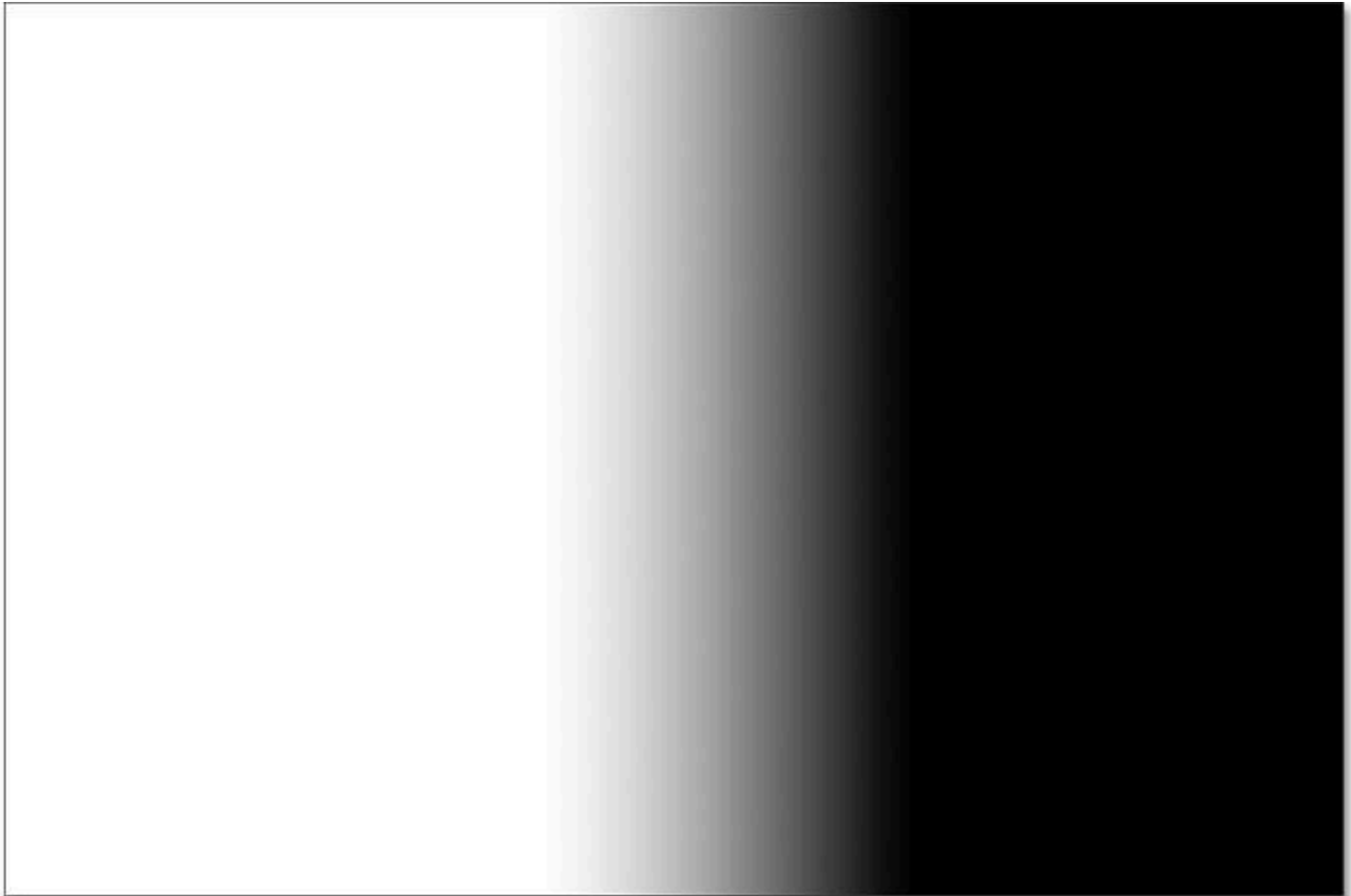
If we look at the layer mask thumbnail in the Layers panel, we see where the gradient was drawn. The black area on the right is where the top image is hidden in the document, allowing the photo on the Background layer to show through. And the white area on the left is where the top image remains visible:



The layer mask thumbnail showing the gradient.

We can also view the actual layer mask itself in the document. If you press and hold the **Alt** (Win) / **Option** (Mac) key on your keyboard and click on the layer mask thumbnail, you'll switch your view in the document from the images to the layer mask. This makes it easier to see exactly what's going on. Again, the area of black on the right is where the top layer is hidden from view, and the white area on the left is where it's visible.

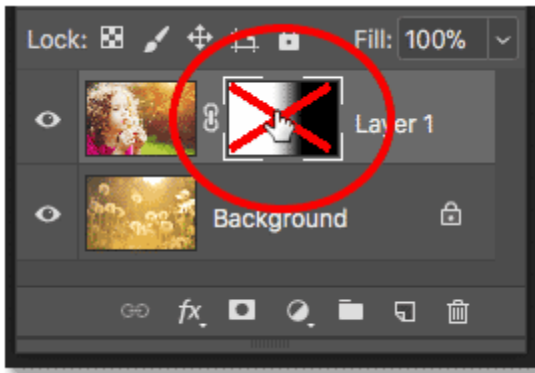
But notice the gray area in the middle, where the gradient gradually moves from black to white. This area creates a smooth transition between the two layers, allowing them to blend seamlessly together. To switch your view from the layer mask back to the images, again press and hold your **Alt** (Win) / **Option** (Mac) key and click on the layer mask thumbnail in the Layers panel:



The dark to light gradient in the middle is what allows the two images to blend seamlessly together..

Quick Tip: How to toggle a layer mask on and off

Here's a quick tip for working with layer masks. You can toggle a layer mask on and off by pressing and holding your **Shift** key and clicking the **layer mask thumbnail** in the Layers panel. Click the thumbnail once to temporarily disable the mask and view the entire layer. A red "X" will appear in the thumbnail, letting you know that the mask is disabled. Hold Shift and click the thumbnail again to turn the layer mask back on:



Hold Shift and click the thumbnail to toggle the layer mask on and off.

And there we have it! That's a quick look at how to blend two images together using the layer opacity option, layer blend modes, and a layer mask, in Photoshop!