

Custom Shadow Mastery 1 for Photoshop Elements | Module 1

Video 01-01 Shadow Detective

Our world is defined by shadows.

The world would appear flat without shadows. Even though we know this is a globe, and it's round, and the clouds form a circular pattern, and even though there are some shadows around the land and clouds, our eye tells us something isn't quite right about this globe.



Ahhh. Much better.



Shadows are all around us. Notice the shadows in the following photos. Some are obvious. Some not so obvious. (See Slideshow in the video)

Shadow Detective

In order for you to understand drop shadows well enough that you can create good shadows, you must first become observant.

So here is your first assignment:

For one day, or one week, or better yet, a full year, or the rest of your life, simply notice and observe shadows. Notice:

- The direction of the light ...
- How dark it is
- Or light
- How far is the shadow from the object?
- The length of the shadow
- How well defined the shadow edges are (or not)
- Is there more than one shadow on the same object?
- Anything else you find interesting about the shadow?
- Take a photo of interesting shadows.
- Put it in a Shadow file.

From now until you become a shadow expert, remember who you are—YOU are a Shadow Detective.

Video 01-02: Shadow Decisions

When it comes to shadows, you're in charge. You get to decide how your shadows will look, so in this lesson we'll cover the two main shadow decisions you need to make, and you'll choose your routine settings. As we do this, keep an observant eye out for the drop shadows you see in the demonstration images. If you pay attention to them, you'll start to get a good feel for custom shadows.

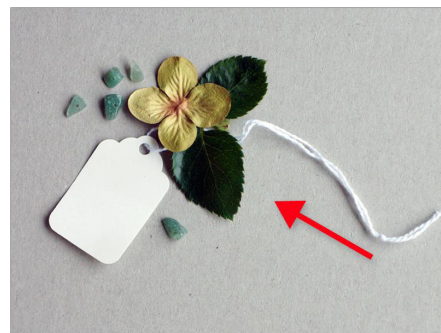
Choose A Shadow Direction

The easiest shadow characteristic to choose is the direction of the light, which, in turn, determines the direction of the shadow. Here is a cluster of real objects that I photographed. Can you tell which direction the light is coming from?

The shadows are cast to the upper left, so the light must be coming from the lower right. Take a moment to appreciate the "custom" look of real drop shadows.

Tag

- Look at the tag. The shadow doesn't stay along the edge of the tag. It bends outward where the tag is popped up, both at the bottom and at the top.
- The shadow is lighter and fuzzier the farther away the object is from the background.
- The shadow is darker and sharper when the object is touching the background—if the object is thin.
- If the object is more three dimensional, like the little rocks, the shadow is cast further. If the object is tall enough, the part of the shadow farthest away from the light source becomes lighter.
- Notice there's no shadow along the right side of the tag, because the light source is casting the shadow away from that side.
- The shadows tell us this tag is popped up.
- If you remove those shadows, and here I cloned them away, the very same tag looks very flat.
- It looks much better with the drop shadow!



Flower

- Look at the flower. Which of these two petals is popped up more, the top one or the left one? It would be hard to tell if it wasn't for the drop shadows. The shadow of the petal on the left extends out further and has a fuzzier edge than the top petal.
- It looks like the top petal may be as high as the left petal, but the side of the petal is bending down, which you can tell by the shadow on the petal itself, so that's why it's closer to the background.

String

- Notice how the string shadow almost disappears where it bends up high.
- No part of the string shadow is very sharp. The string is slightly fuzzy to begin with, and it's thin, so it doesn't cast as deep a shadow.

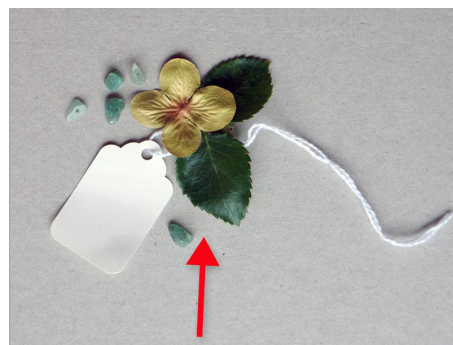
Leaves

The leaves are mostly dark, but not all dark. Where the light reaches a leaf, it looks pretty light. Because the light is coming from the lower right, the leaf is casting its own shadow on itself.

Now let's quickly go through some other light directions.

Light Direction 2

- Here's the next light direction. The shadows are going up, so the light is coming from the bottom.
- Notice the difference in the bottom leaf. Most of it is visible now. Just the center area is dipped down enough that it stays in the shadow.



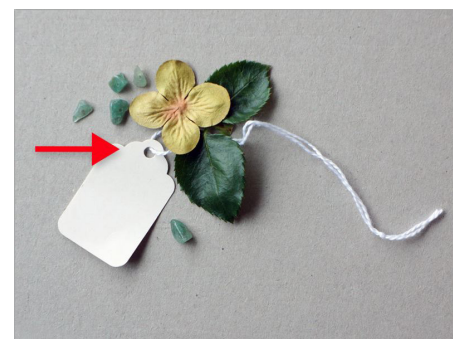
Light Direction 3

- In the next view, the shadows are going toward the right and up, so, you guessed it, the light is coming from the bottom left.
- Now look at the leaf. It's almost all visible, so this leaf is popped up a bit on the right side, and it casts a pretty long shadow up and to the right.



Light Direction 4

- In this view, the shadows are going to the right, so the light is coming from the left.



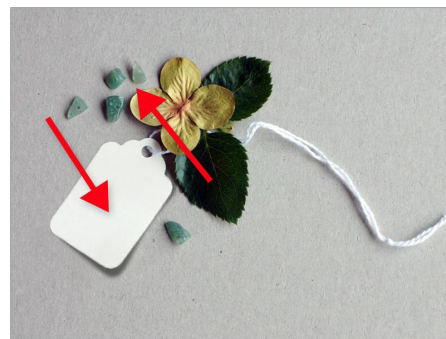
Light Direction 5

- Here's the last view. The shadows are going diagonally and to the right, so the light direction is from the upper left.



On your scrapbook pages, you'll be using a combination of regular and custom drop shadows, so remember to use the same angle of light or your page will look wrong.

Here, for example, the tag shadow is going down and to the right, but all the other shadows in the cluster are going the opposite direction. Don't let that happen to you. Keep them all going the same direction.



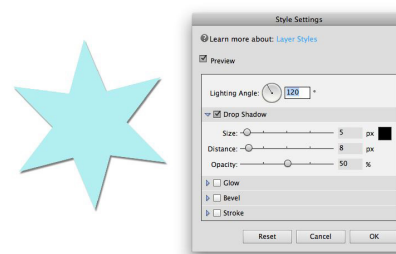
I like to choose one direction and stick with it, unless circumstances call for something different, like when you use an element with a custom shadow already attached to it. If that's the case, you'll need to create the rest of your page to match the shadow on the element.

My personal favorite Lighting Angle is from the upper left, shown by the angle line in this circle. It's a 120° angle, but you'll need to decide on the angle you want. The two most common are having the light come from the upper left or the upper right.

To change the angle on a regular Photoshop or Photoshop Elements drop shadow, click on the line in the circle and drag it to a new spot, or type in a degree in the box.

I'm showing you the drop shadow angle in Photoshop Elements here, but Photoshop has the same option.

Whatever you choose, stick with it, and that way you'll always know which direction your custom shadows should go.



Choose Shadow Opacity

The next shadow decision involves opacity. You must set an opacity whether your shadow is made by Photoshop or Photoshop Elements, or it's a custom shadow made by you.

How light or dark should your shadow be? The answer to that is, "It depends!" Again, you get to choose, so how do you make your decision?

Here is an example of very dark shadows on real objects that I photographed in bright sunlight. I think we can all agree that these shadows are too dark and draw attention to themselves rather than the elements.



Here is the same group of elements photographed in the shade with only diffuse light. This is better, but not perfect. Somewhere in between, but more on the light side would be best.



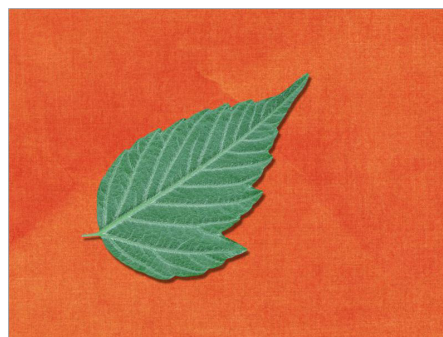
When you add the default drop shadow to an element, it's almost always too dark, because the default Opacity is 70%. If I move the shadow out further, you can see how dark it is. Doesn't this remind you of the really dark shadows on the objects I photographed in full sun? You really don't want that look on your pages.



Here is the leaf shadow at 50% opacity, which is what I routinely use. I may vary from that occasionally, but 50% is my standard go-to opacity.



It makes a difference what the background is, too. Here's a light paper background...and here's a darker paper. It's interesting that the shadow looks darker on the darker paper, but sometimes that's not the case, so you'll need to decide with each paper what opacity to use.



Now that you've analyzed your options, choose your shadow direction and shadow opacity for drop shadows. And remember, you'll be using the same opacity number with regular and custom drop shadows.

Video 3: Shadow Layers

Here's how to put a regular Photoshop Elements drop shadow onto its own layer so you can customize it. For this to work, your object must be smaller than half the size of your document.

- Create a regular drop shadow the customary way.
- Double click on the fx icon to bring up the Style Settings dialog box. Move the distance until the drop shadow is no longer below the object. Click OK.
- Right click (Mac: Ctrl click) on the object layer and choose Simplify Layer.
- Get the Rectangular Marquee tool. Feather should be 0 and Aspect Normal. Click and drag a selection outline around the object.
- Press Ctrl Shift J (Mac: Cmd Shift J) to cut the object and place it on a new layer.
- In the Layers panel, click on the shadow layer.
- Get the Move tool and move the shadow layer below the object.
- Now that your shadow is on its own layer, you can customize it as much as you want.

Video 4: Custom Shadow Layer

In both Photoshop and Photoshop Elements, here's a quick and easy method to create a custom drop shadow layer:

- Press Alt (Mac: Opt) and, in the Layers panel, click and drag down on the object layer to create a duplicate layer below the original object.
- If there are layer styles on the duplicated object, right click (Mac: Ctrl click) on the layer in the Layers panel and choose Clear Layer Styles.
- Press D to reset the Color Chips to black over white.
- Press Alt Shift Backspace (Mac: Opt Shift Delete) to fill the duplicate layer with black.
- In the Menu Bar, choose Filter > Blur > Gaussian Blur. Enter the amount of blur you want—usually 3 to 6 pixels—and click OK.
- Now you can customize the shadow layer as much as you want.

Custom Drop Shadow Action

Although it's easy to create a custom shadow layer manually, it's much faster to use my Custom Shadow action.

- Open the Actions panel and load the Custom Drop Shadows action. If you don't know how to do this, copy and paste this link into an internet browser: <http://digitalscrapper.com/forums/forumdisplay.php?312-Actions>
- Twirl open the folder, if necessary, and click on the custom shadow action of your choice to select it.
- Click the play button to apply a drop shadow.
- When you return to the Layers panel, you'll see the custom shadow on a layer below the object, and the Smudge tool will be selected, so you can begin to customize the shadow.

Video 5: Photo Shadow Actions

There are two main tools I use to create custom shadows. One is the Smudge tool, which we'll discuss in another lesson, and the other is the Warp function of the Transform tool. This is only available in Photoshop, but if you can run actions in Photoshop Elements, you can take advantage of the Warp tool.

I'm filming this tutorial in Photoshop Elements, but everything I'll say applies to Photoshop as well.

- Download the actions that come with this lesson and extract them from the zip file. (Mac: Double click on the file; Win: Right click and choose Extract All)
- In the Actions panel, open the fly out menu and choose Load Actions. Navigate to where the actions are stored on your computer and select the following actions:

Horizontal Custom Shadows

Vertical Custom Shadows

Square Custom Shadows

LARGE Images-Paper Custom Shadows

- Click Open.
- Make sure your photo is the active layer in the Layers panel.
- In the Actions panel, twirl open the appropriate action folder. There's one for horizontal, vertical, and square photos, as well as an action set for over-sized photos and papers. My photo is horizontal, and it's a normal size, so I'll open the Horizontal folder.
- Notice you have several choices.
 - 3 Corners small will give you a small custom shadow on three corners of your photo.
 - 3 Corners medium will give you a little bit bigger shadow on three corners.
 - 2 Lower Corners only pops up the lower part of the photo.

Rt Lower Corner only pops up that corner.

Lt Lower Corner only pops up that corner.

As you can see, it really takes the work out of creating a custom shadow! And you can still adjust these shadows further, if you wish. But most of the time, just the action will be sufficient. For years I've created custom shadows in almost exactly the same way every time for photos and papers. This just automates that process.

Since the ratios are different for vertical and square images, I've created a separate set of actions for each of them, but they contain the same five effects.

You can use the Horizontal, Vertical, and Square actions on small to medium papers and journaling elements, but if you're working with a large photo or paper, these actions may produce a larger drop shadow than you want, which is why I've provided the large images set.

In the Large Images set, there are only three choices, vertical, horizontal, and square, and they all create a three-corner custom shadow with a more subtle effect.

One thing I would caution you against is using this action on every photo on your page. A custom action will draw attention to your photo, so if every photo is popped up, it may be too much. Try using it on one, or maybe two photos. It will look much better!

And one last thing to note, the action will have a slightly different result if the photo is angled before running the action, but remember, you can always make an adjustment because the shadow is on a separate layer.

Video 6: Shadow Warp

Video 6 is for Photoshop only. The Warp tool is not available in Photoshop Elements.

Video 7: Shadow Action Tips

Here are some custom shadow action tips to help avoid confusion.

Clipping Masks

If you are using the custom shadow action on a photo that's clipped to a photo template or layer mask, on which layer do you apply the action?

- Just as you would with layer style effects, you would select the mask layer and run the action.
- If there is already a drop shadow on the mask layer, double click on the fx icon, uncheck the drop shadow option, and click OK. (In Photoshop, drag the shadow layer to the trash or simply click on the visibility icon to hide it.)
- When you run the action on a mask, it will break the clipping connection between the photo and the mask. Simply clip the photo to the mask again by pressing Alt (Mac: Opt) and clicking between the photo and mask layer.

Smart Objects

You can use the custom shadow action without any problem on a smart object. A smart object can be created in Photoshop by Right clicking on the layer and choosing Convert to Smart Object. You can tell it's a smart object by the icon in the lower right corner of the thumbnail. Without getting into a lot of detail, a smart object is a layer that can be edited multiple times, but it always refers back to the original object when you make changes, so you don't lose quality.

- Choose the shadow action you want and click the Play button.
- If a photo is clipped to a smart object, the clipping connection will be lost when the shadow action is applied, so simply clip them together again by pressing Alt (Mac: Opt) and clicking between the photo and smart object layer.

Adjusting Shadows

Remember that you're not locked in to the shadow created by an action. You may adjust it as much as you like.

- For example, you may want to make part of the shadow larger or smaller. Press Ctrl T (Mac: Cmd T) and drag from any side handle to affect the sides. To change the corners, press Ctrl (Mac: Cmd) and click and drag from a corner handle. (In Photoshop you'll also be able to use the Warp tool for even finer adjustments.)
- When you're adjusting a Transform outline, it will sometimes jump too far when you try to move it, and you can't seem to get it in just the right spot. If you zoom in close, the outline will be more manageable to move in small increments. Double click inside the outline to commit the change.

Adjusting the Edge Blur

- If you want the edge to be softer and fuzzier, you can press Ctrl F (Mac: Cmd F) after you run the action, and it will run the last filter using the same settings. Since you just used the Gaussian Blur filter, that's what it will run. If you wait too long, though, and use another filter, it will run whatever filter is the most recent.
- In Photoshop, and in some earlier versions of Photoshop Elements, you can press Ctrl Alt F (Mac: Cmd Opt F) and get the most recent filter with the option to make changes to the settings.
- If that shortcut doesn't work for you, simply go to the Menu Bar and choose Filter > Blur > Gaussian Blur to add more blur. When you move the Radius slider, you can see a preview of how the shadow will look, as long as you have Preview checked in the dialog box. When you're satisfied, click OK.
- You may also want to use the Smudge tool to make modifications to the shadow. We'll go into depth on using the Smudge tool in the next Module.