

Design Beautiful Pages— Line of Beauty

Test Your Skills Challenge 2

by Linda Sattgast

Challenge: Making Shadows Look Real

With digital scrapbooking it's wonderful that we can so easily add a drop shadow style to a layer, but with this ease of use comes responsibility. If we're clueless or careless we'll end up with a page that looks unrealistic because the shadows don't match what we see in the "real" world.

So let's set digital aside for a bit and take a look at some real drop shadows. What follows is a series of photographs of real papers, photos and elements.

Paper Shadows

Let's start by placing one paper strip on a piece of background paper. This is how it would look in "real life."

Don't concern yourself with the shadow of the background paper. Instead, focus on the drop shadow of the paper strip on top of the background.

Is the drop shadow large or small?

Answer: The shadow is small. Paper has a very small drop shadow when it's sitting flush with the background paper.

- Are your digital drop shadows this small when you put a paper strip directly above the background paper?
- If not, why not?



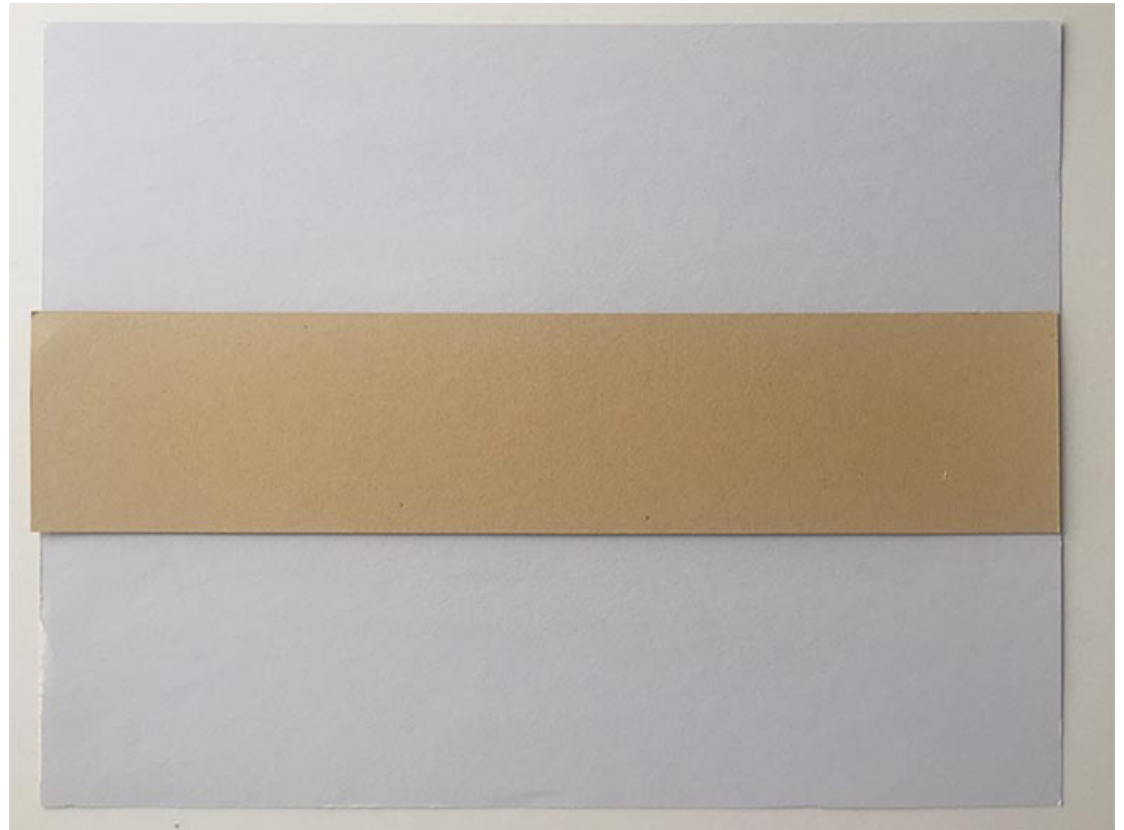
When would paper on a background layer have a bigger shadow like the one shown here?

Answer: If you place something under the paper strip to pop it up, you get a larger shadow. I placed a stack of three Post-It notes under the paper strip on both the left and right side to pop it up.

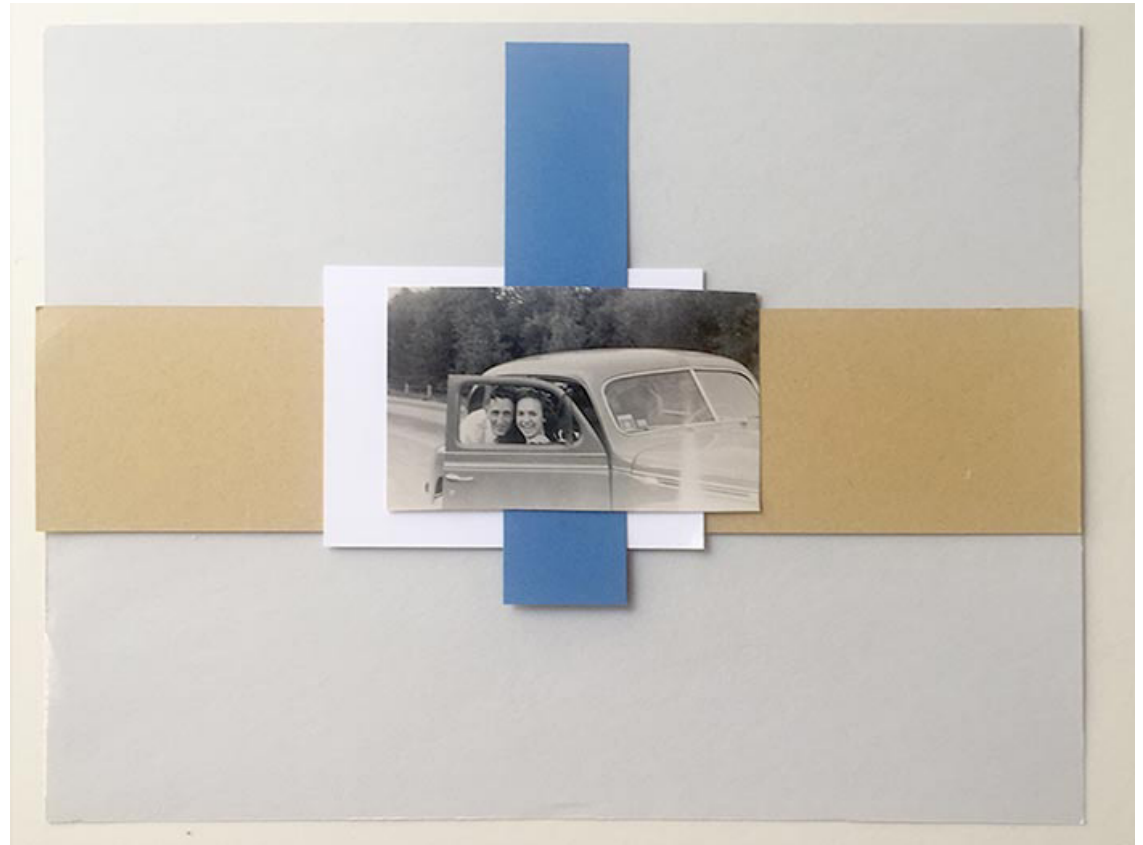
Popping something up on a page is a legitimate thing to do in scrapbooking. Paper scrapbookers do that to draw attention to something on their page—usually a photo or an element. But do paper scrappers pop up a paper strip every time they make a page? I don't think so.

So why do many digital scrapbookers pop up a paper strip right off the bat by using a higher drop shadow? I don't know the answer, but it's a fairly common practice.

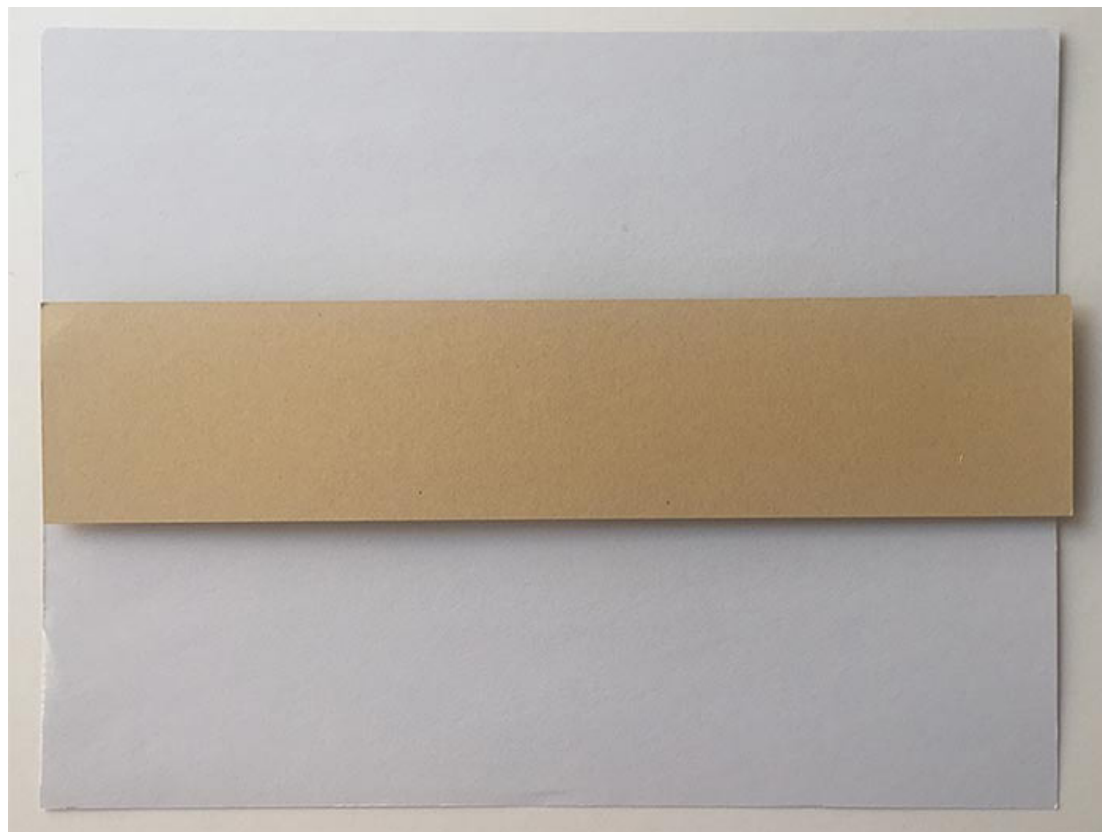
Don't get me wrong. In digiland this is considered a “smaller drop shadow,” and I would never tell you this was too big if I looked at your page, but I want you to consider being more conservative when it comes to the size of drop shadows.



If you start with a shadow this big and begin to stack additional papers and photos above the paper strip, the shadows get progressively bigger, which is why I recommend that you start with a small shadow if you're planning to stack a lot of papers.

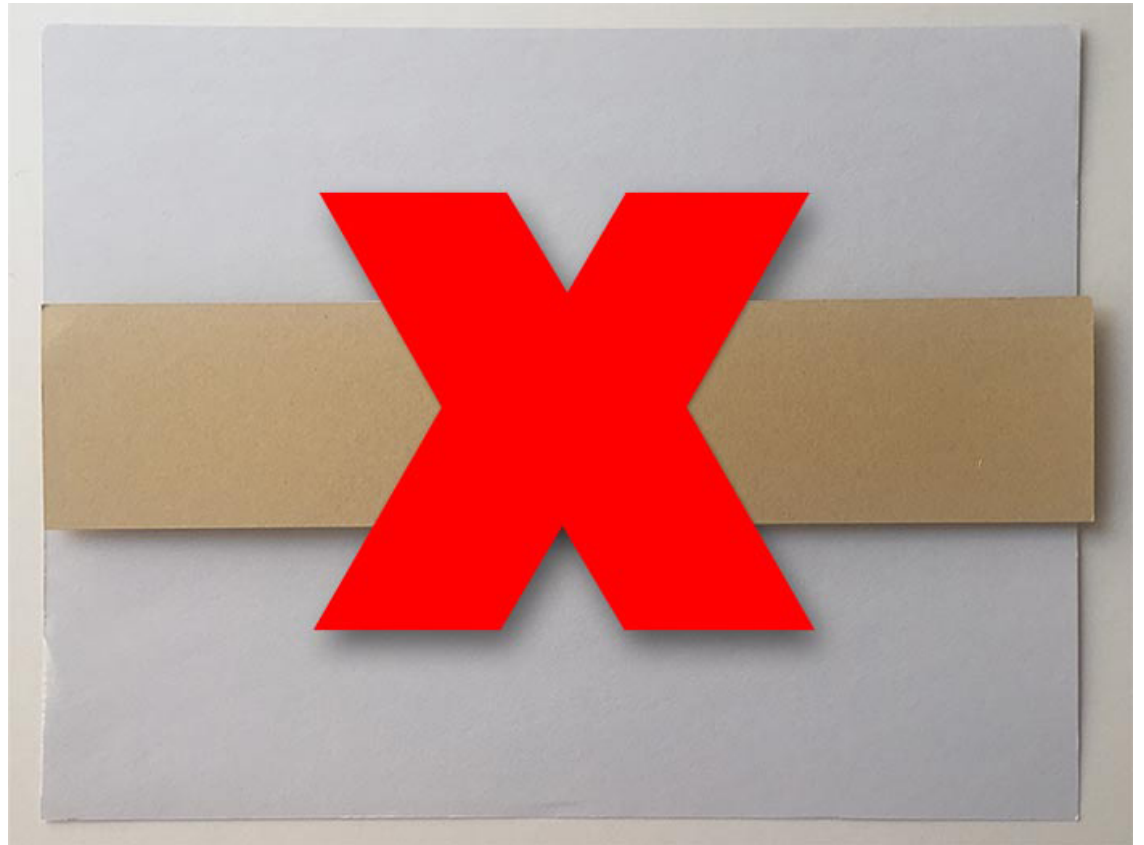


Here is an example of shadows I see too frequently on digital scrapbook pages. This shadow is huge! I had to put a stack of 15 or more Post It notes under each end of the paper strip to get it this high.



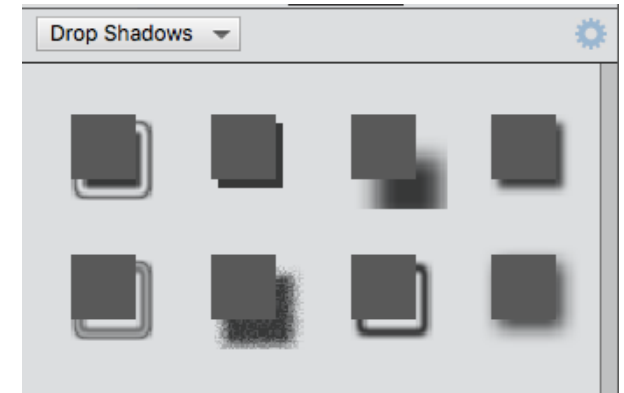
This drop shadow has reached the realm of unrealistic AND ugly, so just say no to high drop shadows!

How do shadows get this big on digital pages where we have complete control over the size, distance, and opacity of a drop shadow?



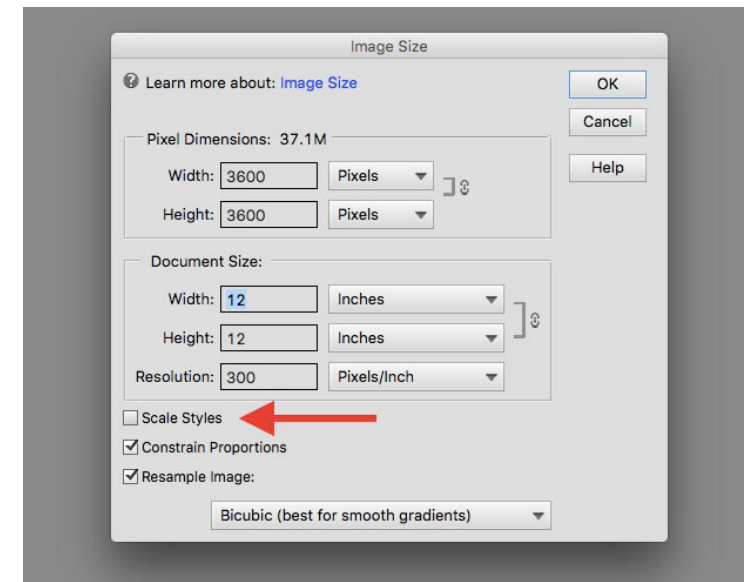
I have two theories. One is that digital scrapbookers use the default drop shadows in Photoshop Elements.

My advice: Don't use the default drop shadows. They're awful! Instead, in the Menu Bar choose Layer > Layer Style > Style Settings. (In Photoshop the default drop shadow is often just right, but it's easy to tweak if it isn't.)



Another possibility is that when a page is resized for the web, a scrapbooker forgets to check the box next to Scale Styles.

This will cause the style to stay the same size while all the layers get much smaller, which makes the layer styles look huge on a gallery image.



Here's my original page with nice drop shadows.

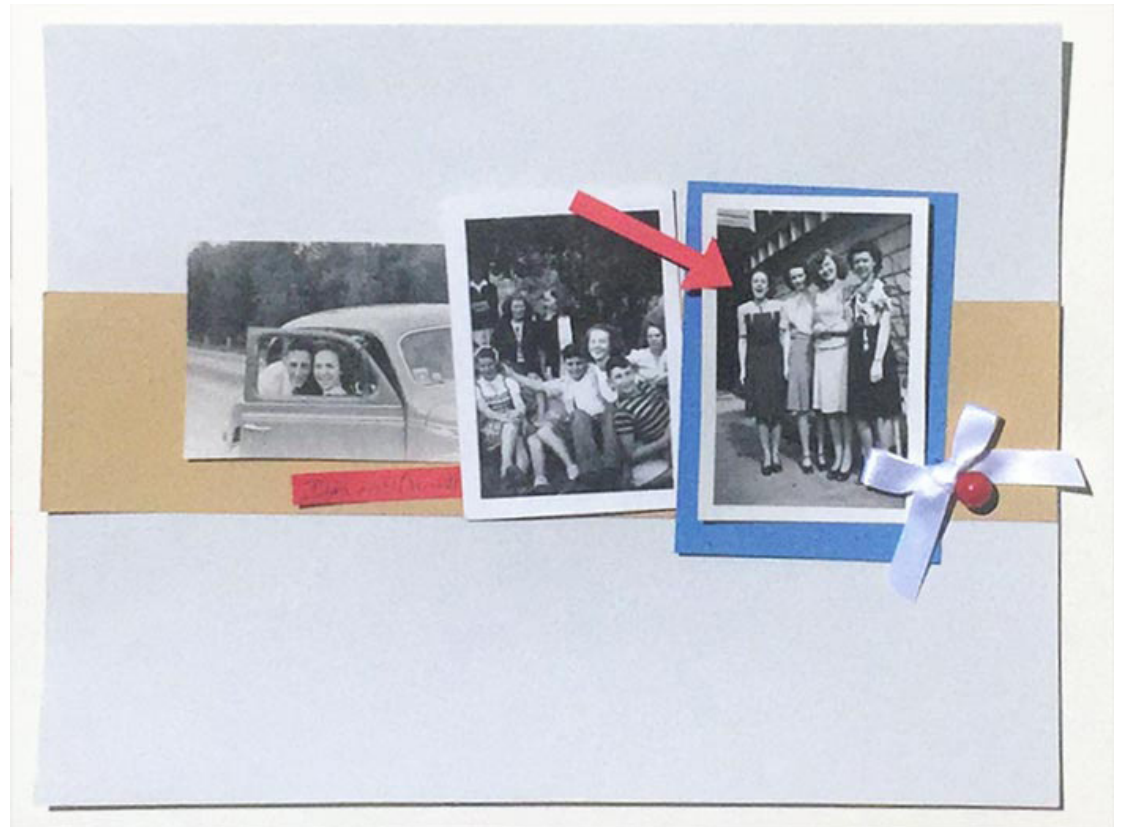


And here's the page when I resize it and forget to check Scale Styles. It looks terrible!



Harsh Shadows

Another problem I see is dark, harsh drop shadows. In this image I added some paper, photos, and elements above the paper strip, and set it outside in direct sunlight, which produces dark shadows like these. So even though the shadows are a good size, they're much too black and sharp to be pleasing.



In contrast, this photo was taken by a window with indirect light. The shadows are much softer, lighter, and more pleasing.

Challenge

It's so easy to look at paper sitting on a table, and never notice the drop shadow, so I challenge you to take some time to look at real drop shadows of 3D objects around you—especially objects you might put on a scrapbook page. Put one paper on top of another and really notice the distance, size, and opacity of the shadow.

Once you see how real shadows look, try to make your digital shadows look as good as real shadows!

