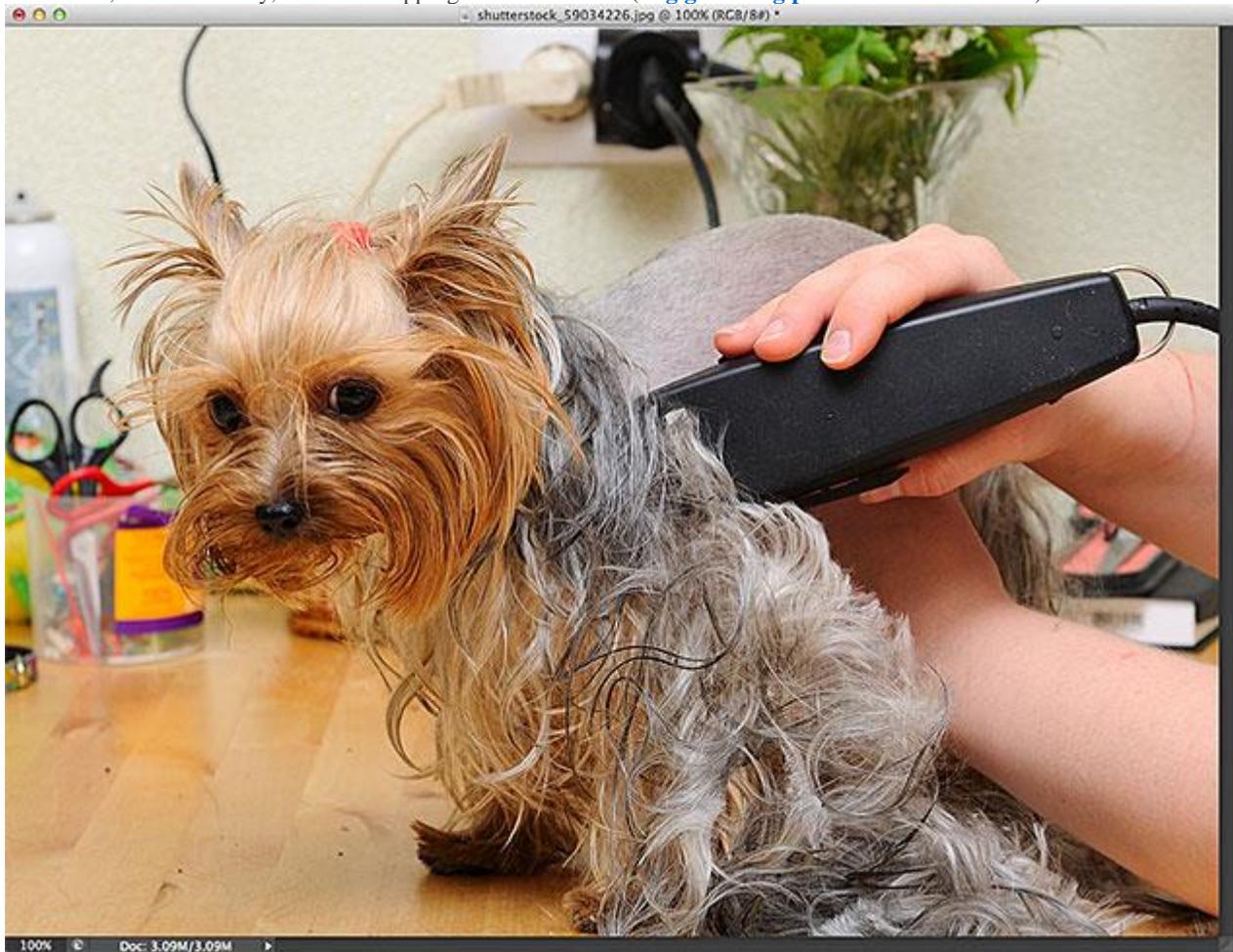


Photoshop Clipping Masks Essentials

Written by Steve Patterson. In this **Photoshop tutorial**, we'll learn the essentials of using **clipping masks** to hide unwanted parts of a layer from view in a document. Clipping masks are a lot like Photoshop's **layer masks** in that both allow us to show and hide different parts of a layer, but clipping masks work differently.

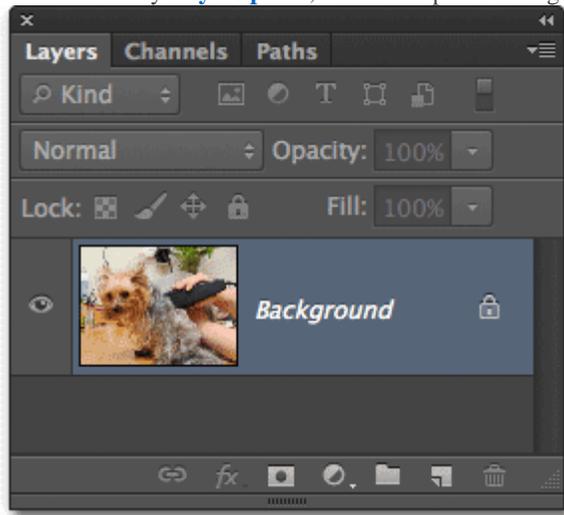
Unlike layer masks, where we first need to add a mask to the layer and then paint or fill areas on the mask with black (to hide the area), white (to show the area) or gray (to partially hide the area), clipping masks simply use the **contents and transparency of a layer** to determine which parts of the layer above it remain visible. That may actually sound more confusing than layer masks when you first hear it, but as we'll see, clipping masks are very easy to use. In fact, they can be faster and easier to use than layer masks! There's so many possible uses for clipping masks in Photoshop that it would be impossible to cover them all in a single tutorial, so what we're going to do here is cover the basics and essentials of how clipping masks work so you can take what you've learned and focus on the fun part – coming up with your own creative ways to use them!

I'll be using Photoshop CS6 in this tutorial but everything we'll cover here applies to any recent version of Photoshop. To really understand how clipping masks work, we first need to make sure we understand the difference between areas with actual **content** and areas of **transparency** on a layer. To do that, we'll use my little friend here who's also trying to understand, in his own way, what this clipping stuff is all about (**dog grooming photo** from Shutterstock):



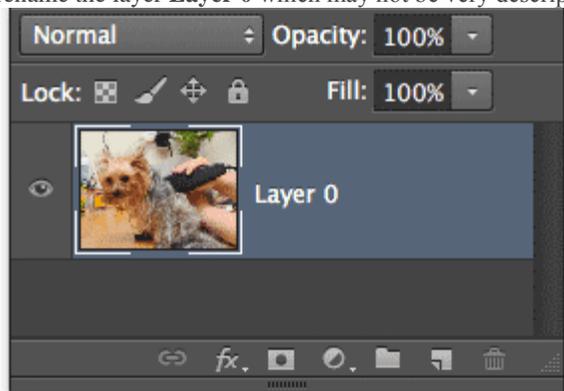
Clipping masks... dog clippers... see what I did there? Yeah, the dog doesn't look too impressed with me either.

If we look in my **Layers panel**, we see the photo sitting by itself on the **Background** layer:



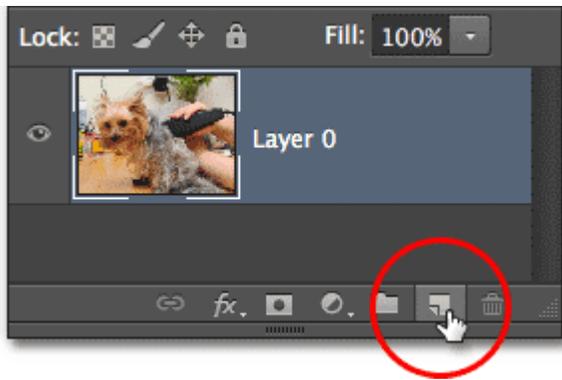
The Layers panel showing the image on the Background layer.

To show how clipping masks work, I'm going to add a new blank layer below the image. Now, Photoshop doesn't actually allow us add layers below a **Background layer**, but to get around that problem, all we need to do is rename the Background layer to anything other than *Background*, and the easiest way to do that is to simply hold down the **Alt** (Win) / **Option** (Mac) key on the keyboard and **double-click** on the layer's name in the Layers panel. Photoshop will instantly rename the layer **Layer 0** which may not be very descriptive but it's good enough for our purposes:



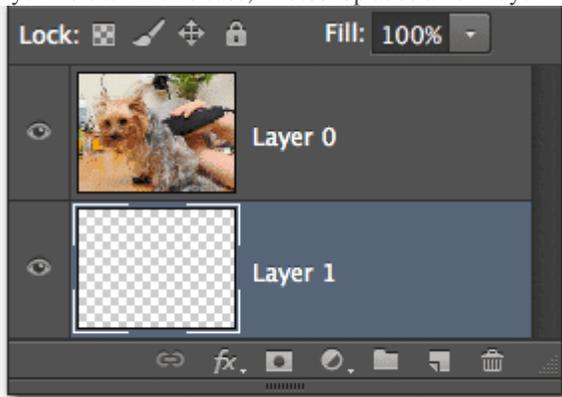
The Background layer has been renamed Layer 0.

Now that the Background layer is just a normal layer, we can add a new layer below it. To do that, I'll press and hold the **Ctrl** (Win) / **Command** (Mac) key on my keyboard and I'll click the **New Layer** icon at the bottom of the Layers panel:



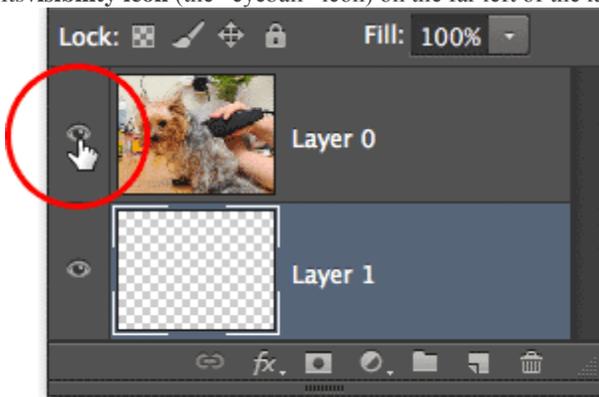
Holding Ctrl (Win) / Command (Mac) and clicking the New Layer icon.

Normally Photoshop adds new layers above the currently active layer, but holding down the Ctrl (Win) / Command (Mac) key while clicking the New Layer icon is a handy little trick that tells Photoshop to add the new layer *below* the active layer instead. In this case, Photoshop adds a new layer named **Layer 1** below the image on Layer 0:



Photoshop adds the new layer below the original image layer.

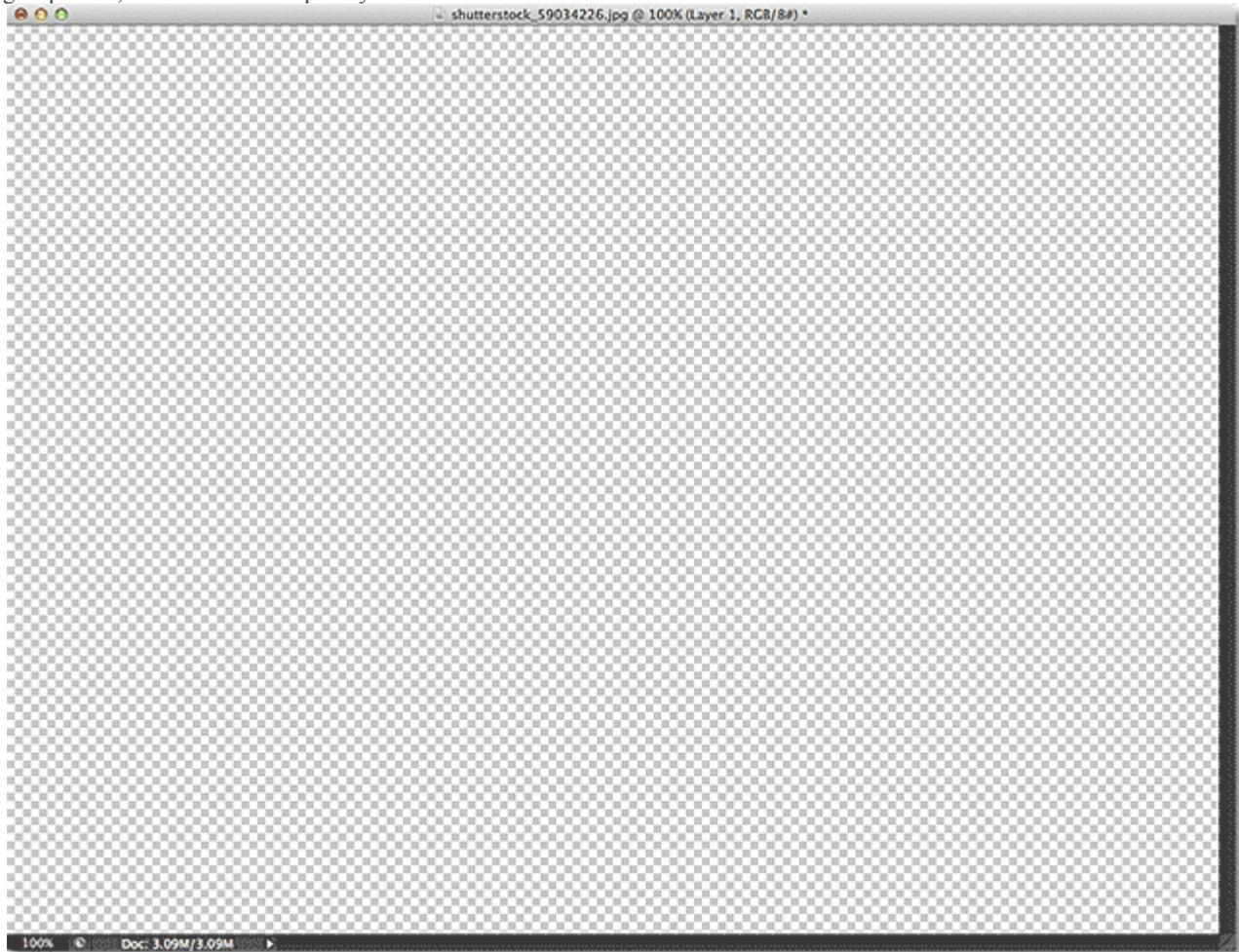
Let's take a closer look at our new layer. I'm going to hide the original image layer for the moment by clicking on its **visibility icon** (the "eyeball" icon) on the far left of the layer in the Layers panel:



Click the visibility icon to turn layers on or off in the document.

With the image layer turned off, we're now seeing just the newly added layer in the document. By default, new layers are blank, meaning there's nothing on them. They have no content at all. They may be full of promise, sure, but nothing else, at least not at the moment. When a layer has no content, it's **transparent**. We see right through it. Photoshop displays

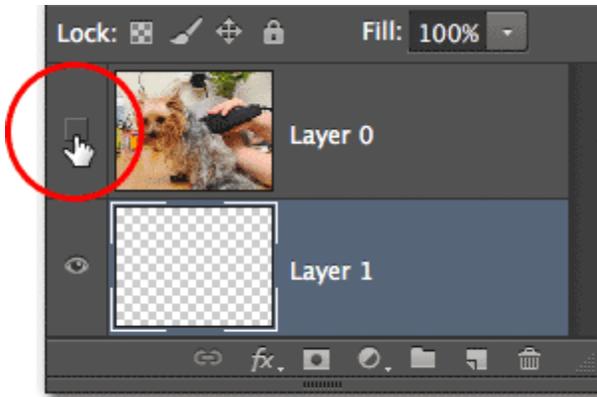
transparency on a layer as a **repeating grid pattern**, as we see here. When we see nothing else on a layer except for this grid pattern, we know it's completely blank:



The document window showing the newly added blank layer.

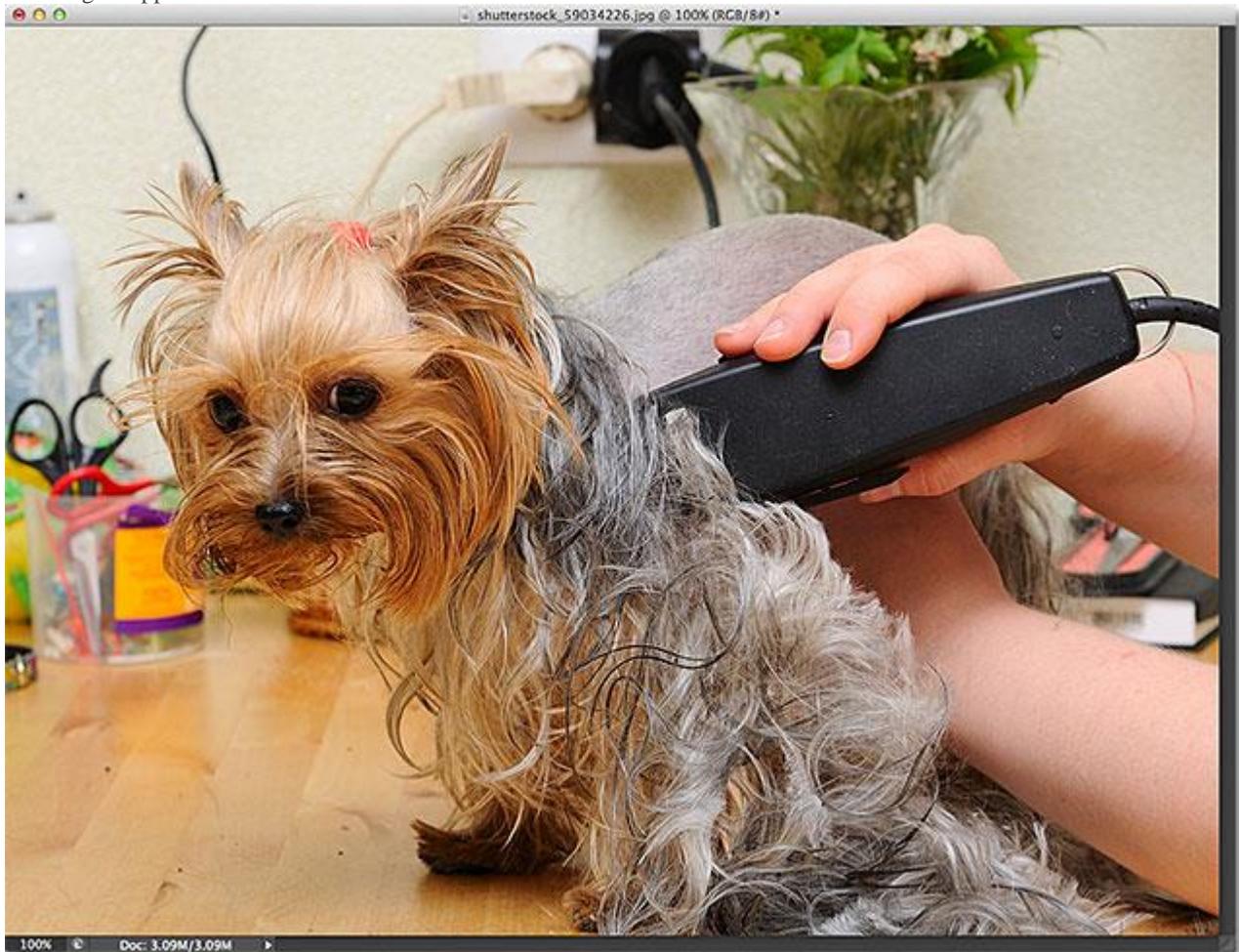
As I mentioned at the beginning of the tutorial, the way clipping masks work is that they use the contents and transparency of a layer to determine which areas of the layer above it remain visible. How does that work? Well, any areas on the layer below where there are **actual contents** (whether those contents are pixels, shapes or type – basically anything other than transparency) become the **visible areas** of the layer above, while **areas of transparency** on the layer below become the **hidden areas** on the layer above.

As we just saw, our new layer has no content at all. It's just a blank, transparent layer. Let's see what happens if we try to use it as a clipping mask for the image layer above it. To do that, I'll first turn the image layer back on in the document by again clicking its visibility icon:



Turning the image layer back on in the document.

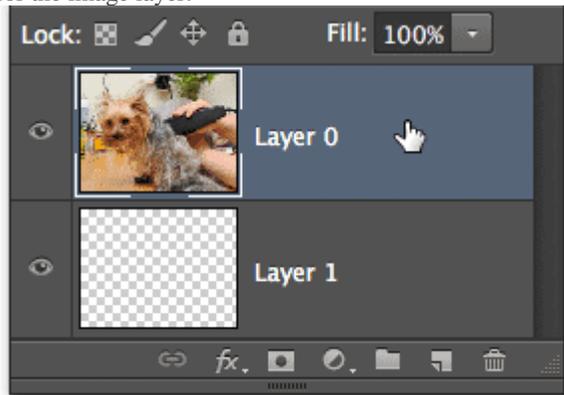
The image reappears in the document window as before:



The image is once again visible in the document.

Next, I need to make sure I have the correct layer selected in the Layers panel. When creating a clipping mask, we want to select the layer that's going to be "clipped" by the layer below it, so in my case here, I'll click on my image layer (Layer

0) to make it active (the currently active layer is highlighted in blue). Layer 1 below it will then become the clipping mask for the image layer:



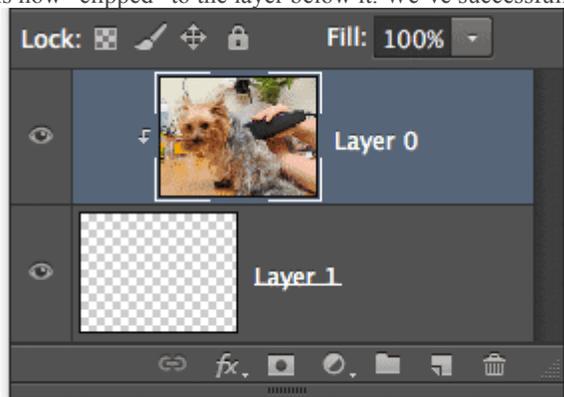
Selecting the image layer.

To create a clipping mask, we simply go up to the **Layer** menu in the Menu Bar along the top of the screen and choose **Create Clipping Mask**:



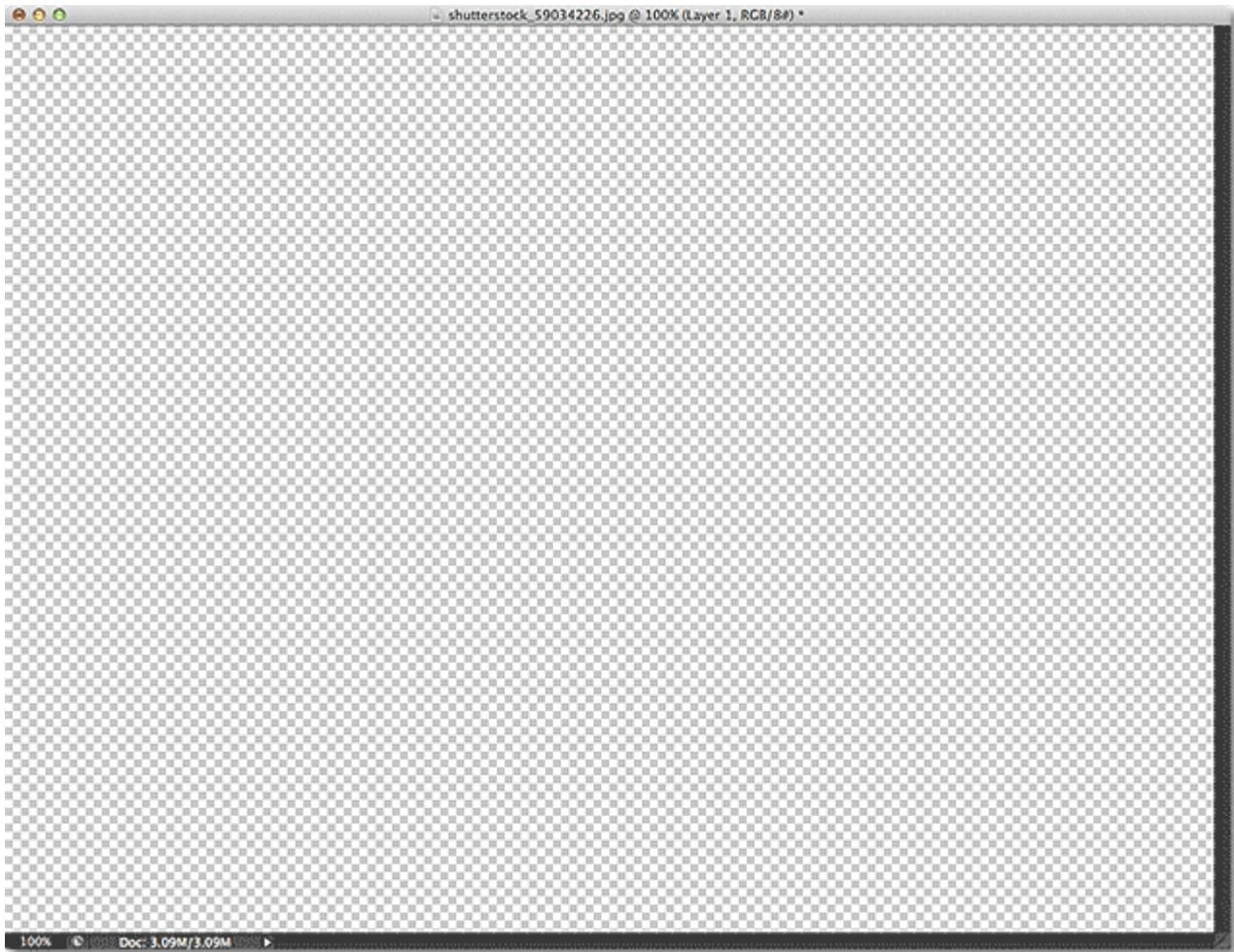
Go to **Layer > Create Clipping Mask**.

If we look again in our Layers panel, we see that the image layer (Layer 0) is now indented to the right, with a small arrow to the left of the preview thumbnail pointing down at Layer 1 below it. This is how Photoshop lets us know that the layer is now “clipped” to the layer below it. We’ve successfully turned Layer 1 below into a clipping mask for Layer 0 above it:



The Layers panel showing the top layer clipped to the bottom layer.

The problem is, all we’ve really done is created one of the most uninteresting clipping masks imaginable because Layer 1 currently has no content. Since it’s completely transparent, and Photoshop is using the transparent areas to figure out which areas of the layer above should be hidden, all we’ve ended up with in the document window is, well, nothing. The entire image on Layer 0 has been hidden from view:



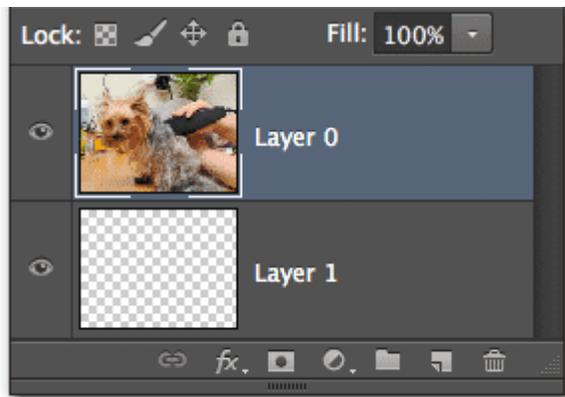
With no content on the clipping mask layer, the image layer above is completely hidden.

That wasn't very exciting, so let's release our clipping mask. To do that, we go back up to the **Layer** menu at the top of the screen and choose **Release Clipping Mask**:



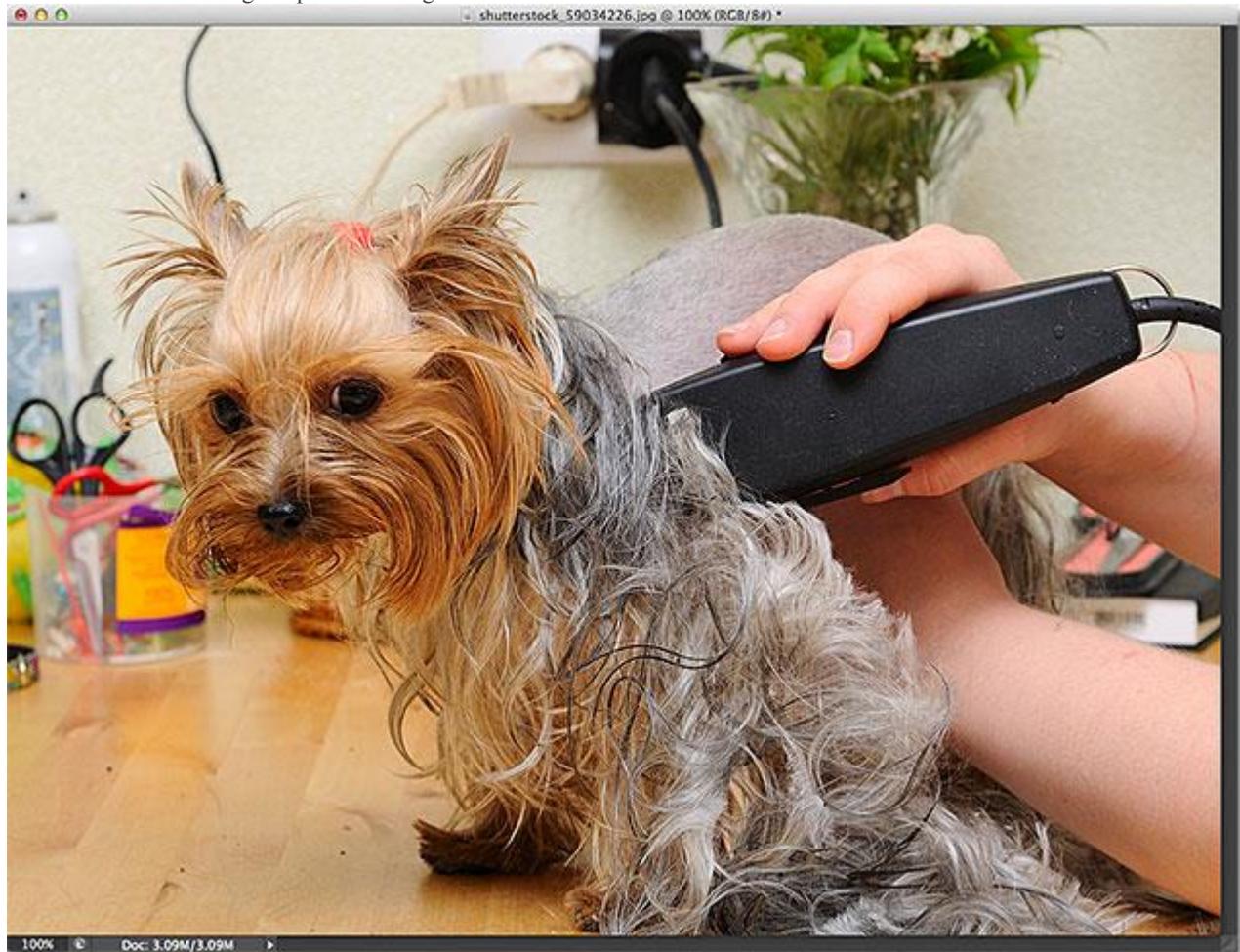
Go to **Layer > Release Clipping Mask**.

We can see that the image layer is no longer clipped to the layer below it because it's no longer indented to the right in the Layers panel:



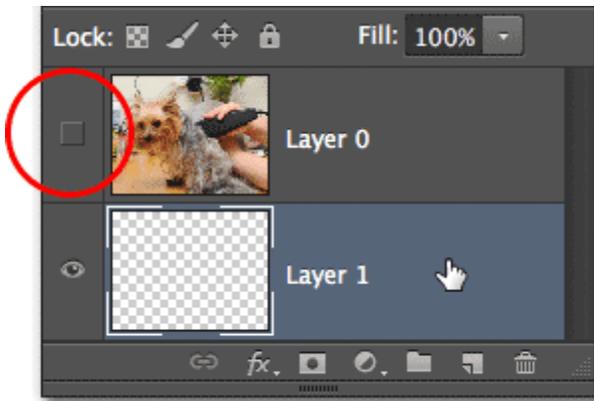
All signs of the clipping mask are gone from the Layers panel.

And we're back to seeing the photo once again in the document window:



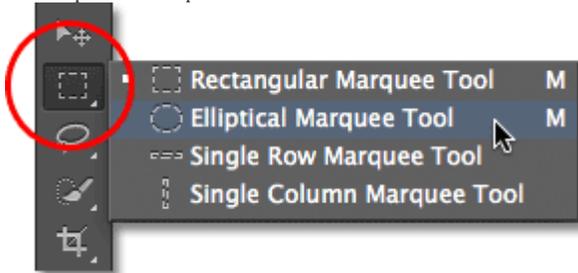
With the clipping mask released, the image returns.

Let's add some content to the blank layer. I'll hide the image layer again temporarily by clicking its visibility icon, just so we can see what we're doing, then I'll select the blank layer by clicking on it in the Layers panel:



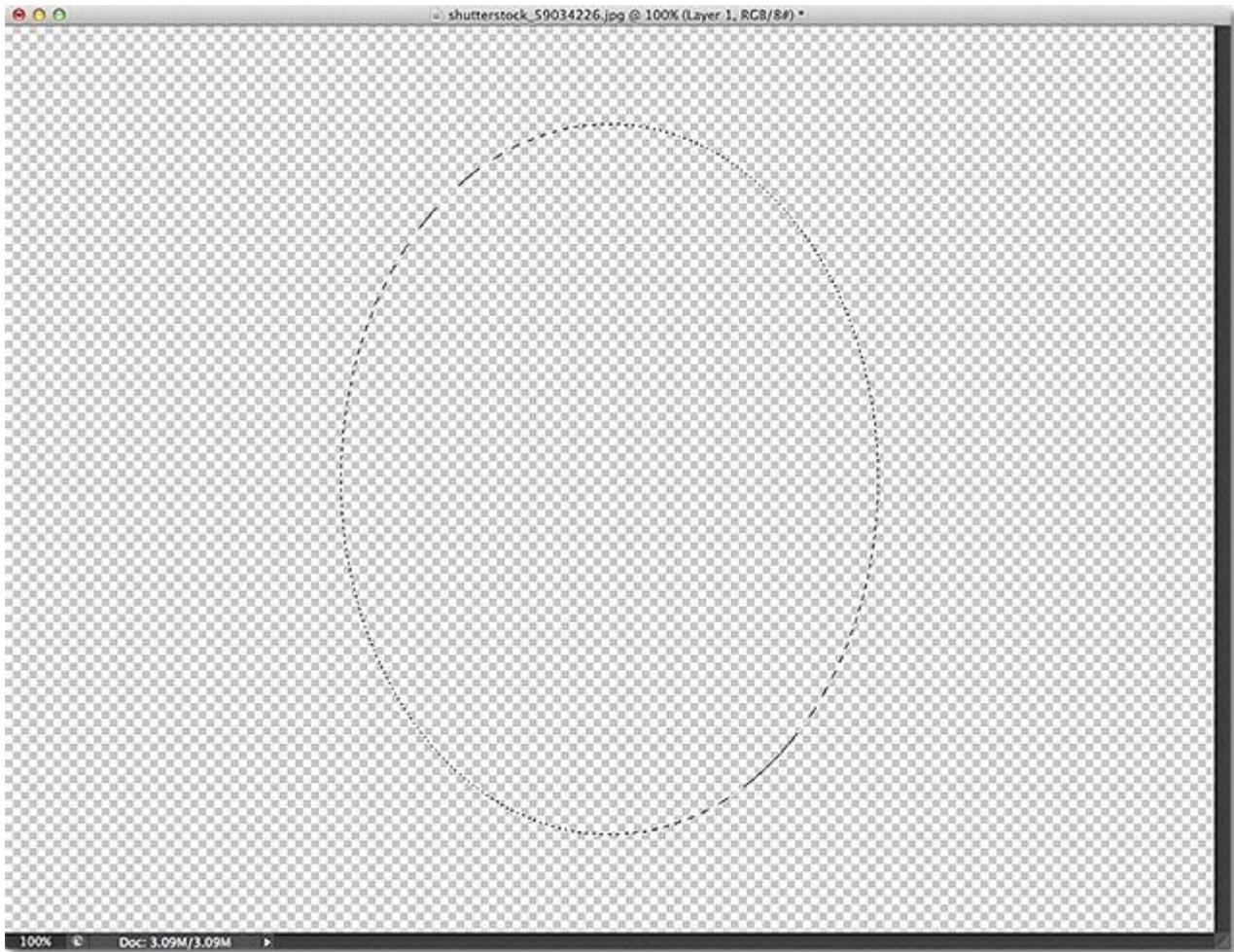
Turning off the top layer and selecting the bottom layer.

With the blank layer selected, I'll grab my **Elliptical Marquee Tool** from the Tools panel by clicking and holding on the Rectangular Marquee Tool until a fly-out menu appears showing me the other tools nested in that spot, and then choosing the Elliptical Marquee Tool from the menu:



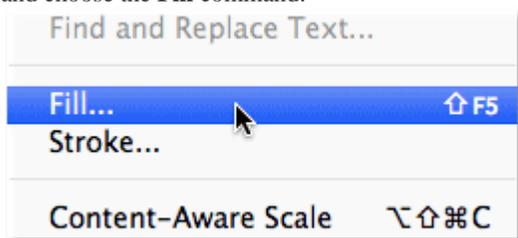
Selecting the Elliptical Marquee Tool.

Then, with the Elliptical Marquee Tool in hand, I'll click and drag out an elliptical selection outline in the center of the document. There's no particular reason why I'm using this specific selection tool. The point here is simply to add some content to the layer:



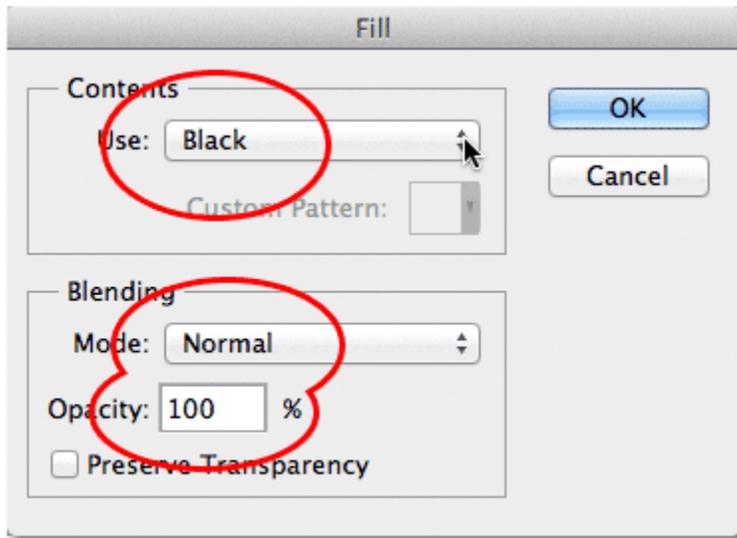
Drawing a selection with the Elliptical Marquee Tool.

To create actual content, I need to fill the selection with something, so I'll go up to the **Edit** menu at the top of the screen and choose the **Fill** command:



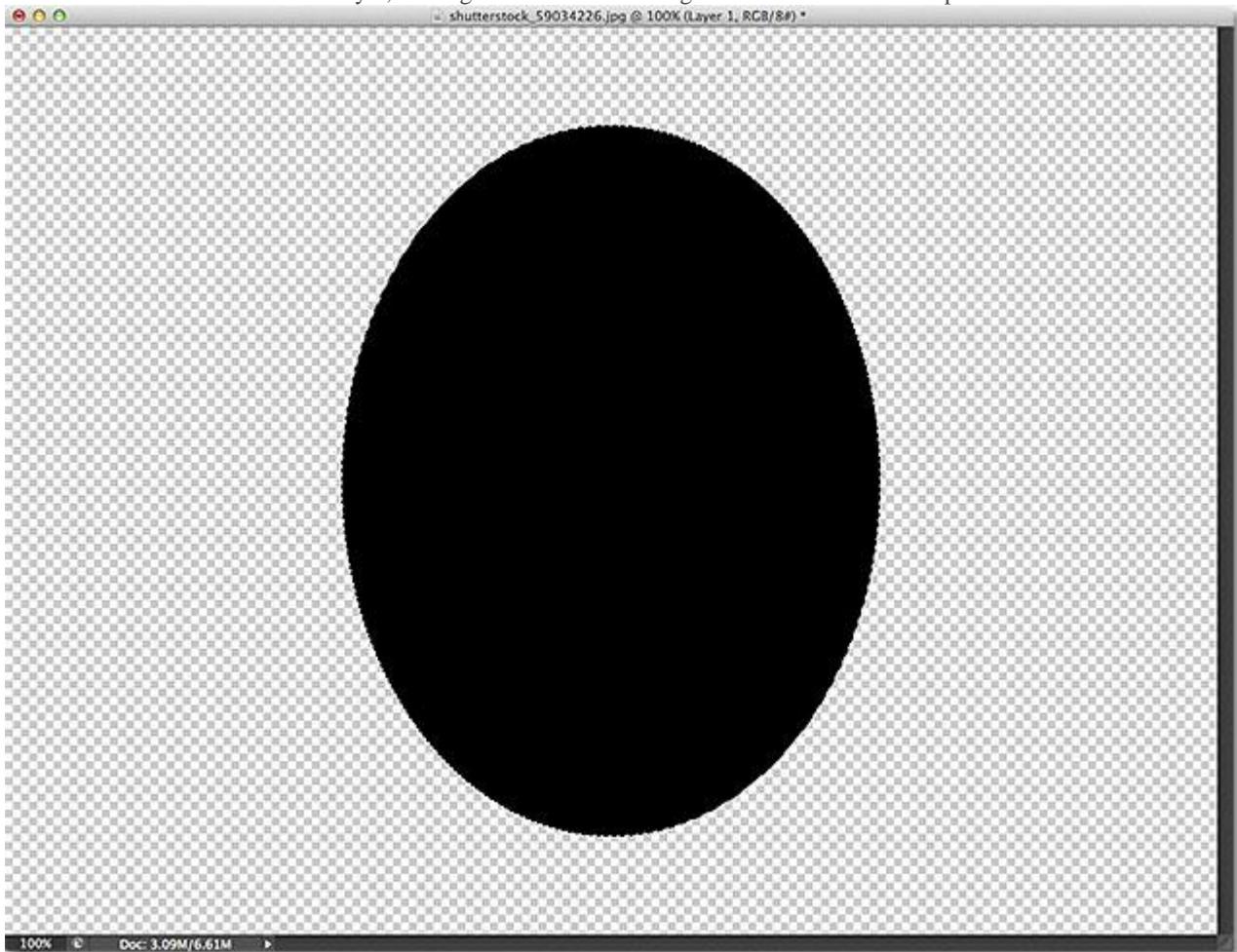
Going to **Edit > Fill**.

This opens the Fill dialog box. I'll set the **Use** option at the top of the dialog box to **Black**, and I'll make sure the **Mode** option near the bottom is set to **Normal** and the **Opacity** option is set to **100%**. Again, I'm simply adding content to the layer. There's no reason why I'm specifically choosing black as my fill color, other than black will be easy to see in the screenshots:



The Fill dialog box.

I'll click OK to close out of the Fill dialog box, and Photoshop instantly fills my elliptical selection with black. I now have an area with actual content on the layer, although the area surrounding the content remains transparent:



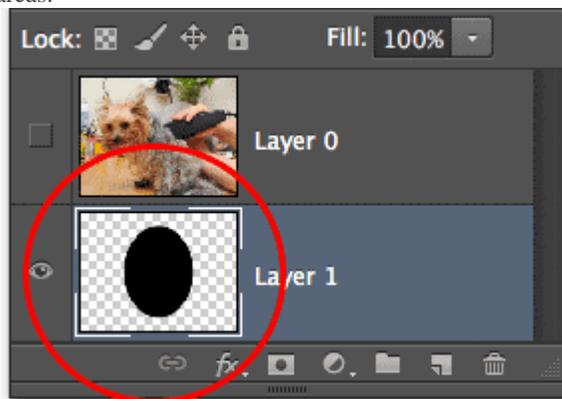
The selection has been filled with black.

The selection outline itself is still visible, so since I don't need it anymore, I'll remove it by going up to the **Select** menu at the top of the screen and choosing **Deselect**:



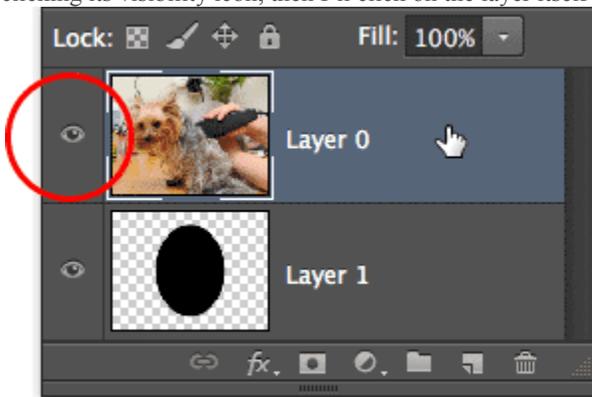
Removing the selection outline by going to **Select > Deselect**.

Now that we've added some content to the bottom layer, let's take a quick look again in the Layers panel. We can see the black-filled elliptical area in the **preview thumbnail** for Layer 1. What's important to notice here is that if you compare this preview thumbnail with the preview thumbnail for the image layer above it, you'll see that some of the photo on the image layer is sitting directly above the new content area, while the rest of the photo sits above the remaining transparent areas:



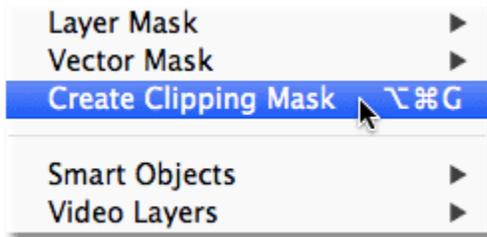
The preview thumbnail shows the filled content area on Layer 1 below the photo.

Let's see what happens this time when I go to create the clipping mask. As before, I'll turn the top layer back on by clicking its visibility icon, then I'll click on the layer itself to select it and make it active:



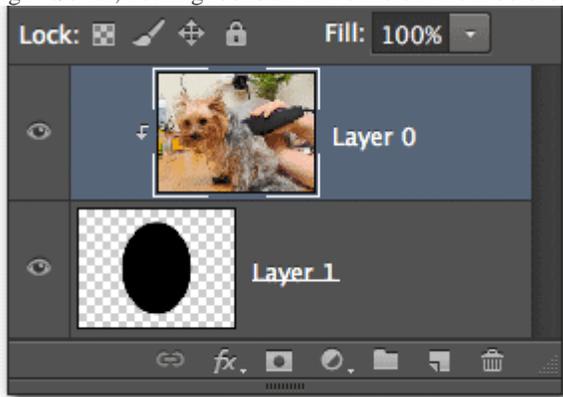
Selecting and turning on Layer 0.

I'll add the clipping mask by once again going up to the **Layer** menu at the top of the screen and choosing **Create Clipping Mask**:



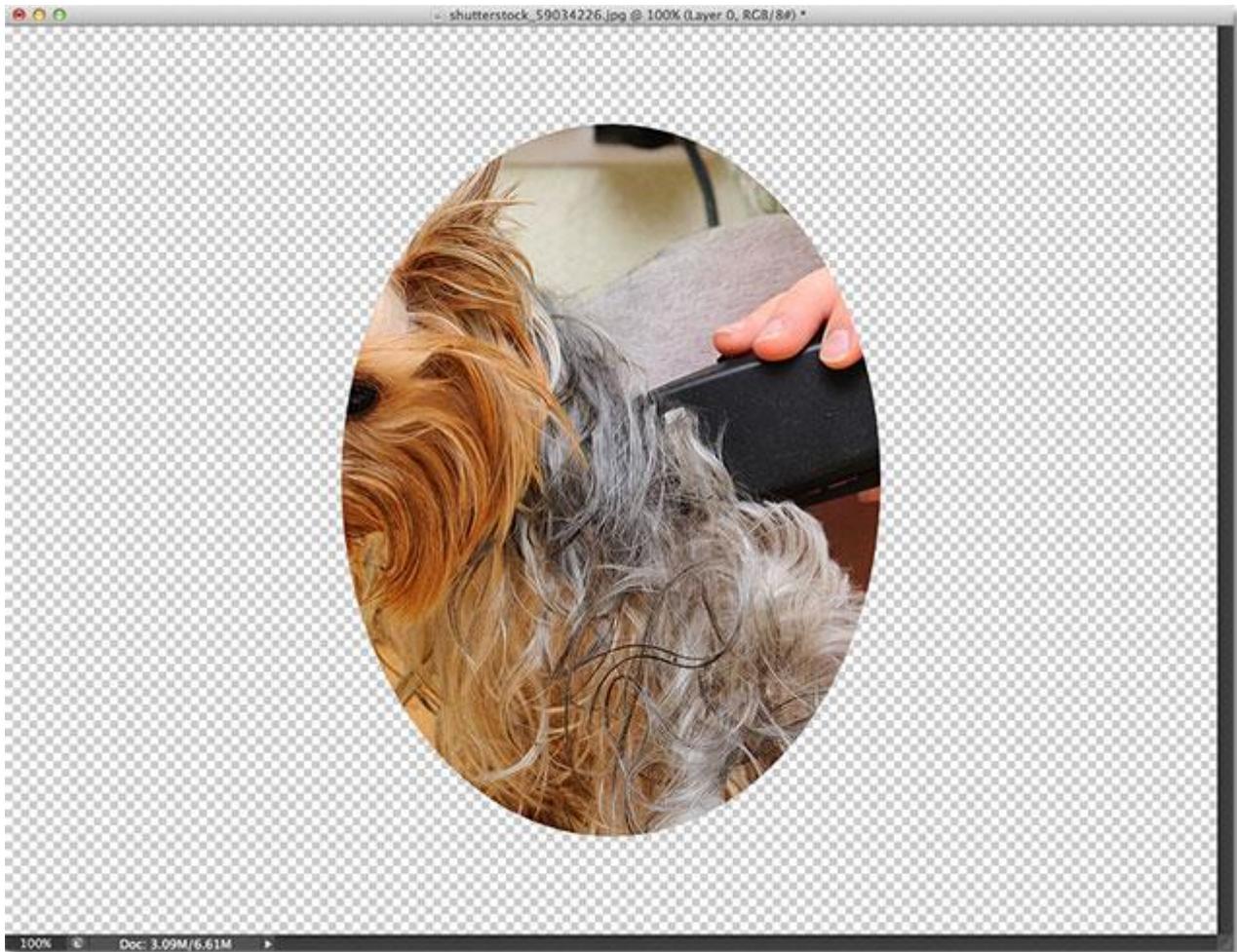
Once again going to Layer > Create Clipping Mask.

The Layers panel once again shows us that the top layer is now clipped to the layer below by indenting Layer 0 to the right. So far, nothing looks all that different from before:



The Layers panel again showing the clipping mask.

But when we look in the document window, we see something very much different than what we saw last time. While much of the photo is once again hidden because it's sitting above transparent areas on the layer below, the area of the photo that's sitting directly above the elliptical content area now remains completely visible:



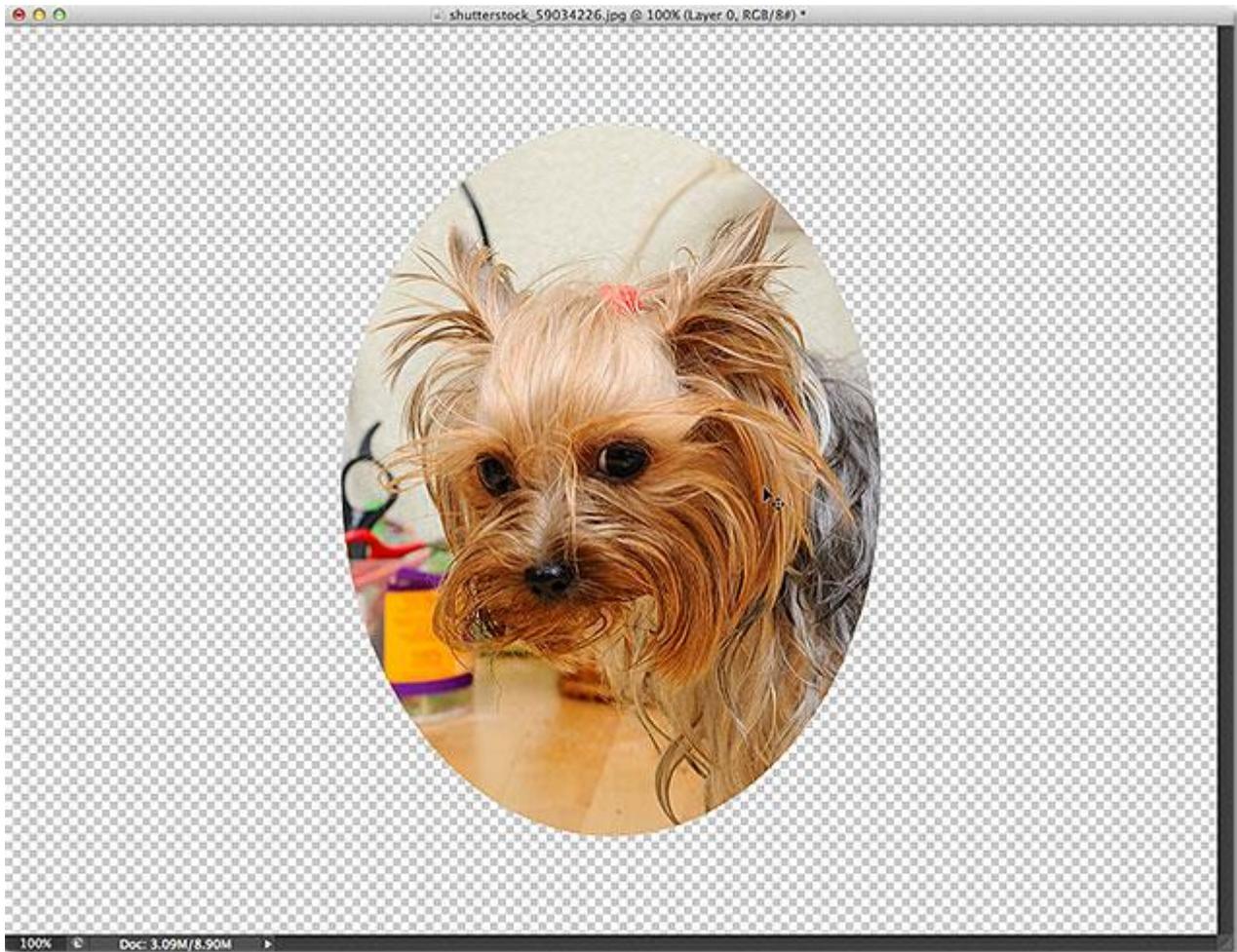
The part of the photo above the content area stays visible in the document.

Of course, the result might look better if the subject of my photo was centered inside the shape. Thankfully, one of the great features of clipping masks is that it's easy to move photos inside them. All I need to do is grab my **Move Tool** from the Tools panel:



Selecting the Move Tool.

Then with the Move Tool in hand and the image layer selected in the Layers panel, I can simply click and drag the photo into position inside the clipping mask:



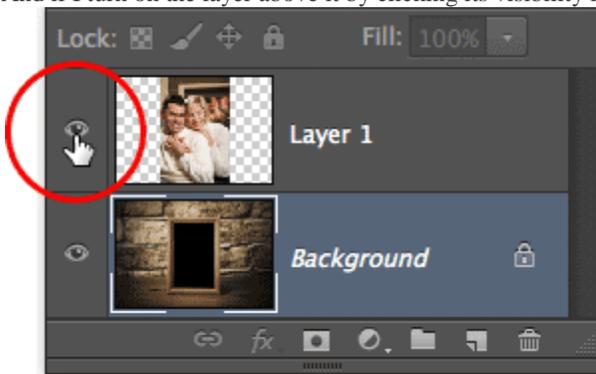
Click and drag images with the Move Tool to reposition them inside clipping masks.

Let's look at a common situation where a clipping mask would be used. Here's another document, this one containing two photos. The image on the bottom Background layer is of a photo frame (**old photo frame** from Shutterstock):



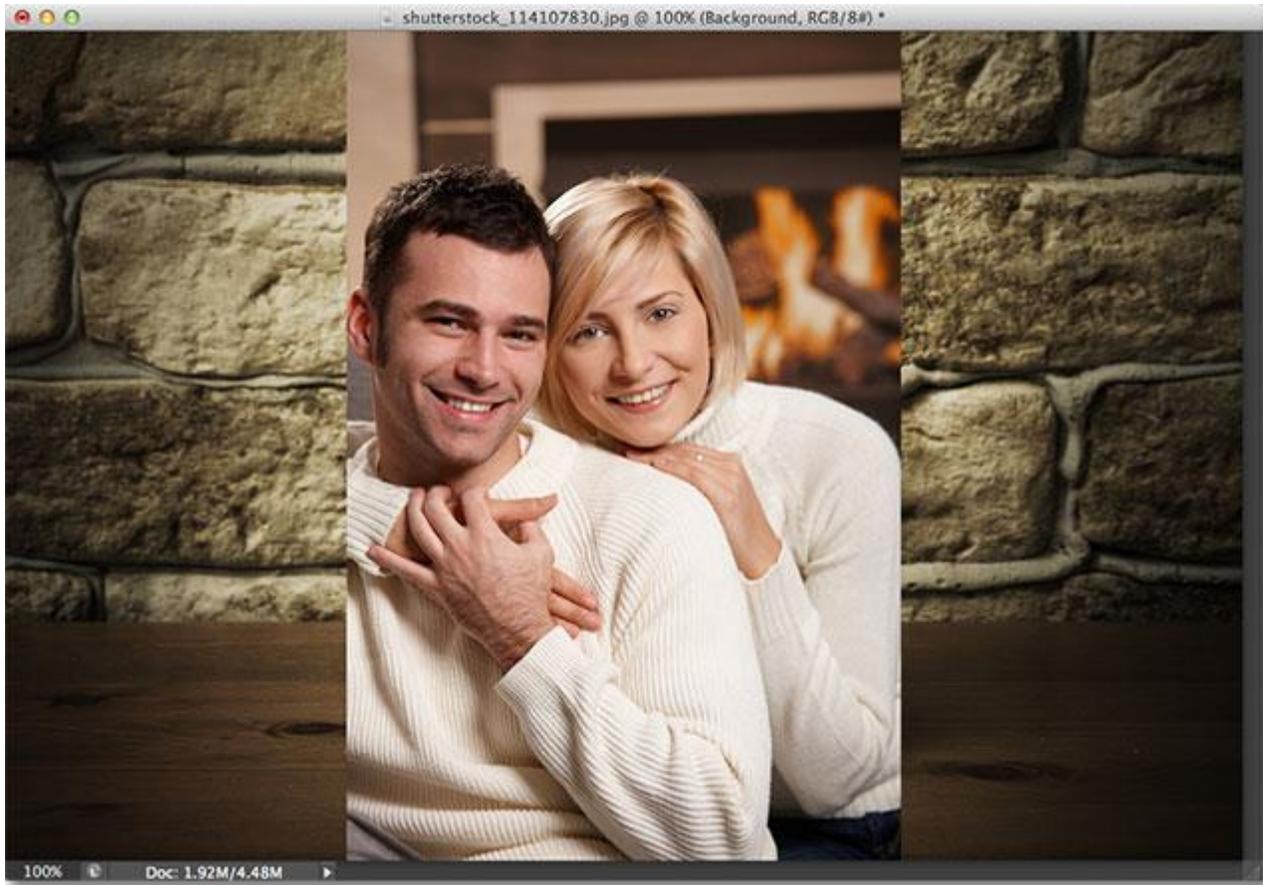
A photo of an old wooden frame.

And if I turn on the layer above it by clicking its visibility icon:



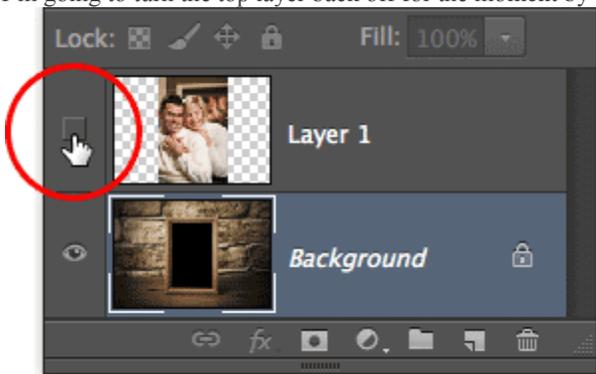
Clicking the visibility icon for Layer 1.

We see the photo I want to place inside the frame ([young couple photo](#) from Shutterstock):



The photo that will be going inside the frame.

I'm going to turn the top layer back off for the moment by clicking again on its visibility icon:



Turning the top layer back off.

To place the photo of the couple inside the frame using a clipping mask, I first need to select the area inside the frame. In this case, since the area inside the frame is solid black, I can easily select it with the **Magic Wand Tool** which I'll grab from the Tools panel. To get to it, I'll need to click and hold on the Quick Selection Tool until the fly-out menu appears and then select the Magic Wand Tool from the menu:



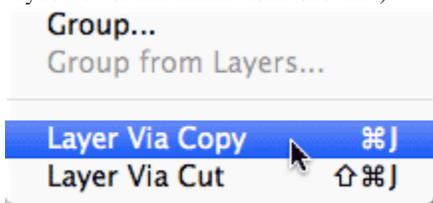
The Magic Wand Tool is nested in with the Quick Selection Tool.

With the photo frame layer active in the Layers panel, I'll click inside the frame with the Magic Wand Tool to instantly select all of that black area:



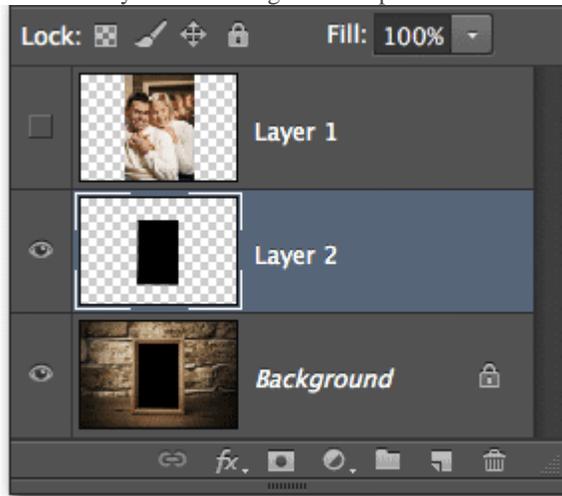
Clicking on the area inside the frame with the Magic Wand Tool to select it.

Next, I need to copy the selected area to its own layer. To do that, I'll go up to the **Layer** menu at the top of the screen, then I'll choose **New**, and then **Layer via Copy** (or I could simply press **Ctrl+J** (Win) / **Command+J** (Mac) on my keyboard for the much faster shortcut):



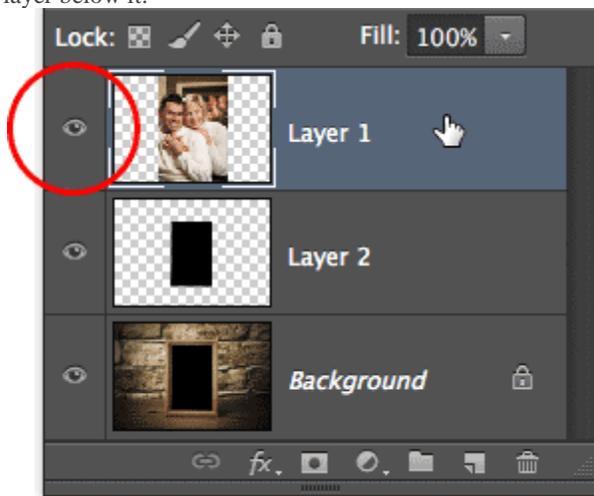
Going to **Layer > New > Layer via Copy**.

Nothing will seem to have happened in the document window, but if we look in the Layers panel, we see that the area inside the frame has been copied to its own layer above the original image. Notice in the layer's preview thumbnail that only the area inside the frame has been copied, which means it's the only part of the layer with actual content on it. The rest of the layer surrounding it is transparent:



The area inside the frame has been copied to a new layer.

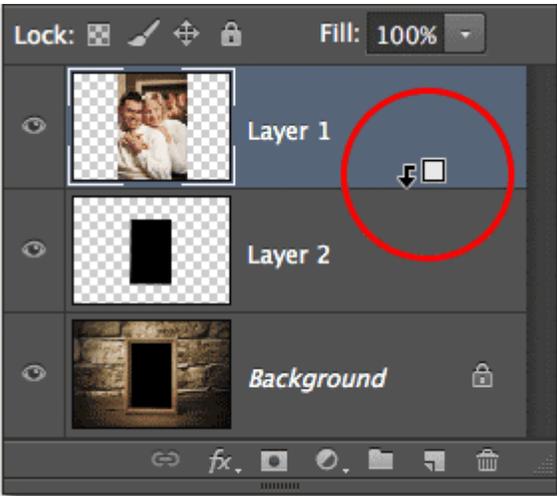
I'll turn the top layer back on by clicking its visibility icon, then I'll click on the layer itself to select it and make it active so we can add our clipping mask. As we learned earlier, we always want to select the layer that's going to be clipped to the layer below it:



Selecting and turning on Layer 1.

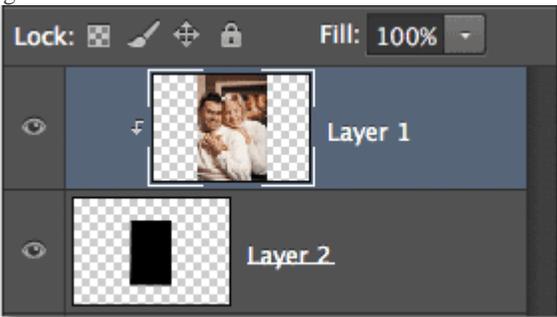
Let's go ahead and create our clipping mask. This time, instead of choosing the Create Clipping Mask command from under the Layer menu, we'll use a much faster and more common way, and that's by creating it directly from within the Layers panel.

All we need to do is press and hold the **Alt** (Win) / **Option** (Mac) key on the keyboard and hover our mouse cursor directly over the **horizontal dividing line** between the two layers we want to use with our clipping mask. When you see your mouse cursor change into the **clipping mask icon**, just click with your mouse:



Click between the two layers when your mouse cursor changes to the clipping mask icon.

The layer above will instantly be clipped to the layer below, with the Layers panel showing the top layer indented to the right:



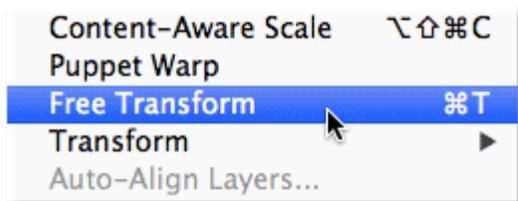
Layer 1 is now clipped to Layer 2 below it.

And in the document window, we see that the photo on Layer 1 now appears only inside the area of the frame we selected and copied to its own layer. The rest of the photo has been hidden from view because it sits over top of transparency on the clipping mask layer below it:



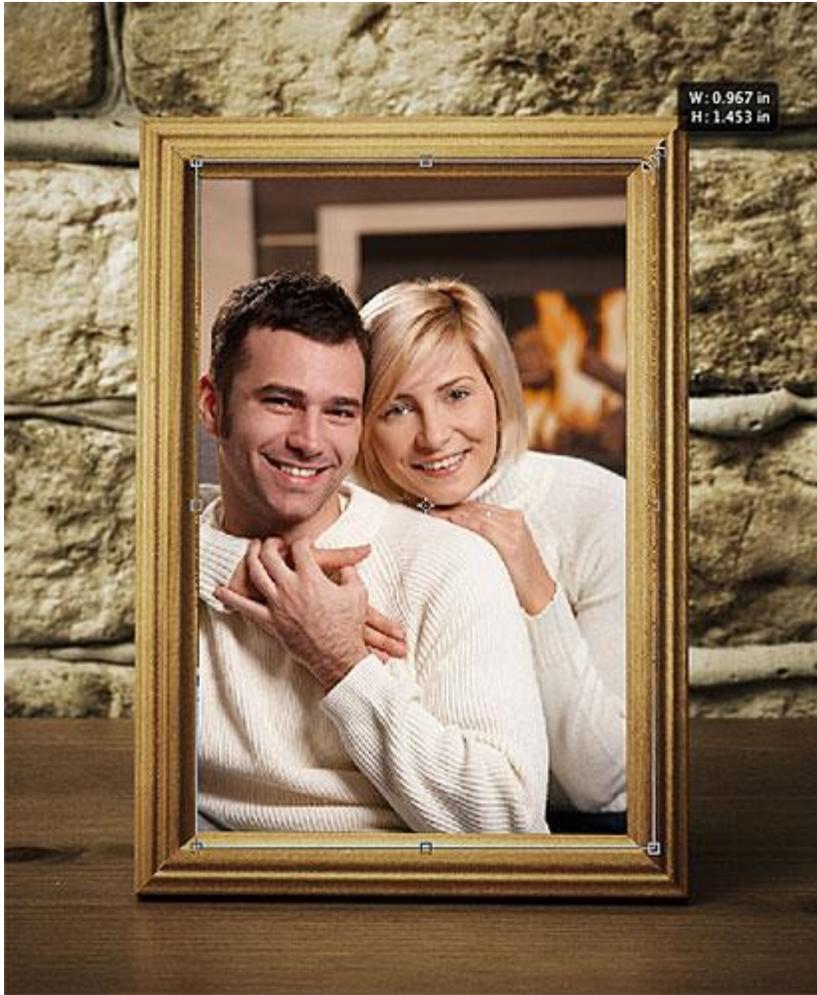
The photo is now clipped inside the frame thanks to the clipping mask.

We saw earlier that we can use Photoshop's Move Tool to move and reposition images around inside their clipping mask. We can also use the **Free Transform** command not only to move images inside clipping masks but also to resize them as needed. In my case here, I need to make the photo smaller so it fits more naturally inside the frame, so after making sure I have the photo's layer selected in the Layers panel, I'll quickly go up to the **Edit** menu at the top of the screen and choose **Free Transform**:



Going to **Edit > Free Transform**.

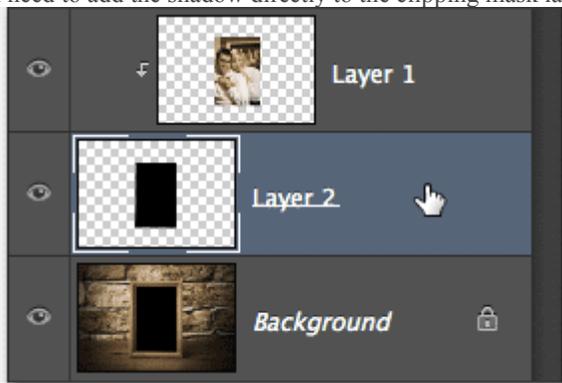
This brings up the Free Transform box and handles around the photo. You'll notice when resizing images inside clipping masks that even though you can only see the area that fits inside the clipping mask shape, the Free Transform box and handles will appear around the **actual dimensions of the image** which includes the area currently hidden from view. Simply click and drag any of the **corner handles** to resize the image as needed. Hold down your **Shift** key as you drag the handles to constrain the aspect ratio of the image so you don't accidentally distort the overall shape of it. When you're done, press **Enter** (Win) / **Return** (Mac) to accept the transformation and exit out of the Free Transform command:



Resizing the photo inside the clipping mask shape with Free Transform.

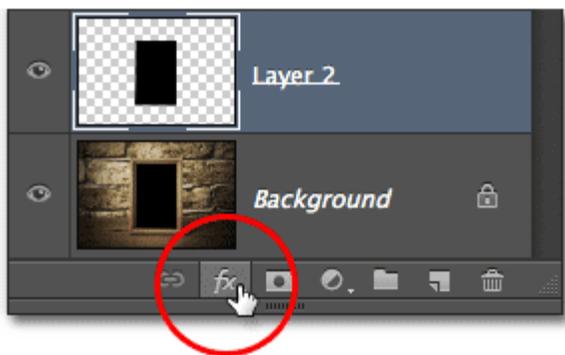
There's just one more finishing touch needed to make things look more realistic, and that's to add a bit of a shadow around the inner edges of the frame, which brings us to yet another thing we can do with clipping masks – **add layer styles** to them!

I need to add the shadow directly to the clipping mask layer itself, so I'll click on Layer 2 in the Layers panel to select it:



Making the clipping mask layer the active layer.

With the clipping mask layer selected, I'll click on the **Layer Styles** icon at the bottom of the Layers panel:



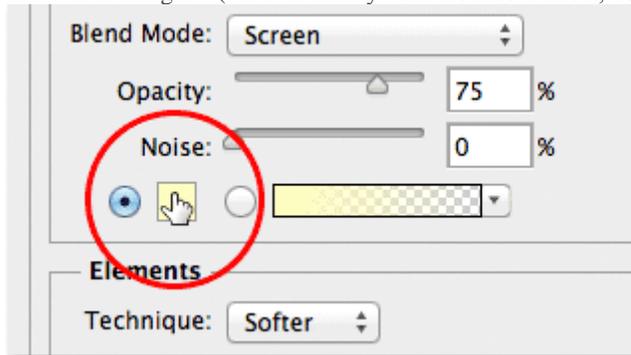
Clicking the Layer Styles icon.

Then I'll choose **Inner Glow** from the list of layer styles that appears:



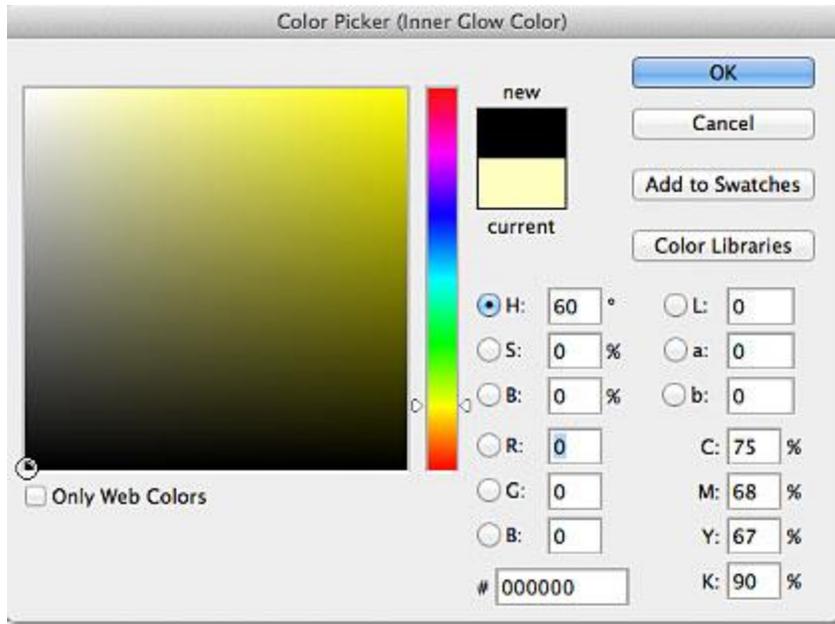
Choosing an Inner Glow layer style.

This opens Photoshop's Layer Style dialog box set to the Inner Glow options in the middle column. I first need to change the color of the glow (since I actually want a shadow effect, not a glow effect), so I'll click on the **color swatch**:



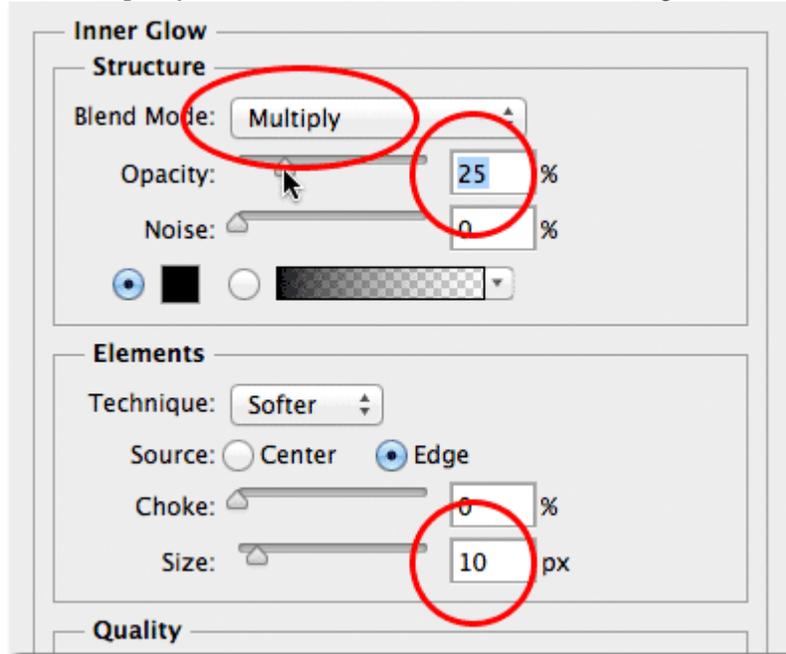
Clicking the color swatch.

This will open the **Color Picker**. I'll choose **black** from the Color Picker, then I'll click OK to close out of it:



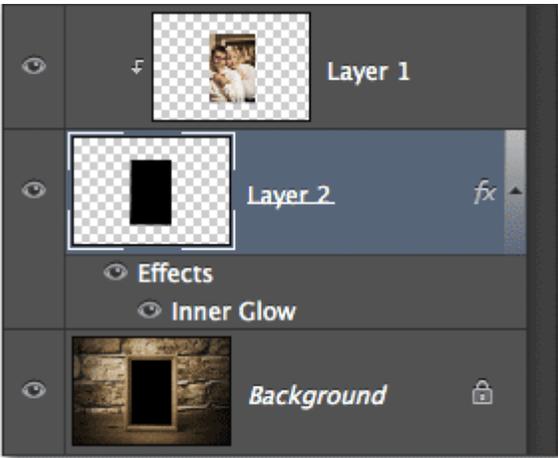
Choosing black from the Color Picker.

Back in the Layer Style dialog box, I'll change the **Blend Mode** of the Inner Glow from Screen to **Multiply**, then I'll lower the **Opacity** down to **25%** and I'll increase the **Size** of the glow (shadow) to **10px**:



The rest of the Inner Glow settings.

I'll click OK to close out of the Layer Style dialog box, and with that, we're done! If we take one final look in the Layers panel, we can see the newly added Inner Glow style that's been added to the clipping mask layer (Layer 2):



Any layer styles we've added appear below the layer in the Layers panel.

And here, thanks to the ease and flexibility of clipping masks, is my final result:



The final result.

And there we have it! That's the basics and essentials of working with clipping masks in Photoshop!