

Replacing a Drab Sky with a Blue Sky

by D. L. Ashliman



These instructions apply specifically to Photoshop Elements, version 11. Other versions (including Photoshop CC) are similar, although some tools may require different pathways.

Find a picture with a drab sky and a simple horizon line. Sharply defined roof-lines, mountains, or flags work well. Lacey trees or people with big hair are hard to isolate.

Choose a picture that contains nothing but blue sky (or a sky with interesting cloud patterns).

Open both photos in the Editor, using the “Expert” option.

Under the Window menu activate your main photo (not the new sky). Alternatively, you can activate a photo by clicking twice on its thumbnail in the Project Bin.

Under the Layer menu choose “Duplicate Layer.” You now have two identical layers. The purpose of this extra step is to retain all the metadata (capture date, camera information, tags, star ratings, etc.) contained in your main photo. Using the sky picture as your background will work, but then you will have the sky photo’s metadata in your new photo, which is not what you want.

Your two identical layers are visible in a panel on the right-hand side of your screen. If this panel is not visible, activate it under the Window menu. Its name is “Layers” (logical enough!)

Under the Window menu or from the Project Bin activate your sky photo. Under the Select menu choose “All.” Under the Edit menu choose “Copy.”

With the Window menu return to your main photo, which now has two identical layers. Activate the bottom layer by clicking once on its icon in the Layers panel. Under the Edit menu choose “Paste.” Your project now has three layers: the sky photo sandwiched between the two identical main-subject layers.

If your sky photo was taken with a different camera, it may be the wrong size. You can resize it with the Free Transform tool (under the menu “Image -- Transform” – in Photoshop PS5 this tool is under the “Edit” menu). Confirm this operation by clicking once on the green arrow at the bottom of your image. You can also make color changes to the sky at this point. Be sure to hide the topmost layer (with the small eyeball icon) and to activate the sky layer before trying to make any changes to the sky!

Your next task is to erase selected portions of the top layer to allow the layer immediately beneath it (here a blue sky photo) to show through. Different techniques are possible.

Select and Delete Method (my preference for a subject with a simple skyline and a uniformly colored drab sky):

Activate the topmost layer. Use the “Quick Selection Tool,” “Magic Wand Tool,” or “Magnetic Lasso Tool” to select the drab sky. With the drab sky selected, I like to tighten the line of “marching ants” around the main subject by following these steps: Select > Modify > Expand.... Choose a value between 2 and 5 pixels. This step cuts into your main subject slightly, but in so doing you reduced the risk of creating an artificial-looking halo around your subject.

Delete the selected drab sky by pressing the backspace key. Your new sky will magically appear in the hole that you thus create.

Follow the pathway Select > Deselect.

You can clean up around the edges with the Eraser Tool, using a very small hard brush for close work, and a broad brush for larger areas.

Layer Mask Method (my preference for a main subject with a complicated skyline):

Activate the topmost layer.

Create a layer mask. Do this by clicking once on the layer mask icon at the top of the Layers panel. It is a shaded rectangle with a white circle inside. A white rectangle will appear beside the thumbnail image of your top layer. This is the layer mask.

How the layer mask functions:

By painting black over the mask you erase an area of the layer that it is attached to.

By painting white over a blackened portion of the mask, you restore the erased area.

To use the layer mask:

Be sure that the mask is activated. Click once on its icon.

Note the color swatches at the bottom left side of your screen. Whatever color they were at the beginning of your session, the top swatch is now black, and the bottom swatch is now white.

Select the Brush Tool (its icon looks like a water-color brush). At the top of your screen you can change the hardness and size of your brush. Begin with a very large hard brush (perhaps 500 pixels wide).

Paint across the portions of your main image that you wish to erase. This will expose the blue sky beneath this layer.

Note that your black paint strokes appear on the mask's icon at the right of your screen.

You can use a selection tool to isolate part of the image before applying the brush strokes. If you do this, only the selected portion of your photo will be effected by the brush strokes. Be sure to choose "Deselect" from the Select menu before continuing.

To erase the portions of your image close to the subject that you wish to keep, choose a much smaller brush size.

If you erase part of your main subject by mistake you can easily undo the damage by following these steps:

Change the brush color from black to white by clicking on the two-headed arrow above the color swatches at the bottom left of your screen. The active color is now white. Paint over the portion of your main photo that you wish to restore.

Change the active color back to black to continue removing unwanted portions of your top layer.

If you wish to further edit your main image, be sure that its thumbnail is activated and not the mask. Click once on the thumbnail that you wish to activate.

Additional Editing:

You may wish to reposition or resize your extracted image over its new background.

Activate the layer that you wish to move.

Choose the Move Tool. It is located at the top of your tool panel, and its icon is crossed double-headed arrows with an additional arrow pointing upward. Drag your extracted image to its new position.

You can resize the image with the same tool by using the handles at the four corners.

You can change its aspect ratio by dragging the handles in the middle of the top, bottom, or side edges.

You can rotate the extracted image by dragging the curved arrows that appear when you place the cursor just outside the corners.

The last operations (resizing, changing the aspect ratio, and rotating) require that you confirm the operation by clicking on the green arrow at the bottom of the image.

Additional editing and sharpening can be done at this stage. Remember: you can make changes only to an active layer. Unless you have flattened or merged layers, you must edit your sky and your main photo (the top layer) separately.

Before closing your project, you may want to save it in three versions:

1. If you want to be able to make future changes to the separate layers, you must save the photo in the PSD format (the default for any project with layers). This will be a very large file, up to 100 times larger than an equivalent JPEG file.
2. For emailing and printing save a second copy as a JPEG (medium quality, unless you want to turn it into a huge enlargement). Choose “Save As...” from the “File” menu, and select the JPEG format.
3. To save only the extracted portion of your top layer, for possible use in other projects, follow these steps:
 - Before flattening your multi-layered image save it in whatever version you wish to keep.
 - Delete the bottom two layers of your image one at a time by right clicking on each one’s icon in the right-hand panel, then selecting “Delete Layer.”
 - Save you remaining layer (the cut-out main subject) as a PSD file. I like to use a file name similar to “originalname-extracted.psd.” In a later project you can paste this extracted image over any background of your choice.