Collages

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Definition. Also called a montage, a collage is an artistic work consisting of multiple items pasted together to create a single composition. Instead of scissors and glue, our main tool will be Photoshop Elements, version 11. Other versions and other photo editing programs will also work, but the specific steps outlined below will differ somewhat.

Getting started. The first step is to decide which images you will include in your collage. Open your selected photos in the "Expert" mode. Thumbnails of your photos should be visible in the "Photo Bin" at the bottom of your screen. If not, press the button "Photo Bin" in the lower left corner. For my sample collage, I will be working with these four photos, taken on a week-long bicycle trip through France's Alsace region.

Choosing a background. You may use an existing photograph for your background, or—as I will do here—a blank file. For this option follow the pathway File > New > Blank File. Choose the following values:

- Name: Choose a descriptive name, such as "Alsace Collage."
- Preset: U. S. Paper.
- Width: 11 inches. (presuming that your final product will be horizontal)

- Height: 8.5 inches.
- Resolution: 300 pixels per inch. This is the maximum resolution of most printers.
- Color Mode: RGB Color.
- Background Contents: White. We will change this color in a later step.

With the values filled in, press "OK." Your blank background should now appear in your Photo Bin along with the other photos that you previously opened.

Coloring your background. I like to coordinate the background color with one of the photographs in the collage. To do this activate the photograph that contains the color you wish to use. Do this by clicking twice on its image in the Photo Bin, or you can select the file from the list under the menu Window. Make sure that you are still in the Expert mode.

Choose the eyedropper tool. Click once on the area of color that you wish to copy. In my example I am using the blue sky behind the French flag. Your chosen color will now appear in the foremost swatch at the bottom of your tool list. Now activate your blank white file by clicking twice on its image in the Photo Bin.

Select the Paint Bucket tool. In Photoshop CS5 the Paint Bucket Tool may be hidden behind the Gradient Tool. Click once anywhere on your plain white background, and your new color will spread evenly across it.

Pasting images onto your background: Activate the image that you wish to add to your background.

- If you wish to use the entire image, follow the pathway Select > All. With the entire image selected, follow the pathway Edit > Copy. In my example, I am using the bottom two photographs uncut.
  - If you wish to use only a portion of your image, use your favorite selection tool to select part of your image. Selection of just part of an image can be simple or complicated, depending on how sharply defined it is. With your selection completed (surrounded by a line of marching ants), follow the pathway Edit > Copy. In my example, I am extracting the flag and the sign from their respective backgrounds.
  - Additional information about extracting part of a photograph is contained in my tutorial on "Extracting."
  - If the image that you wish to paste onto your collage is an extracted portion of a larger photo, select the entire image following this pathway: Select > All. Then copy your selection following this pathway: Edit > Copy.
- Your copied image is now in the computer's memory (also known as the clipboard). Activate your background by clicking twice on its thumbnail in the Photo Bin. Follow the pathway Edit > Paste to superimpose the image over your background. Do not be concerned if it completely hides the background. You can easily scale it down to the desired size.
- Each item that you paste onto your background creates a new layer in your composite image.

Resizing and repositioning your pasted image. Activate the layer that contains the image that you wish to resize or reposition. Choose the Move tool. Its icon is a cross plus an arrowhead. Click once on the image that you want to resize or move. Handles will appear at the corners and sides of the image. Please note that if you are using Photoshop CS5 (or related versions) you cannot resize the image using the Move tool. Instead, follow the pathway Edit > Free Transform.

- Drag in or out on a corner handle to resize an image without altering its proportions.
- Drag in or out on a top, bottom, or side handle to change its proportions. You can use this technique to make a person look thinner or thicker (be careful here!).
- Move the cursor just outside of a corner handle and it will change its shape to a curve with two arrowheads. Use this option to rotate your image to any desired angle.
- Any resizing or rotation of an image must by completed by clicking once on the green checkmark, or canceled by clicking once on the red cancel button. You cannot proceed without completing this step.
- You can move your image anywhere on your background by clicking and dragging with the Move tool.
- At this stage you can further edit your individual images, but remember: You can only make changes to an image whose layer is active. In some instances the active layer may be hidden by a layer above it. To see what you are doing, make an upper layer temporarily invisible by clicking on the eyeball icon next to its thumbnail in the Layers Panel at the right of your screen.
- Note also that a layer does not have to be 100% opaque. With the layer activated, change the 100% opacity number to a lower value, letting the layer beneath it show through to some extent.

Text. It is easy to add a caption to any photograph, including a multi-layered collage.

- First, choose the Text Tool. Its icon is an upper-case T.
- The "Tool Options" panel should appear at the bottom of your screen.
- Under Type, you will probably select "Horizontal."
- Pull-down menus let you choose:
   - Any font that is installed in your computer.
   - Font size.
   - Color.
   - And—depending on the font that you have selected—a variety of styles, such as **bold** or *italics*.
- Additional text options include alignment (left, centered, or right) anti-aliasing (which allows for smoother diagonal lines, such as those found in an upper-case A). Keep this box checked.
- With your initial choices made (you can change them later), click once where you wish your caption to appear.
- Type your message. Click the green checkmark to finalize your typing. This automatically selects the Move tool, allowing you to drag your text box to a new position, rotate it, or resize it.
- Complete your action by clicking once on the green checkmark.
- Additional decorative effects are possible with the options under the "T" icon with a curved line beneath it, found at the top of your screen. With the Text tool selected, click once on your text, and this special effects icon will appear. Click once on it, and numerous options appear. Experiment with the various curves and waves that you can add to your caption.
- Your caption can be further edited with the text tool and essentially the same techniques used in most word-processing packages.

Layers. My sample composite image now consists of six layers: a plain blue background, four photos, and a text box. This photo, saved "as is" in the psd format with all six layers intact, is 30.6 megabytes large. The advantage of doing this is obvious: I can come back at any time and make changes to the

individual parts of the photo. The disadvantage is also obvious: the large file size will fill up my hard drive, and files of this size cannot normally be emailed or pasted into other applications. The same photo, flattened and converted to a medium-quality jpeg, is only 1.1 megabytes large, and when viewed is indistinguishable from the original psd file.

My recommendation for saving collages. Follow the pathway File > Save As, then choose the location, filename, and format that you want.

- Save your entire collage in the psd format, if you think that you may want to redo parts of it at a later date.
- Save your collage in the jpeg format for emailing, printing, and ordinary viewing purposes. Choosing the jpeg format will flatten the image, making future editing of the separate parts impossible, but has the obvious advantage of small size and universal portability.

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My final collage.