



Design Solutions: Actions in Adobe® Photoshop®

We all know that Photoshop can suck up your time better than any vacuum. If you want to spend more of that time working creatively you want to add Actions to your tool set.

How can actions help you?

Consider the work you do in Photoshop. There are probably certain steps that you're repeating for each image. Even if it's just a step or two, they can add up to a lot of time and mouse clicks. By recording actions for these tasks you can spend more time working creatively. Actions can be run on individual files, or on whole folders of files by using the Batch or Image Processor commands in either Photoshop or Adobe Bridge. Using Bridge you can even run an action on selected files (instead of a whole folder.)

There are dozens of actions available for free download on the Web. We're going to show you how to create your own actions for those everyday tasks.

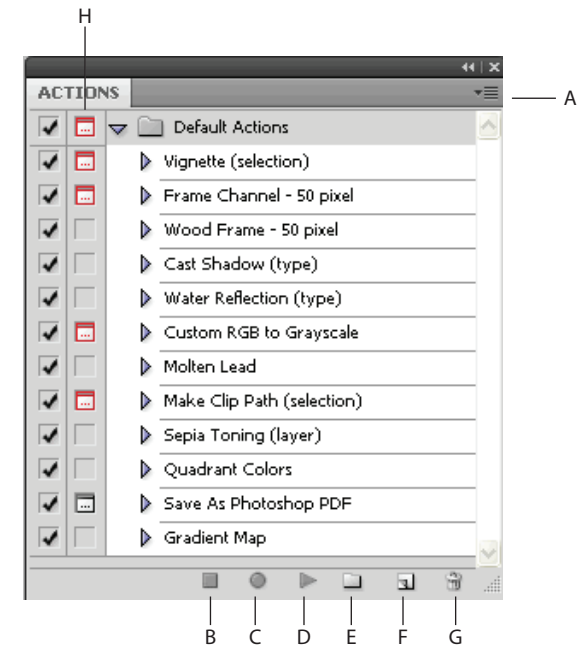
Start with a test run

“Plan ahead” has always been good advice. Sure, it takes a couple of minutes to set up an action. And it makes you take a good look at your workflow. In the end, this will allow you to work more efficiently. Typically you'll have more luck if you walk through the steps that you want to record *before* you record them.

Create an Action

In our first example we will create an action that adds a Curves adjustment layer and applies the Auto setting.

1. **Make sure you have a file open**
When you create an action you are instructing Photoshop to record your steps. You don't typically want to record the step of opening a particular file. You're going to want to run the completed action on a file that is already open or a whole bunch of



Photoshop Actions panel

A. Actions panel menu B. Stop button C. Record button D. Play button E. New action set F. Create new action G. Trash H. Modal control

files. We want to make sure we have a file open before we create our new action.

2. **Display the Actions panel**
Choose Window > Actions to display the Actions panel. (Observe the folder of



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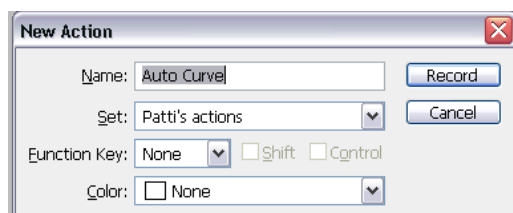


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Default Actions. You may find something there you didn't realize you needed.)

3. Create a new action

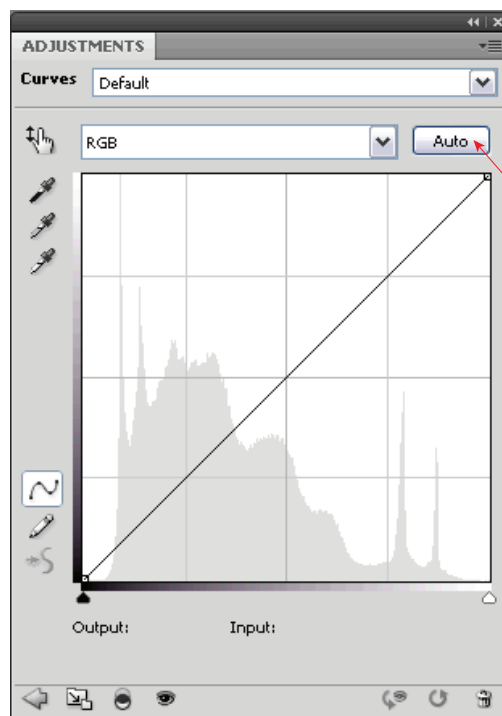
Click the folder icon to create a new action set for your actions. You can name it [your name]'s Actions. Then click the Create new action icon to create a new action. We'll name it **Auto Curve**. Observe that you can



apply a color and a keyboard shortcut to the action. Click OK. Photoshop is now recording every step you take.

4. Step by step

For our action we will choose Layer > New Adjustment Layer > Curves. Then we'll click the Auto button to apply the Auto settings. (If you're more comfortable



using Levels, you can choose Layer > New Adjustment Layer > Levels instead.)

5. Save

Choose File > Save As and save your file with a new name.

6. Stop recording

Click the stop recording button. That's it!

Actions and Saving

You'll notice that we added a Save As command to our action. If you run the action on multiple files using the Batch command it must have a Save command or none of your files will be saved. However, if you're running the action on a single file you won't want the Save command—it will just overwrite the file that's there, so you'll check the box next to the Save step to turn it off.

Use the action

You can use the action you just created on an open file, on a folder of files, or if you use Adobe Bridge—on selected files.



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Run the action on a single file

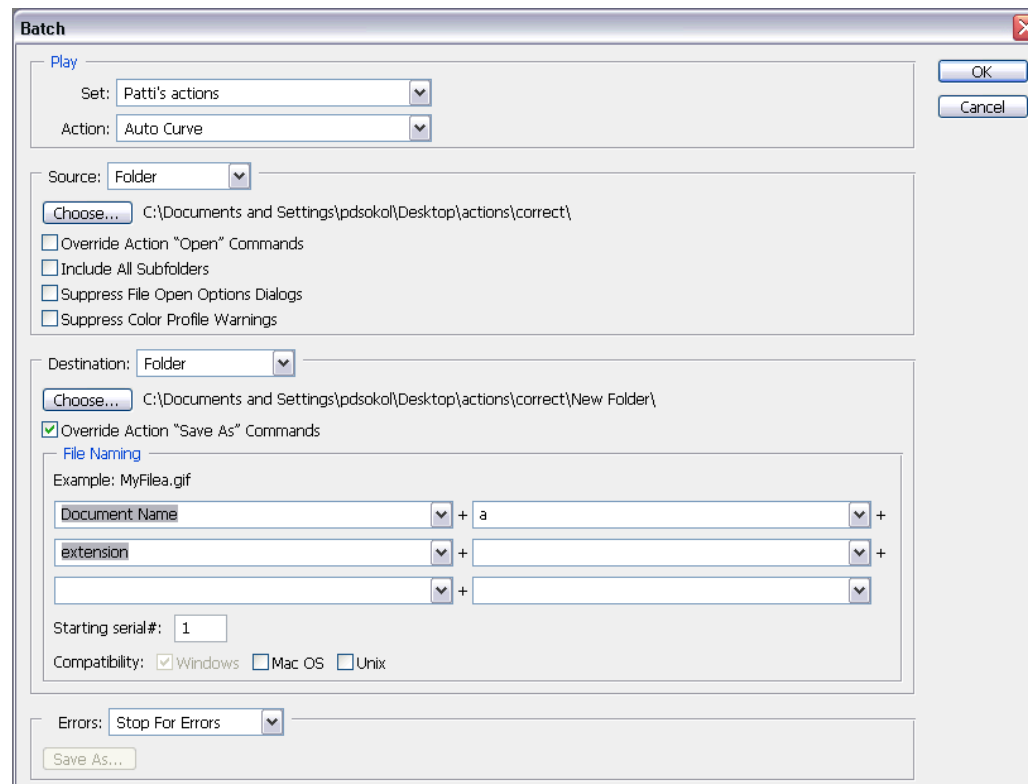
With a file open, select your action from the Actions panel. Uncheck the Save step so that it won't save to the name and location you choose earlier. Click the play button. Don't blink!

About the Batch dialog box

Let's take a look at the Batch dialog box. In Photoshop, choose File > Automate > Batch.

It's pretty straightforward, choose the action set and action that you want to play. Choose your source folder.

If your action includes an open command you'll want to check the box to Override Action "Open" Commands. (Remember, we started with an open file so there wouldn't be an open command recorded. Therefore, we should not check this box.) Check the boxes to suppress open options dialogs and color profile warnings.



Choose the destination folder. Check the box to Override Action "Save As" Commands. Again, we needed to record the Save As so that the file will get saved, but we want the Batch dialog box settings to control location and file name.

You have all sorts of options for naming the file, including serial numbers and date.



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Run the action on multiple files

There are a couple of methods available for running an action on multiple files. From within Photoshop you can choose:

- » File > Automate > Batch or File > Scripts > Image Processor.
- » From Bridge you can choose Tools > Photoshop > Batch, or Tools > Photoshop > Image Processor.

The Image Processor allows you to run the action while changing file type or resolution. Using Bridge offers the benefit of allowing you to select specific files and run the Batch or Image Processor commands on the selected files.

Practice—Apply a custom curve adjustment to multiple files

Let's take the next step. Suppose that you have several images that were shot under the same lighting conditions. Perhaps in

a studio or even outdoors. Wouldn't it be great if you could apply a custom Curves adjustment to all of the images?

You'll begin by correcting one image and saving a Curves Preset.

1. **Open one of the images and add a Curves adjustment layer**
Use the black point and white point eyedroppers to adjust your image. Click with the black point eyedropper in the area of your image that should be black. Click with the white point eyedropper in the area of your image that should be white. Drag the curve if further adjustment is needed.
2. **Save a Preset**
When the image is adjusted to your liking, choose Save Curves Preset from the Curves panel menu. Give the Preset a meaningful name.
3. **Create the Action**
Now create a new action using the same steps we followed before. This time instead of clicking Auto choose Load Curves Preset from the Curves panel menu. Remem-

ber to save the file. Run the action on the group of files.

More options

Let's explore the other options available to us in the Actions panel.

Edit an action

What if you want to change a value that you entered when you were recording the action? It's easy, simply double-click on that step in the action and change the value.

And if you want to add a step or two? Select the step in the action that the new steps will follow and click the Record button.

Delete a step by selecting it and clicking the trashcan icon at the bottom of the Actions panel.

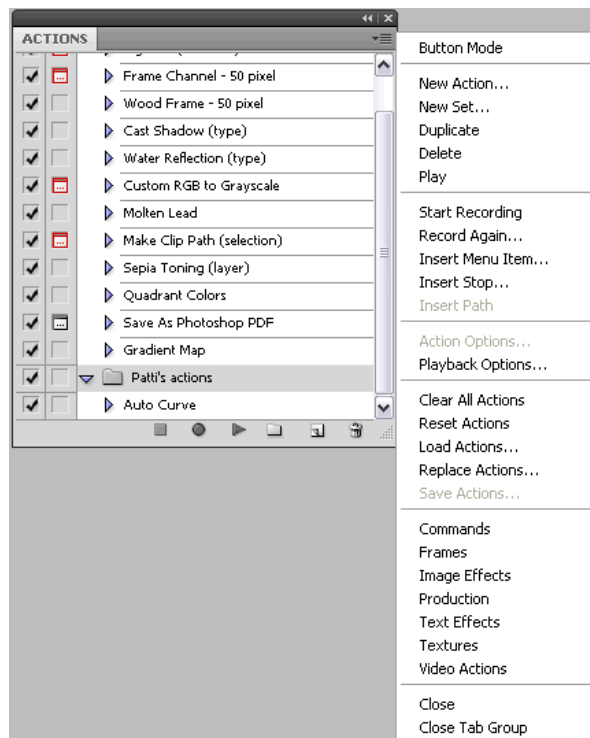


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Prompt for input

What if you want to be able to enter a custom value in a dialog box? You can set your action to display a dialog box when it gets to that point. This is called a modal control. (See the screen shot on page 1.) The easiest way to do this is after you have recorded the action. Simply click in the second column next to that step. You'll see an icon that represents a dialog box. Be aware, if you click in the second column next to the action name you will be setting that behavior for all the dialog boxes in the action. You'll be warned that this cannot be undone. You can always turn each one off, manually, one... at... a... time.

Insert a stop

Whether you plan to share this action or not, communication is a good thing. Choose Insert Stop from the Actions panel menu to type a message that will appear at that point in the action. Be sure to click the Allow Continue button so that you (or someone else) can continue running the action.

Button Mode

Button mode is for those of you who would like to be able to run an action just by clicking a button. Choose Button Mode from the Actions panel menu. Remember that you chose a color when you created your action? That shows up now. To change the color or keyboard shortcut turn off Button Mode, select the Action and choose Action Options from the Actions panel menu.

Turn off a step

Let's say you want to run all of the action except one step. Simply click the check mark next to that step to turn it off.

Practice—Record an action with multiple steps

Let's record an action that has more than one step. We'll record an action that adds



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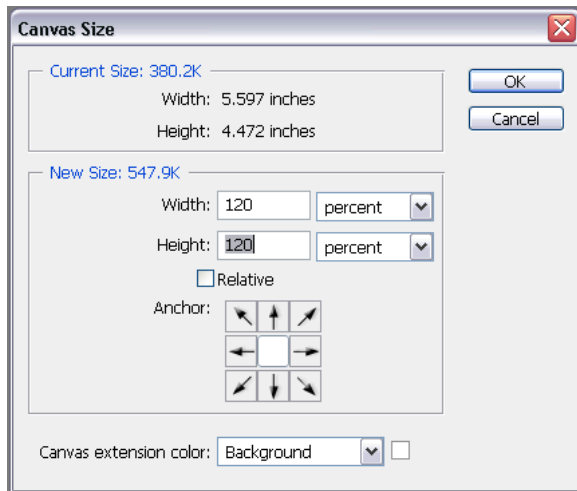
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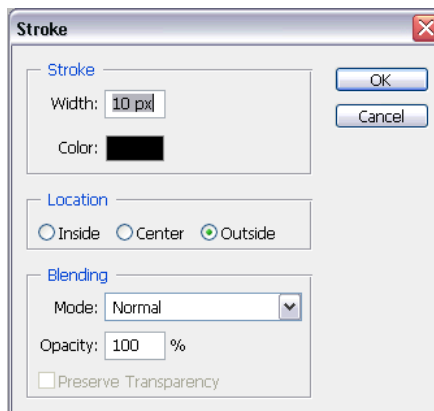
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canvas to our image, puts a black outline around it, and finally adds a drop shadow.

1. Before you begin



Make sure you're working with an image that has a single layer named Background. Set your foreground and background colors to their defaults of black and white.



2. Create a new action

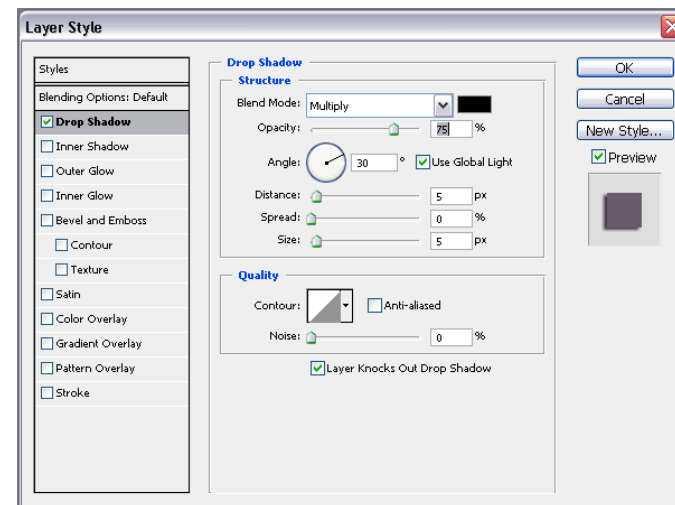
Name it **Shadow Frame 10 px** and save it in your actions folder. Click OK. You're now recording.

3. Duplicate the Background layer

Right-click on the word Background in the Layers panel and choose Duplicate Layer. You can name the layer or accept the default of Background copy.

4. Add canvas

Choose Image > Canvas Size. I like to change the units from inches to percent. That makes the action useful regardless of the original image size. Let's set both the width and the height to 120 percent. Make



sure the center square is selected for anchor position.

5. Add the stroke

Make sure that Background copy is the active layer. Choose Edit > Stroke. Set a stroke width (I chose 10 px) and then click to set the Location to Outside.

6. Add the drop shadow

With Background copy still active, choose Layer > Layer Style > Drop Shadow. Turn on the preview and modify the settings until you're happy with the result.



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7. Save and stop recording

In the old days I'd probably flatten the image. But these days I prefer to maintain the editability of the drop shadow effect. So we'll choose Save As and give it a name. Then click the stop recording button. You can now run that action on any image that you'd like to have a border and a drop shadow.

change the settings in the Preferences menu.

Use Bridge to run an action on selected files (rather than a whole folder.) Use the Filter panel to help you select the images. Use the Image Processor to resize, output to different format, and run an action all at the same time.

Look online for lots of free actions. Start by checking out the [Photoshop Exchange](#).

<http://www.adobe.com/exchange>

You can also check out the links on my Delicious page:

<http://www.delicious.com/pdsokol>

Final tips

Don't assume. Be sure that your starting image is what you expect. For example, if it already has multiple layers you might get an unexpected result.

Keep it simple. It may be easier to run one action and then another than to write one long complex action.

Use the History panel. The History panel can help you troubleshoot your action. Remember that by default the History panel only keeps track of the last 20 steps you performed. If you need to see more



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