

[Automate Your Favorite Photoshop Routines](#)

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If you find yourself repeating the same tasks in Photoshop, it's time to learn how to write a Photoshop action.

You can automate many routine tasks using simple text files that are recorded macro-style. Whether it's converting an image for the Web or making a color photo into a black and white image, you can reduce hundreds of Photoshop steps to the click of a single button. Actions are one of the most powerful features in Photoshop's tool chest. And if you aren't using actions, then you aren't taking advantage of Photoshop's potential. Let's dive in and see what you're missing.

Actions Defined

Actions are mini recordings of commands. These text files store a kind of shorthand that only Photoshop can read. Once it reads the commands, it applies them sequentially to any image. While that may sound difficult, it isn't. In simpler terms, you load or create an action, store it in the action palette, and whenever you want to repeat the processes covered by the action, you hit Play. That's all there is to it.

Getting Started

Open the Actions palette. (Hit the F9 function key, or go to Windows -> Show Actions.)

Using the Action Palette

1. **Action set folder:** This is where you store sets of actions. Actions must be saved in "sets." A set can contain between one and 100 actions. I suggest that you put related actions together in sets. For example, put all of your sharpening actions in one set, and all your resize and rotate actions in another.
2. **Action:** This is the actual set of commands recorded in macro form. You have to select this to ensure the correct action is being applied to the image.

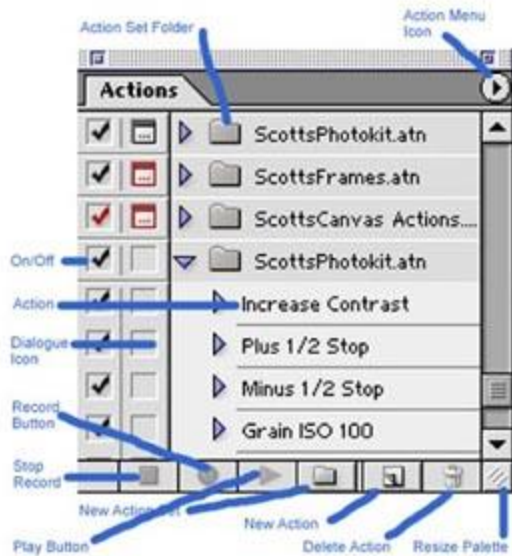


Figure 1. This is the Photoshop Actions palette in Edit mode

3. **On/Off command:** This turns an action (or an effect nested inside of an action) on or off.
4. **Dialogue icon:** Requires user intervention. When the action is running, the user may click this to modify the highlighted command. If it is turned off, Photoshop will execute the defaults for that command.
5. **Play button:** Begins playing an action (or set of actions).
6. **Record button:** Starts recording (or resumes) recording (not in button mode).
7. **Stop record:** When finished running an action, hit this button (not in button mode).
8. **New set:** Creates a new set in which to place your actions (not in button mode).
9. **New action:** Creates a new action within the selected set (not in button mode).
10. **Delete action:** Deletes the selected action (or steps within the action). Simply drag and drop the action to this icon to delete it (not in button mode).
11. **Resize palette:** Self-explanatory.
12. **Action menu icon:** This opens the action menu and allows you to edit the action, insert new commands, delete commands, and save sets (not in button mode).

Once you have the palette open, you should see the default actions that came with Photoshop. If these are not present, you have probably modified your Photoshop defaults or deleted the actions. To reinstall them, go to the *Goodies* folder on your Photoshop CD, find the *Actions* folder, and reinstall.

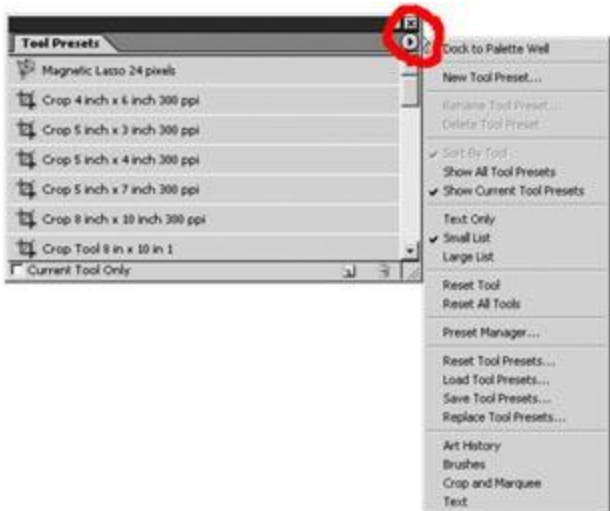


Figure 2. When you click on the delta (triangle) located at the top-right corner of the palette, you get the fly-out menu

To load or edit existing actions, create new actions, or delete actions, you open the Actions menu. Click the small triangle (or delta) located in the upper right-hand corner of the actions palette. Take a look at the example below.

Loading actions is very simple. On the fly-out menu, select "Load actions." Find the action on your hard disk that you wish to load and double-click. It will pop right into the actions palette. To run the action, hit Play. (This assumes you are in edit mode, not button mode).

Understanding Button Mode Versus Edit Mode

Select button mode from the actions palette menu. Switch to edit mode by hitting button mode a second time. This toggles the palette between the two modes.

Button mode: This mode allows users to run actions with the simple click of a button. It presents a less confusing set of options to some users. There are some disadvantages to using button mode. First, the user doesn't have the option to adjust the command settings. Though easier to understand and use, the flexibility to modify, stop, or otherwise alter the action is gone. Second, you can't display action sets in button mode. I recommend button mode for beginners only. Once you are accustomed to actions, you will want to work in edit mode.

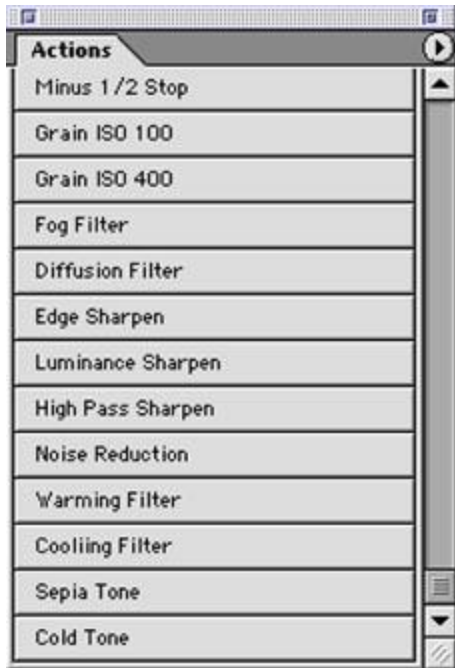


Figure 3. This is what button mode looks like

List/edit mode: This view of the actions palette is the more powerful and functional choice. As the name implies, you can edit actions and sets when viewing the palette in this mode. In fact, this is the only way to create, edit, or alter actions. When initially opening Photoshop, actions are displayed in list mode by default.

Creating Actions

You aren't limited to the actions that come with Photoshop. You can make your own. To do this, you will want to open any image and then open the actions palette.

1. Create a new action set or select an existing action set from the Actions menu. Remember, actions are always saved in sets.
2. From the actions palette, click the new action icon at the bottom of the palette, or choose "New action" from the Actions menu.

This is the menu item you select to make a new action. The dialog box pops up and asks you to assign a function key, name the action, etc.

3. Next, name your action, assign it a function key,* assign a color for organization, and select the set in which to place the action. You may always change these later by going to the Actions palette menu, selecting Action Options, and typing a new name.

The main thing to remember is that, once you hit Record, anything you do in Photoshop will be added to the action unless you manually stop recording. You can stop and resume at any time. *(Note: When assigning function keys, you have a choice of using F1-F12, or

combinations of keys, including the `Command` and `Shift` keys. This increases the number of possible keyboard shortcuts to 60.)

4. Proceed with the commands that you want to record.
5. When you are finished, stop recording.
6. Test the action by running it. You should test the action on the image you have open and a second unrelated image to make sure it performs in a predictable manner.
7. Next, save the action. "Save action" will only appear if you select the set where the action was first placed.

You've done it. By default, the action is saved to a folder in Photoshop. You may also save the action to a different folder. I prefer to save my actions in a separate folder. I call this *ScottsActions*. That way, I can always easily find the actions I created.

Editing Your Action

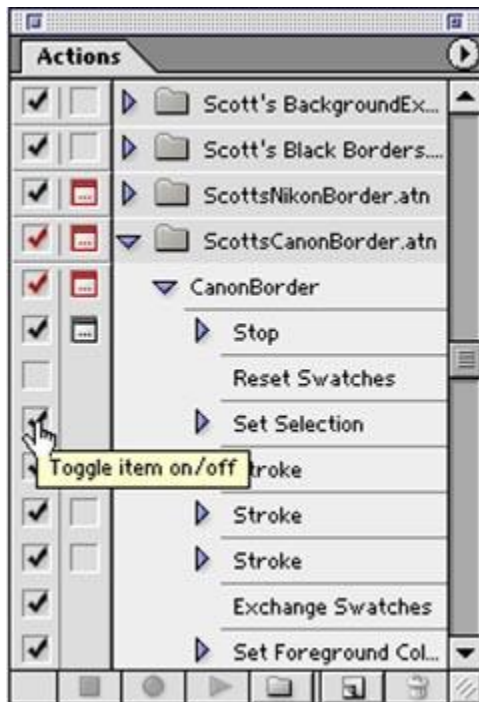


Figure 4. Toggle the action step on or off to change the way the action performs

Once you have an action, you may decide a certain setting is not right or delivers something other than the intended result. If this is the case, you can exclude that step in the action by selecting the checkbox to the left of the command. This toggles the command on or off. You can move any step within the action by dragging it to a new location, or it may be deleted entirely by dragging it to the trash icon on the action palette. If you decide that you need to insert a new step in the action, select the point at which the new section should be added and press Record again. The new step will take place just after the selected command.

Remember that when you record an action, it is sequential: step one, step two, step three. But these steps can be deleted, rearranged, and edited. When you run an action, the series of commands within the action are executed in the sequence in which the action was recorded.

Reviewing Your Actions

An important thing to remember about actions is that they are text files. That means you can print them out. The reason to do this is simple. It helps you learn what you and Photoshop are doing to your images.

When you want to print an action as a text file, go to the action palette and select the action set you want to print. On the Mac, press and hold `Command+Alt`, open the Actions menu, and select "Save actions." When the save dialog box pops open, you should notice that the action has a file extension of `.txt` instead of the native `.atn`. Save it and open it in any word processor. You can print it to any printer. Remember that all the actions in the active palette will print, so you might want to make a backup of your actions, and then delete all but the one(s) you want to print. Then re-install them so that you don't have mounds of paper to sort through.

Gotchas

Occasionally, Photoshop starts to behave unpredictably if you have too many actions. To avoid having this problem, separate your actions into different folders. Also, consider putting them in a different location than the default Photoshop actions. If you still have problems with your actions, reload them. And note that many actions will not work properly if you have `Caps Lock` engaged.

Actions Save Time

Photoshop actions can greatly reduce the "fiddle factor" you face when working with digital images. It's possible to essentially automate all of the important digital darkroom functions that you apply to every image. If you want to spend more time behind the camera than you do in Photoshop, actions will help you achieve that goal.

Bonus

I have attached an action I wrote called Scott's Beautiful Blur. It creates the effect of shooting through a diffusion filter. It is yours to download and use as you wish. Print it out and study it. You will see that it is easy to make and use actions. Get the action here:

[ScottsBeautifulBlur2.atn](#).