



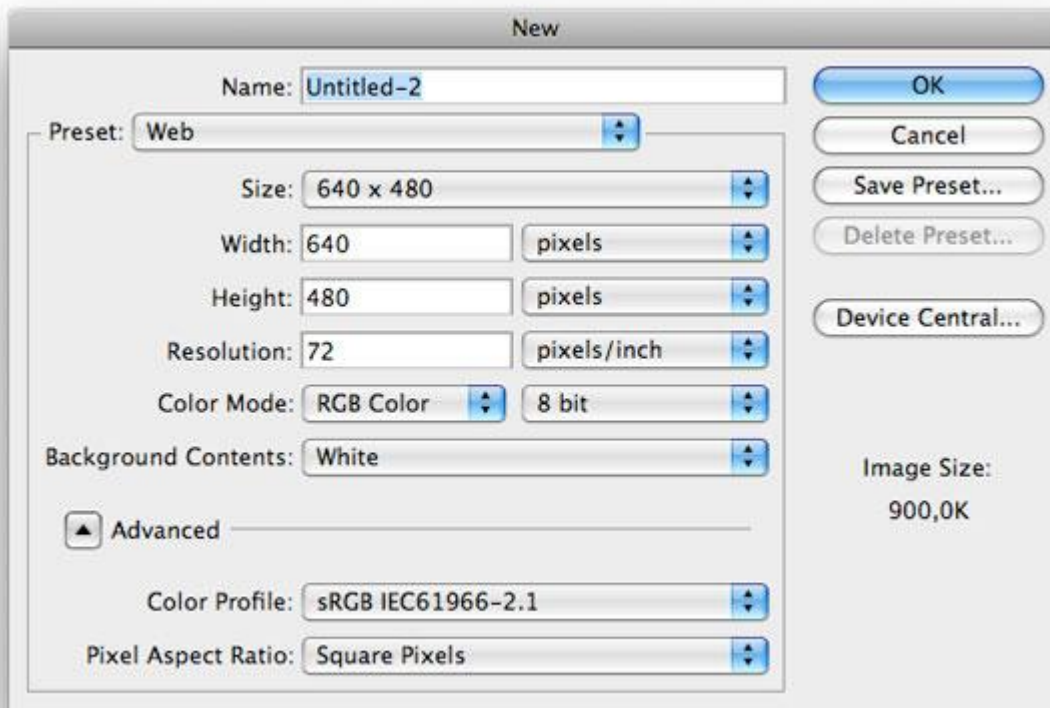
This is the third of a series of tutorials thought for Photoshop beginners. I'll explain in depth those features that can result difficult to understand for a newbie. In the previous two articles I've explained [how the pen tool works](#) and [some useful extracting techniques](#).

Today I want to go one step backwards, and deal with Photoshop power core: layers. It's like to ask: how does Photoshop work? The answer is: with layers. Once understood this concept, everything in Photoshop will be more clear. As always, after a brief introduction, I'll drive you through a series of micro-tutorials to understand better this matter. Let's start!

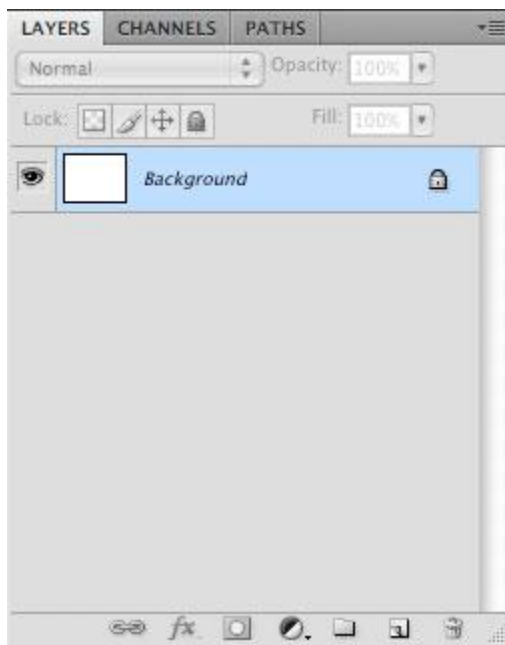
How Photoshop works:

A graphics designer who understands layers mechanism in Photoshop is like a soccer player who understand the offside rule. It's the key. What are layers and why are them so useful? You have to think in this way: every composition realized in Photoshop is the result of several layers combined together. So a layer can be defined as the fundamental Photoshop unit.

This example will show you the meaning of what I'm saying. Let's create a new document in Photoshop (File>New):

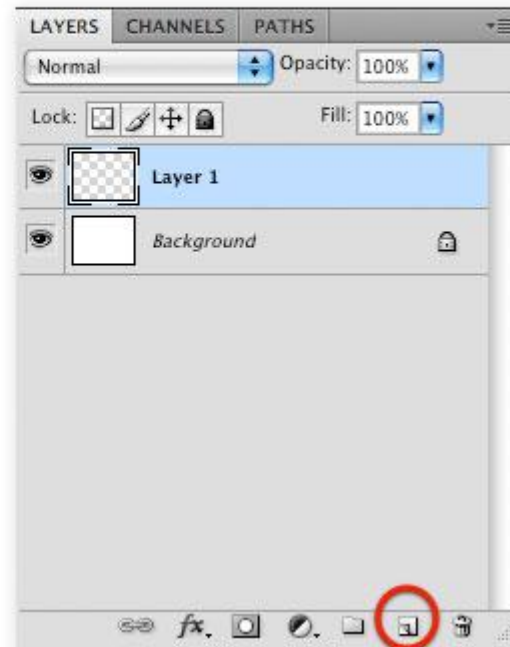


In the bottom right you should have the layers window. In case you don't see it, go to Window>Layers:

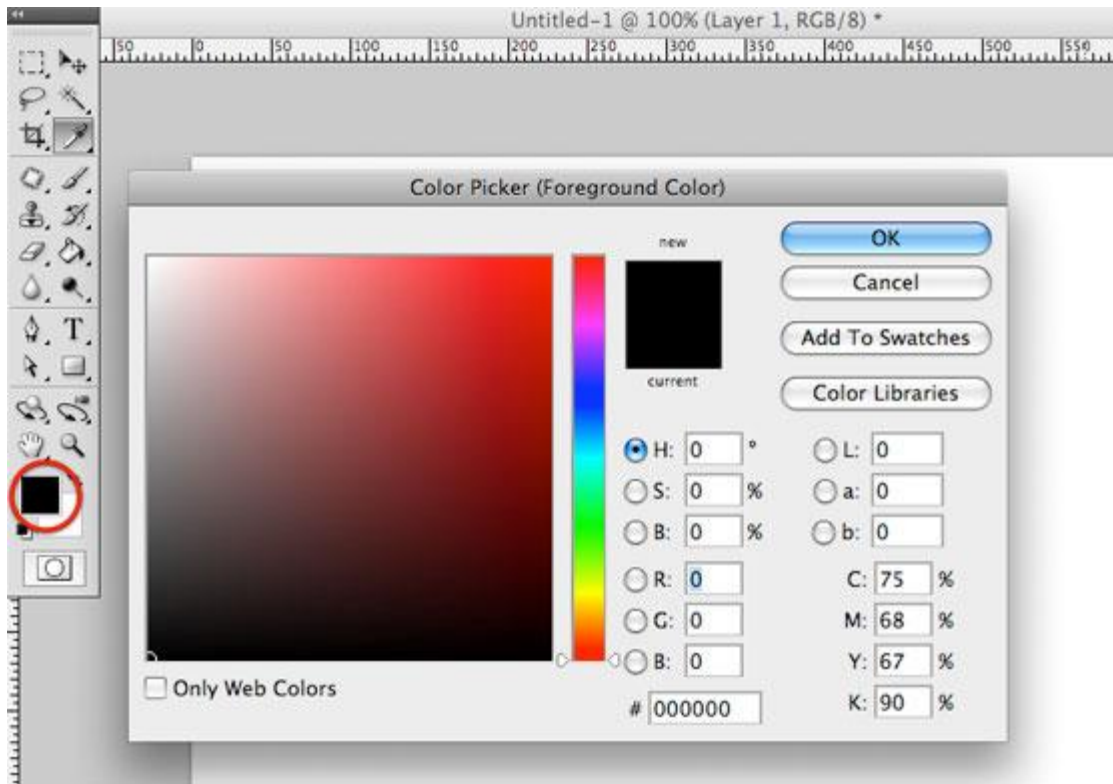


Here you can visualize, select and modify all the layers that compose your final result. As you may have noticed, in this moment we have a single white filled layer. Create a new layer by pressing the appropriate button at the bottom of the layers window. Now you can see a new

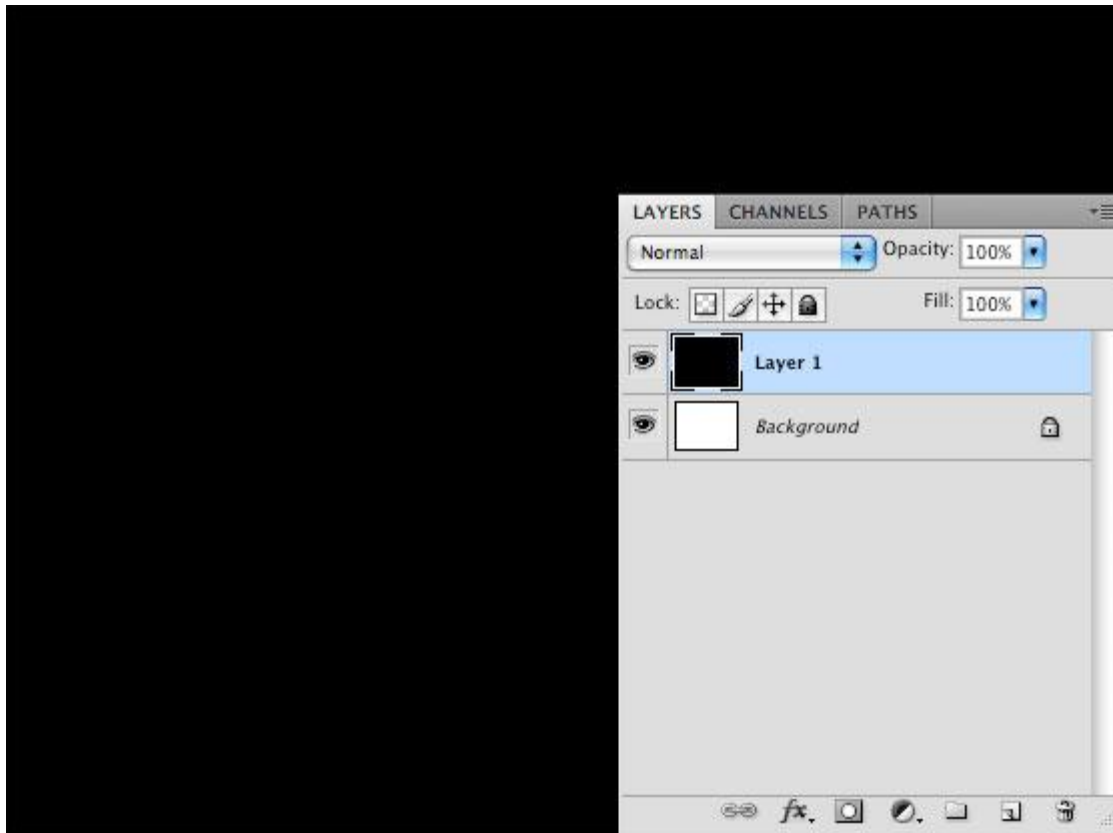
layer, but nothing has changed in your canvas. This is because Photoshop automatically create blank layers.



Set the foreground color to black by clicking on the foreground color thumbnail to open the color picker and selecting black (#000000).



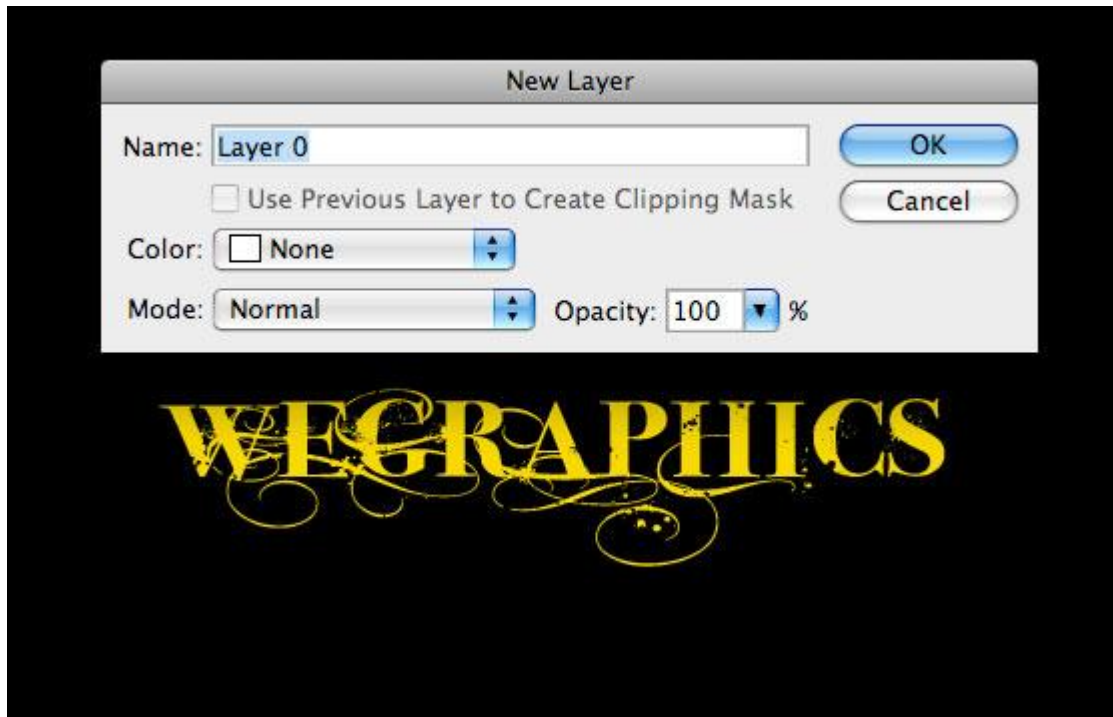
Now grab the Paint bucket tool (G) and click on the canvas to fill it with black. Let's analyse the layers window: the blank layer is now black. This is because what we do on the canvas affects only the layer which is selected. We have 2 layers, one black and one white. Since the black one is above, it's displayed while the white one is hidden (layer hierarchy).



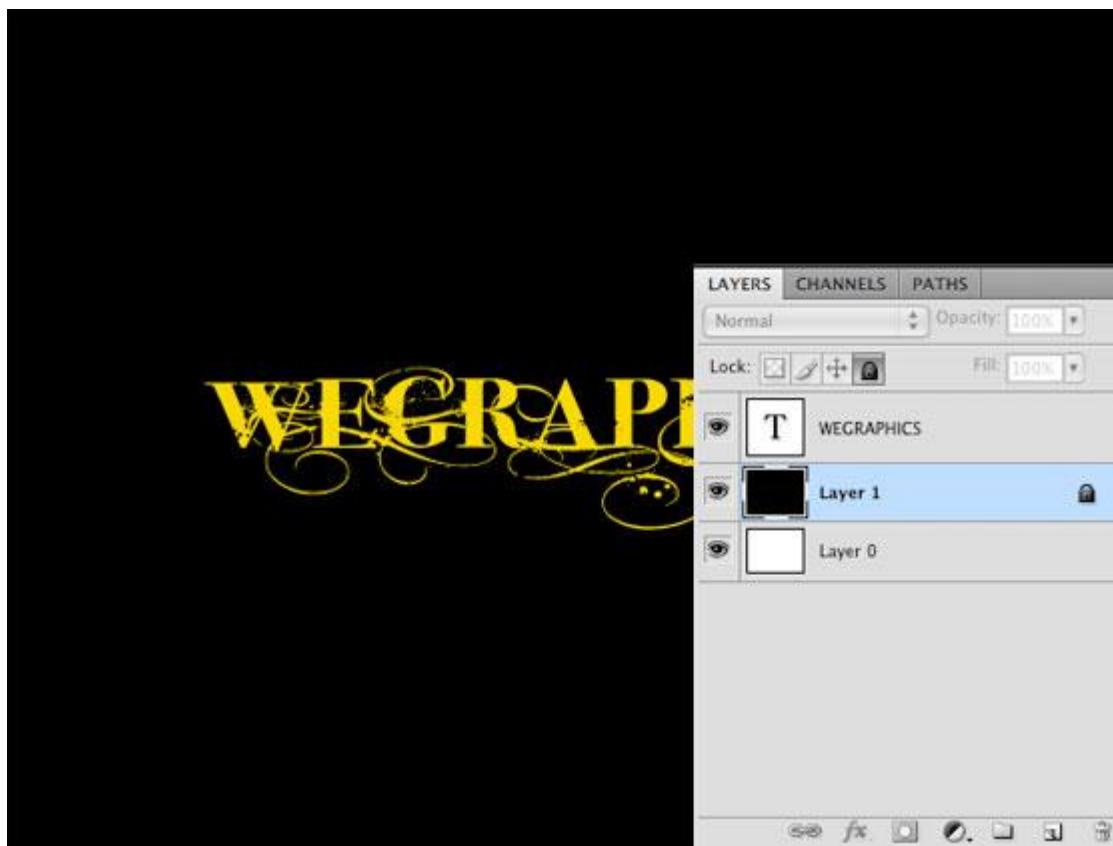
Switch the foreground color to yellow (#f9d904) and use the horizontal type tool (T) to write something. Note that Photoshop has automatically created a new type layer:



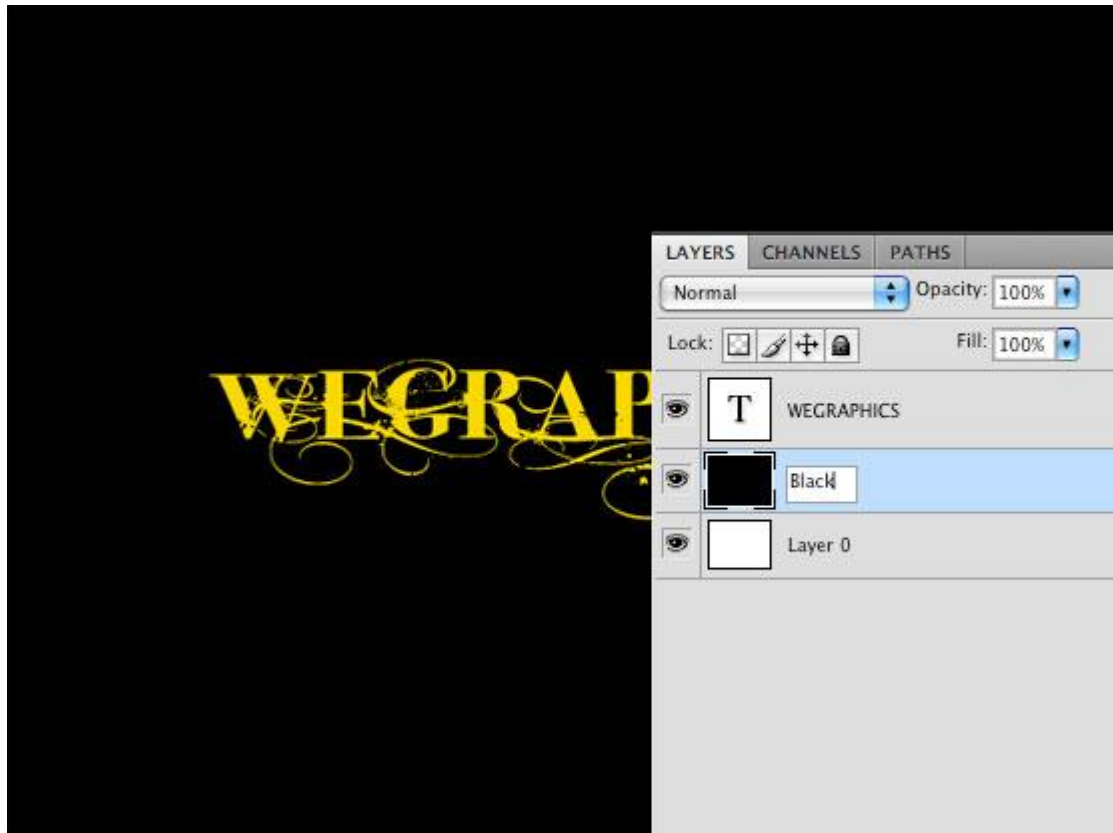
The background layer is locked (note the padlock on the right of the layer thumbnail). This means it can't be modified. To unlock the background layer double click on it and hit OK in the window that appears:



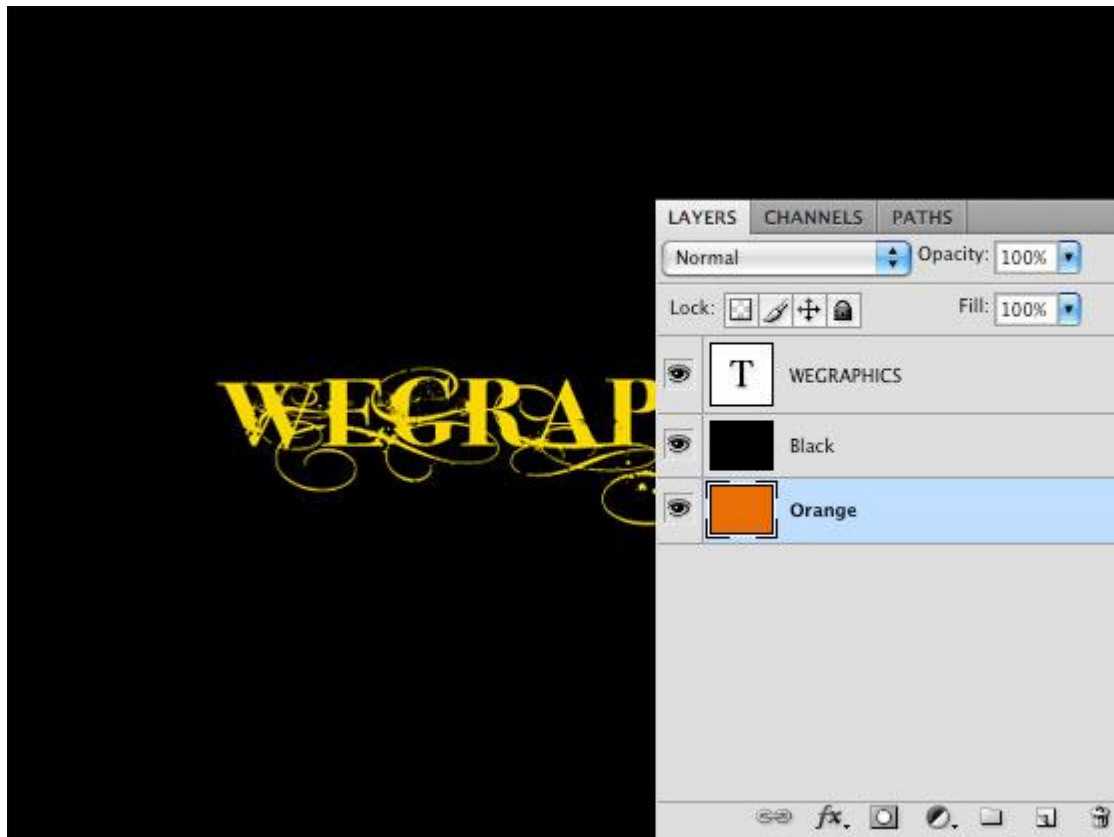
Every time you want to prevent a layer from casual adjustments you can lock it by selecting it from the layers window and pressing the lock button.



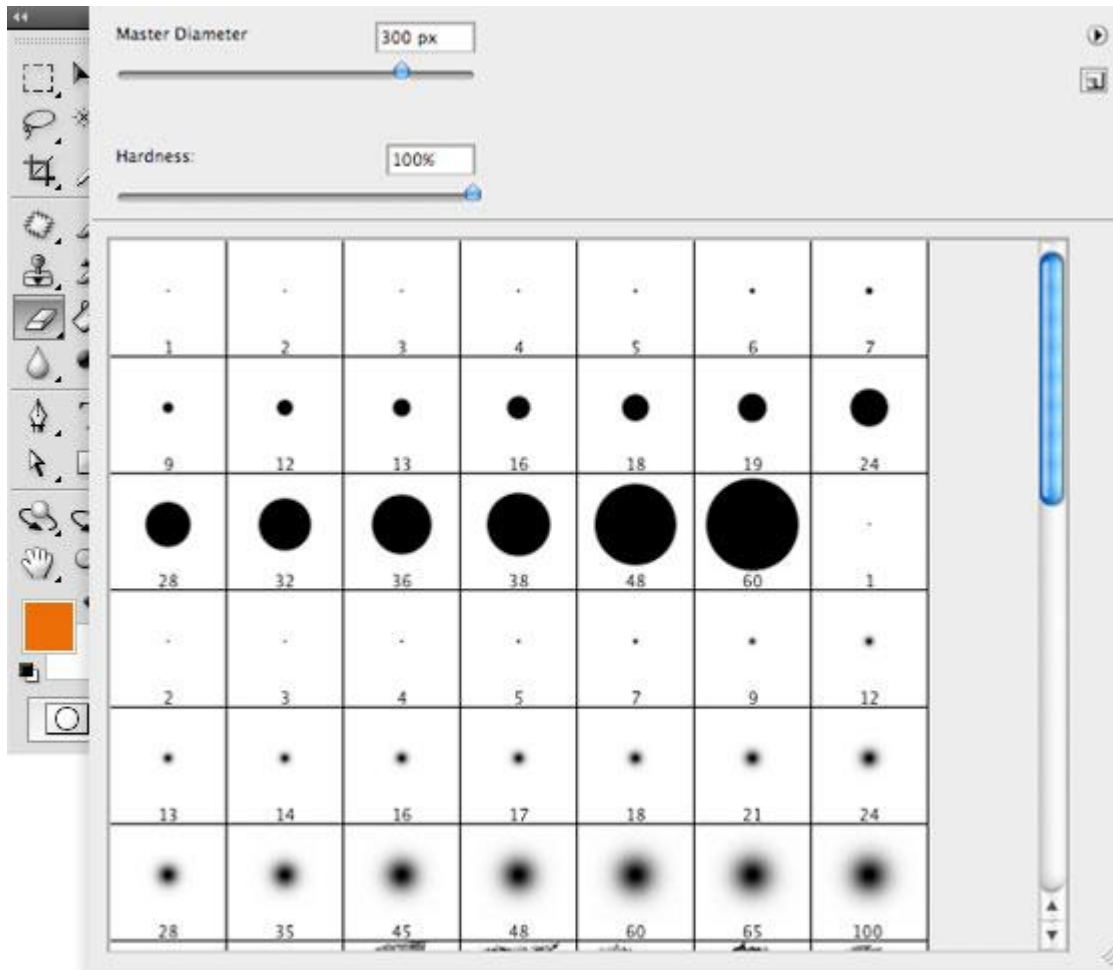
You can give a title to each layer. This is a good practice in particular when you work with complex compositions. Simply double-click on the layer title in the layers window to re-name it.



Select the bottom layer (the white one), set the foreground color to orange (#eb6e08), grab the paint bucket tool and click to fill. Apparently nothing has changed but the bottom layer is now filled with orange, as you can notice from the layers window.



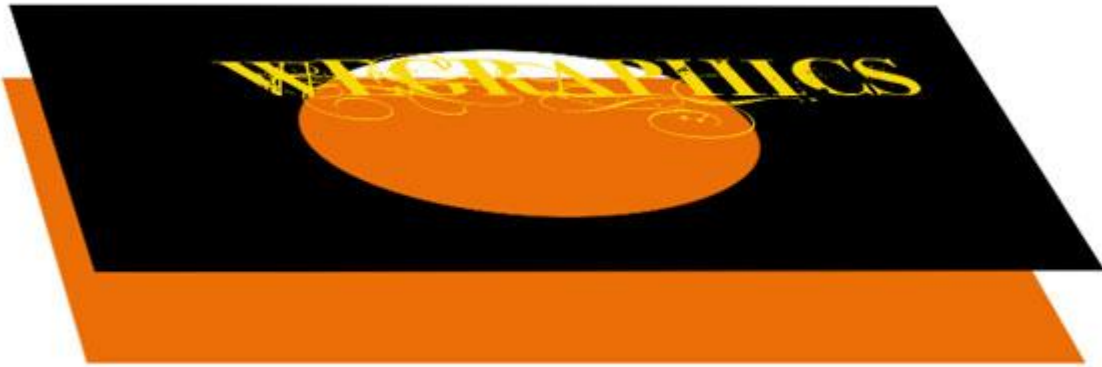
Select the black layer. Grab the eraser tool (E) and select a round 300px brush:



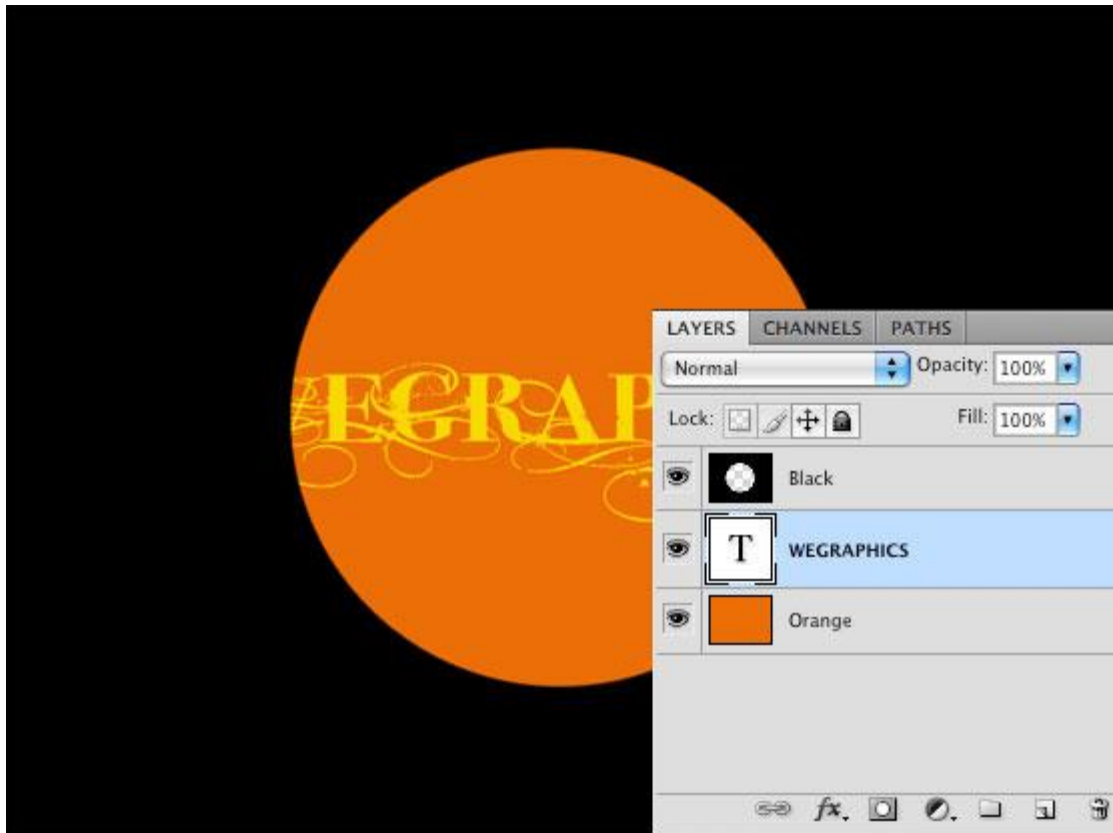
Click once in the center of the canvas. What happens? Once erased the center of the black layer, a part of the orange one appears.



This is due to layers hierarchy:



In the layers window move the text layer below the black one:



As you may have imagined, a part of the text is covered, while the area below the spot is preserved (layers hierarchy). Right-click on the layers thumbnail and select Blending options. Here we can add some adjustments to the layer. Select “drop shadow” with the following settings (screenshot). In this way we can add depth to the image:

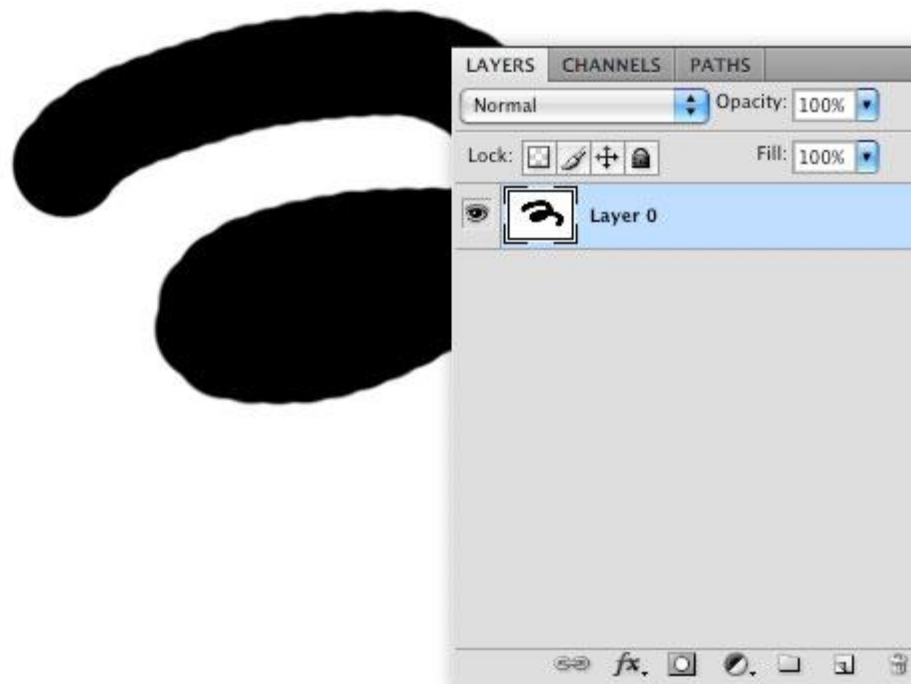


You can add a soft shadow to the text too. In this way you can feel more the sensation to work with 3 different levels one on the top of the other.



Why are layers so useful?

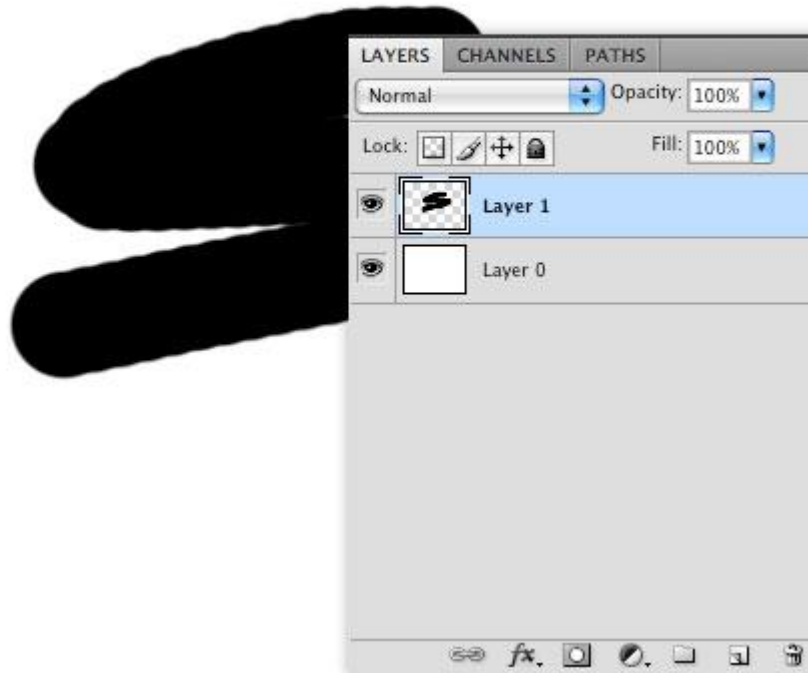
In this mini-exercise I want to show you the usefulness that derives from a correct use of layers. Create a new document in Photoshop and unlock the background layer as we did in the previous tutorial. Grab the brush tool and paint over the canvas:



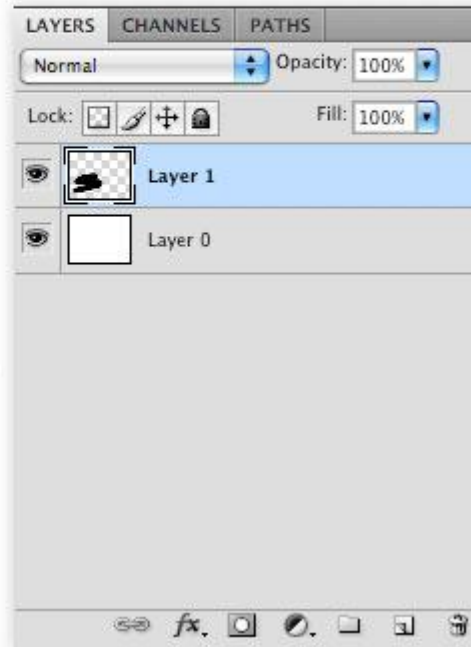
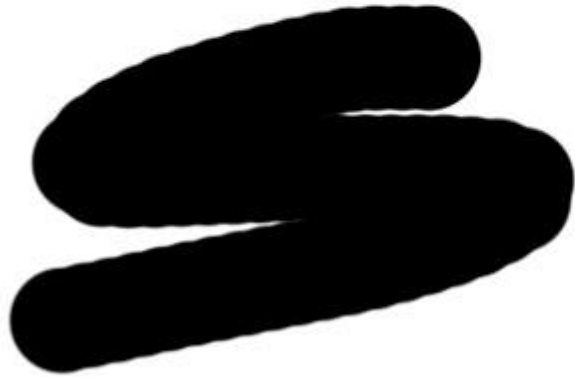
What does happen if you want to move the brush effect? You're obliged to move the entire image (brush+white background):



Let's go back. Instead of painting directly on the white canvas, create a new layer and paint over it:

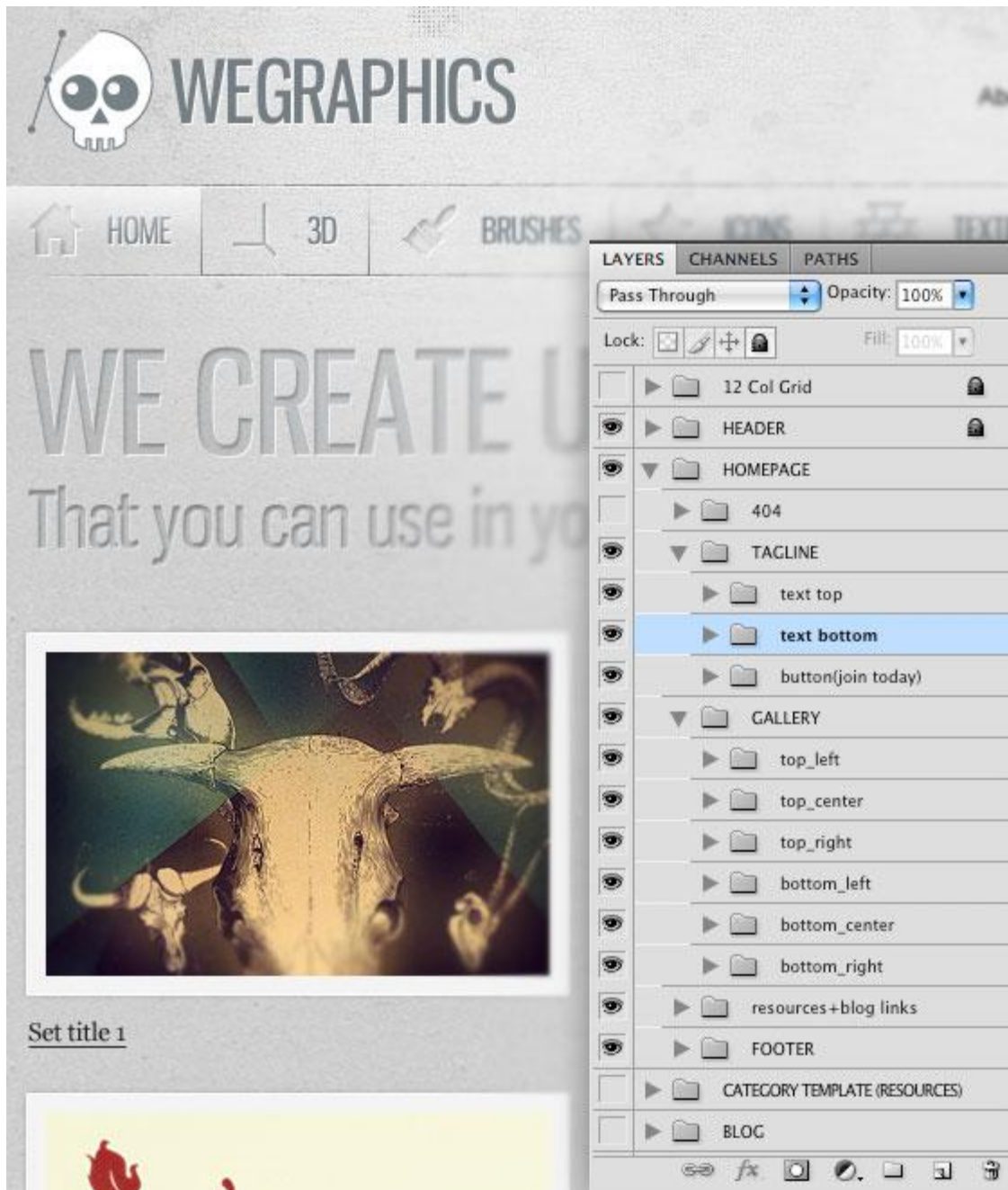


Seemingly the result doesn't change. But this time if we try to move only the brush effect...ta daaaaaaa! We can! Because we affect only the layer that contains brushes. So this is the essence of the speech: layers can give you full control on your works. In particular if properly used they allow you to modify any detail of the composition at any moment (full control!). And this is fundamental when you are working on projects composed by 100-200 layers. Always try to create a new layer for every important modification.



The key is organization

As I've previously written, titling each layer is a good practice to don't get lost among your layers. When the amount of layers grow up consistently, you can set them up into groups. To create a group, select the layers from the layers window and go to Layer>Group layers (or press ctrl+G). Organization is not only a good practice, but something important when you're dealing with complex projects. For example, take a look at how I organized the layers of WeGraphics theme layout. Every group contains 10+layers. Do you imagine how the layers windows would look like if I hadn't use groups???



Hope you've understood something useful about how Photoshop works. I'll work soon on other topic (blending options, masks...) for beginners, so if you have any suggestion, don't hesitate to use the comments ;-)