How to Build a Better Drop Shadow

If you are knocking out (isolating) your images, a good drop shadow will ‘ground’ the subject and eliminates that ‘cut out’ or ‘floating’ look.

A good place to start when creating your drop shadows is the FX feature in Photoshop. But to create a realistic shadow you’ll need to do a little work...

Why are DROP SHADOWS important?
Here’s an isolated shot of strawberries without a drop shadow...

Why are DROP SHADOWS important?
Here’s the same shot of strawberries with a drop shadow...

Which looks better to you?
Here’s how to make realistic DROP SHADOWS.

Okay, before we make our DROP SHADOW...
Let me explain that a really good drop shadow is made up of at least TWO parts...

The CAST SHADOW, this is the diffuse shadow cast by the object onto the surface it is sitting on, and is what most people stop at.

AND... The SET SHADOW...
This shadow ‘grounds’ the item, it creates the realism you won’t find in any FX...
(Yes, it’s subtle, but trust me, it makes all the difference)
Put the two together and...

Voilà

Let's start with an isolated image of a ring on its own layer with a white layer beneath it. Making sure the ring layer is selected (yellow), go to the fx panel and click on 'Blending Options', this will bring up the 'Layer Style' panel...

First, click the box labeled 'Drop Shadow'...

Notice what happens once you click the box labeled 'Drop Shadow'...
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-There is now a thin black line around the ring...

But we’ll need another element to make our ‘Set Shadow’, so click the box labeled ‘Stroke’...

Now go back and click on ‘Drop Shadow’ and we’ll make the first adjustment. First let’s set the ‘Blend Mode’ on ‘Multiply’...

OPACITY, I always set this at 90%... higher is better, because we’ll be able to adjust that later.
Set the ANGLE to best match the lighting and position of your item.

DISTANCE you'll set on the higher side, I used 79 here...

SPREAD set on the low side, I used 13...

And SIZE (which does matter), I went big and set it at 200...
Under the QUALITY - stay with the default CONTOUR - The one thing you’ll want to adjust here is adding about 1% NOISE... This will give you a smoother gradient.

Now we’re going to go to the STROKE dialog box...

For STROKE you want to set the SIZE small, I’ve used a setting of 3...

Set POSITION to “OUTSIDE”
And change your BLENDB MODE to MULTIPLY...

Change your BLENDB MODE to MULTIPLY...
And keep OPACITY at 100%

And leave the FILL TYPE at COLOR ...
The COLOR should be black (these are the default settings).

NOW… click OK!
See, now you have EFFECTS (fx) under your isolated image.

And here’s what you get...

Nice drop shadow? No?

Don’t worry it will be...

While this may not have made the best drop shadow, with the STROKE FX you added you'll quickly see if you’ve made any mistakes in isolating your image...

On the EFFECTS panel, go to the eyeball next to the DROP SHADOW and click the eyeball OFF so just the STROKE is still on.
On the EFFECTS panel, go to the eyeball next to the DROP SHADOW and click the eyeball OFF so just the STROKE is still on. See how the image changes?

Making sure the layer your isolated item is on is still selected, use your eraser tool to remove any errant pixels till your background is clean (make sure you set the eraser to 100% hardness so you can work right up to the item).

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Click the EYE-BALL on the DROP SHADOW to turn it back on.
Okay...
Now here's the trick not many people know about...

With your mouse hovering over the effects panel...
NOT on the EYEBALL, RIGHT CLICK

This will bring up this hidden panel...
(You won’t find this option anywhere else!)

Looking down this hidden dialog box
you’ll see a command “CREATE LAYERS” ...
Select this and let go of your mouse...

PRESTO - You’ll see those uneditable fx shadows have transformed into their own LAYERS!!!

Now, select the STROKE LAYER and go to:
ADD A LAYER MASK icon (on the bottom of the layer palette)
While holding down the OPTION button on your keyboard (I think it's the ALT button on a PC) CLICK it to make a LAYER MASK that's filled with black.

Do the same thing for the DROP SHADOW LAYER...

Notice that now we have a MASK over each layer, both the drop shadow and stroke are completely hidden.

Now, we'll go back and select the STROKE LAYER and with your mouse hovering over the black LAYER MASK, click your SHIFT KEY and (left) click your mouse, this temporarily turns off the mask (see the red ‘X’) and again reveals your STROKE...
See the little ‘BRACKETS’ around the STROKE LAYER, make sure the STROKE LAYER is active.

Next we’ll go to the FILTER menu and choose BLUR.

... And now choose GAUSSIAN BLUR.
Up comes a dialog panel... Here I've used a setting of 16... Click OK.

Notice the STROKE is now blurred...

Now hover your mouse over the STROKE MASK again and holding the shift button, CLICK..

This will reactivate the mask, thus hiding the STROKE LAYER again.
1) Making sure the OUTER STROKE layer is selected...

2) the MASK active...

3) select your BRUSH tool with settings at about 50 hardness and about 72 pixel diameter

4) hit ‘D’ key on your keyboard this will set your background and foreground colors to default (Black and White)

and you’re ready...

When painting on MASKS...
Remember: WHITE = REVEALS
BLACK = HIDES

Now select WHITE and painting with white to reveal, paint the set shadow under your item.
(you can switch between black and white by hitting the ‘X’ key)

See the little white spot you have now painted on the mask, revealing the OUTER STROKE which is the LAYER we use for our SET SHADOW?
Now selecting the DROP SHADOW LAYER and making sure the MASK is active, reset your brush settings to ‘0’ hardness, the diameter 400 pixel...

Now paint in your drop shadow.

Finishing Touches:
Adjust the Opacity of the CAST SHADOW - I Typically set this around 50%
Leave the SET SHADOW at 100%

Here’s our ring ‘before’ & ‘after’...
I think you’ll all agree this technique allows you greater refinement and improves your shadows fx resulting in a higher quality final image.
Volià.
There you have it...
I hope this was instructive.

Thank You

The Edible Arts

Photography in Flux

Christopher Conrad