It All Starts with an Idea

A little bit of imagination can take you a long way with Photoshop Elements. There are so many different ways to combine images that you may not know where to start. You may be asking yourself, "What types of images should I use? Where can I search for ideas?" Well, the truth is that these answers come from within. Photoshop Elements is an amazing tool with many automated features, but combining images is not one of them. By its very nature, combining images—compositing—*is a task that can't be automated. It requires us to begin with an idea of the goal to be achieved and to make a series of evolving decisions about how to achieve that goal. Now's your chance to show your creative side! In this chapter, we'll explore different ways to find artistic inspiration and discover your own unique creative process.*

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Elements can also be used as a professional tool to create composite images for design clients. This involves developing the client's idea, or in some cases, helping the client find an idea to work with and bringing it to life with your image. As long as you have at least one copy of Photoshop CS2 in your production department, you can convert your Elements client composites to CMYK. You can then import the converted artwork into a page layout program such as Adobe InDesign or QuarkXPress.

This chapter also introduces two topics that are important for readers who are just getting started manipulating digital images: the basics of image resolution and sizing, and the RGB color mode. (More advanced Elements users can skim these sections or jump ahead to Chapter 2, "Making Good Selections.") By the end of this chapter, you'll be overflowing with ideas and ready to start compositing.

The Creative Process

I'm sure you've heard the phrase "Every picture tells a story," or "A picture is worth a thousand words." Well, there's a reason these sayings have been around for so long—*because they're true!* Images do tell stories, and creating them in Photoshop Elements *makes you a storyteller*.

As a storyteller, you need to understand that every image you create has its own personal meaning for you as the artist, but it may not have the same meaning for those who view it. Your story can be interpreted in lots of different ways. That's what makes creating images in this way so powerful.

Telling Your Story

So how do you go about telling these stories? What if you don't have a story to tell?

You always have a story to tell, even if you don't know what it is yet. Some of my best collage work *just happens*. (Figures 1.1 through 1.4 show a typical sequence, from the starting image to the finished montage.) As you work, it's easy to become immersed in the image you're creating, and before you know it the story begins to tell itself. Every layer, mask, brush stroke, and blend mode that you add to your image also adds to your story. The key is to not be too self-critical. The more comfortable you get with the tools for combining images in Photoshop Elements, the easier it is for you to follow your creative impulses and experiment. Don't be afraid to explore your every idea.

Figure 1.1
Before I created the final montage shown in Figure 1.4, I knew I wanted to work with this flower photograph, but I wasn't sure what other images to use with it.

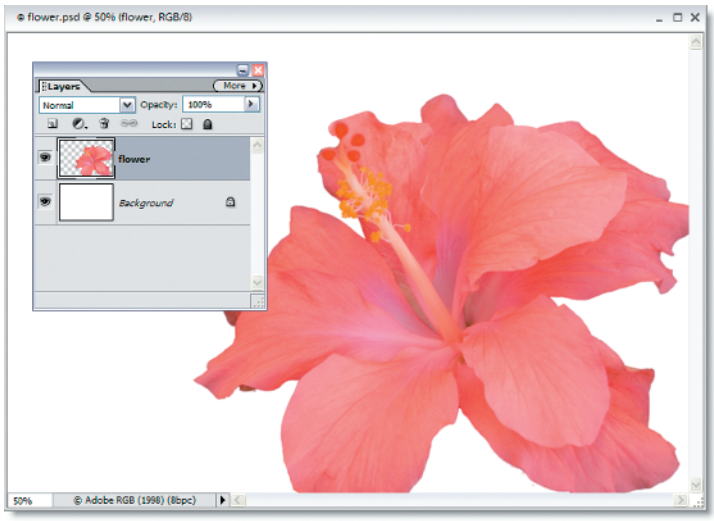


Figure 1.2
I decided to bypass the creative roadblock and began extracting the flower from its background using the Magic Extractor in Photoshop Elements 4. (You'll learn how to work with this tool in Chapter 2 and the related lesson on the CD.)

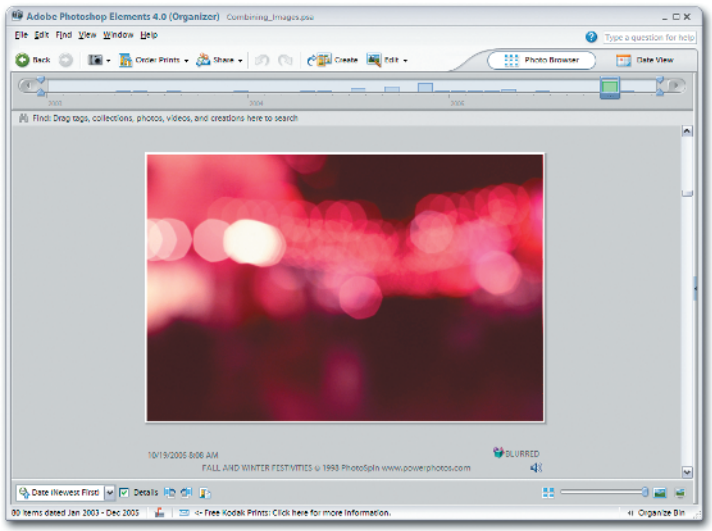


Figure 1.3
Once I had the flower image on its own layer, I began browsing through the photos in my Organizer Catalog (Windows) or Bridge (Mac). When I found this blurry city image, something just connected. The images are similar in color yet totally different in subject matter. It occurred to me that combining these two images might create an interesting contrast. I found my background!

Figure 1.4
Once I trusted my eye and refused to limit myself with specific expectations, the image essentially created itself.

Some images tell stories that are more straightforward than others. Not every project that combines images in Photoshop Elements has to be an abstract montage or collage. For example, you may want to combine images that create a visual document of a special moment in your life, such as a family vacation, a birthday, or a wedding (see Figure 1.5).

Figure 1.5
This wedding montage combines three different images, all brought together using layers, gradient masks, and brushwork.

You can also combine images in Photoshop Elements to change the mood or feeling of an existing photo (see Figure 1.6). These kinds of projects tend to inspire viewers and suggest underlying stories. It's amazing how much you can change the mood of a photograph just by replacing its background.

Before After

Figure 1.6 The photo of the giraffe on the left is nice, but I thought it could use something more. I decided to replace the blue background with one of a clouded sky. Doing so creates a much more playful, dreamlike mood when viewing the image. For some, viewing the revised image may evoke memories of childhood.

Getting Inspired

Keep in mind that every storyteller's journey is unique, and what inspires me creatively may not inspire you. It's up to you to find out what ignites your creative spark.

There are a lot of things you can do to get into a creative mind-set. Here are some sources of inspiration that may work for you:

Books and magazines Try visiting your local library or bookstore and browsing through some fine art and photography books and magazines. Take note of which colors and textures catch your eye; you can use them later in your own projects.

Inspiration vs. Imitation

It is considered copyright infringement to directly imitate another artist's composition. However, there is absolutely nothing wrong with another artist's work inspiring you to create original work of your own. For more information, visit www.copyright.gov/title37/ or www.copyright.com.

Museums and galleries It can be very inspiring to visit a museum or gallery and look at the artwork up close. Make a mental note of the colors and brush strokes that speak loudest to you. Don't limit yourself to art museums; you might also find inspiration at a science or history museum. When visiting them, bring a sketchbook and make some quick drawings of the objects that interest you most.

Travel Taking a trip can be a great way to find artistic inspiration. Visiting new places and experiencing new things can suggest new stories for you to tell with your combined image projects. You may not even have to travel very far. In fact, your local park could be a source of inspiration. Wherever you go, be sure to bring a camera so that you can document all of the interesting new things you encounter. You may be able to use these photos in a montage or collage (see Figure 1.7).

Have Camera, Will Travel

If you bring a digital camera on a trip, remember to bring a backup battery and a few extra memory cards (or a portable storage drive). This way, you'll always be ready to snap a picture whenever you encounter something interesting that catches your eye.

Figure 1.7 I was able to snap the shot on the top while sailing along the Florida Intracoastal canal on a catamaran. As the sun began to set, I noticed the clouds beginning to glow and I raced for my camera. Only a couple of minutes later, the glow of the clouds was gone, as evidenced by the shot on the bottom. The window of opportunity to take this photograph was very small. Thankfully, by being prepared and having my camera with me, I was able to capture the moment perfectly.

Scrapbooks Take time to browse through some old magazines or newspapers that you might have lying around the house. Be sure to bookmark any interesting photos, layouts, or type treatments. You can also tear out the pages that inspire you and keep them in a scrapbook. This way, you can always refer to them later whenever you need motivation.

Classes Taking a class in fine art or computer design can be a great source of inspiration. Not only can you brush up on your skills and find encouragement through your instructor, but you can also interact with other artists. You'd be surprised how much the person sitting next to you in class can influence your work.

Not all your inspiration will come through your eyes, and it's equally important to prepare yourself mentally for creative activity:

Music For some artists, listening to music is a great way to get into a creative mind-set. If music inspires you, try putting on your favorite CD or iTunes playlist and browsing through the images in your Photoshop Elements Organizer (Windows) or Bridge application (Mac). Before you know it, you'll be combining images in the Editor and creating your next masterpiece!

Exercise It's always a good idea to free your mind and body from everyday stress before starting a new creative project, and for some, there's no better way to do this than through exercise. Try taking a jog, a walk, or a swim, or completing a 30-minute workout. It may energize you creatively as well as physically.

Day-to-day activities Simple everyday activities such as cooking, gardening, or home decorating can also be great stress relievers that can help prepare and inspire you for your next creative project.

Staying Inspired

Getting inspired is the easy part. The real challenge comes with trying to *stay* inspired and avoiding those creative "blocks." Here are some suggestions:

Avoid expectations To avoid falling into a creative rut, it helps if you go into a project without any expectations. Your original idea, or your client's idea, may not work out as planned, and this can be very frustrating. It's better to always keep the creativity flowing and allow your project to change and develop as you work on it. If you're working with a client on a project, be sure to keep the communication channels open and always explain *why* a certain idea is not working. Do your best to train your clients to avoid expectations just as you do.

Always have a backup plan Rather than beating a project that isn't working into the ground, make sure you have some other ideas that you can try. It's best to have as many options as possible. This way, if things don't work out as planned, you can always move on to the next idea without getting frustrated. Just let it go and begin exploring something else.

Don't limit yourself Be as open as possible and try every idea that pops into your head. Experiment as much as possible with the images you are working with. Try a blend mode you've never used before, or mix up the layer order just to see what happens. The more you play, the more likely you are to stumble across what I like to call a "happy accident." You never know—you may discover a new technique that you can use over and over again with other projects.

Take breaks Compositing with Photoshop Elements can become addicting. The more you work, the faster time disappears. Just remember, as you stare into the computer screen trying to create the perfect collage—you still have a life, *and it may be passing you by.* Take a break every once in a while and do something else. Not only will your friends and family members appreciate it, but you'll also be giving yourself a chance to clear your head. Later, when you return to your project, you'll have a fresh new perspective that can add to the overall creative excitement of your image.

Gathering Images

Before you can start compositing in Photoshop Elements, you first need some images to combine. There are several ways to collect images for compositing. You can take your own photographs, scan in "found objects," or collect stock images from royalty-free subscription services.

You may have a certain composition in mind before you begin compositing. If so, it's up to you to stage the photo shoot, find the objects you're looking for and scan them in, or locate royalty-free stock images that match your description.

If you do not have a particular composition in mind, then you'll most likely be using whatever images speak to you at the moment. Sometimes this can be a much more creative and fun way to work, but it helps to have a backlog of images to choose from in your Elements Catalog (Windows) or on your drive (Mac).

So where can you find exciting images to use in your projects? What types of images should you look for? Believe it or not, images are everywhere. All you need to do is start looking for them. All around you are images that can inspire new compositing projects.

The Power of Observation

Once you begin combining images with Photoshop Elements, you'll most likely discover a whole new way of looking at the world around you. You may find yourself always looking for images to include in compositing projects. If so, try to always keep a camera with you. This way, you'll always be ready to snap a picture whenever something exciting catches your eye. As Figure 1.8 shows, abstract forms that lend themselves to compositing can be found almost anywhere.

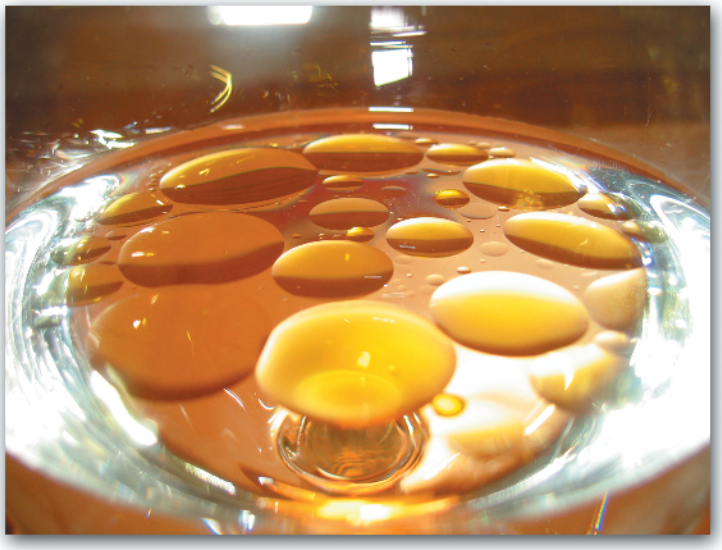


Figure 1.8
It's worth taking the time to capture the details of the world around you. Here, I couldn't resist photographing the way the oil drops separated in the glass of water. It struck me as a great image to base a compositing project around later.

Image Resources

There are many places where you can find images to include in your combined image projects. Here are some resources that you may want to explore:

Thrift shops, flea markets, and antique stores Collage artists tend to be what I call "image pack rats." We just love to poke around in thrift shops, flea markets, and antique stores looking for the next unique object to include in an image. These shops can be virtual treasure chests full of ideas. You can either purchase the items that speak to you most and photograph them later, or, if you've already got a house filled with way too many "found objects," bring a camera with you and—with the owner's permission, of course—photograph the items right in the store (see Figure 1.9).

Figure 1.9
I photographed these starfish at an outdoor market in my hometown of Tarpon Springs, Florida. I was intrigued by their intricate texture—something I might be able to use in a future combined image project.

In the street/in your yard Although they may seem like unlikely places to collect images for compositing, the street outside and even your own backyard can be among the best resources for "found objects." A found object is any interesting item that you happen to stumble across that can later be incorporated into a combined image project, such as the butterfly wings shown in Figure 1.10.

Figure 1.10
I found these butterfly wings on my back patio. I quickly gathered them up, photographed them, and scanned them in. What a score!

Family albums/old photos Old family photos can be great for combined image projects. In fact, in some cases—the older, the better. You can scan these images and use them to create a montage that tells a story about the past and how it relates to the present or future, or you can create a collage that tells a story about your family history (see Figure 1.11).

Royalty-free stock agencies For commercial projects you may need to find a specific image. Not to worry. There are plenty of royalty-free stock photo agencies out there that you can purchase photos from. Many of them offer CD collections that you can buy, and most of them also offer affordable subscription memberships that allow you to search an online database and download images from a website at low, medium, and high resolutions. Figure 1.12 shows one agency's website.

Figure 1.11
This photo was taken in 1950. Photography sure has come a long way since then.

Figure 1.12
Photospin.com is one of my favorite resources for royalty-free stock imagery.

Understanding Resolution

Before you get started with compositing, it's important to know how to size your images, and that requires working with *image resolution*. Understanding resolution allows you take greater control over the final size of your combined image projects. Scaling your finished images to the exact size and resolution you want is the best possible way to ensure

that you will always get high-quality prints. If you are creating a project exclusively for onscreen display, it ensures that you won't be wasting hard drive space by using more pixels than you need.

Tip: If you're already familiar with the basic pixel arithmetic of image resolution and sizing, feel free to jump to Chapter 2, "Making Good Selections."

Pixel Logic

Every digital image that you open in Photoshop Elements is made up of thousands, or even millions of tiny, square pixels. The closer you zoom in on an image, the more visible these individual square pixels become onscreen (see Figure 1.13). A pixel is the fundamental building block of a digital image. Each of the binary numbers that make up an image file represents the color of a single pixel, which is the value recorded from a single cell on the digital camera's sensor chip. The camera's resolution ultimately determines the maximum resolution an image can have, but for most forms of output you'll work at a lower resolution.

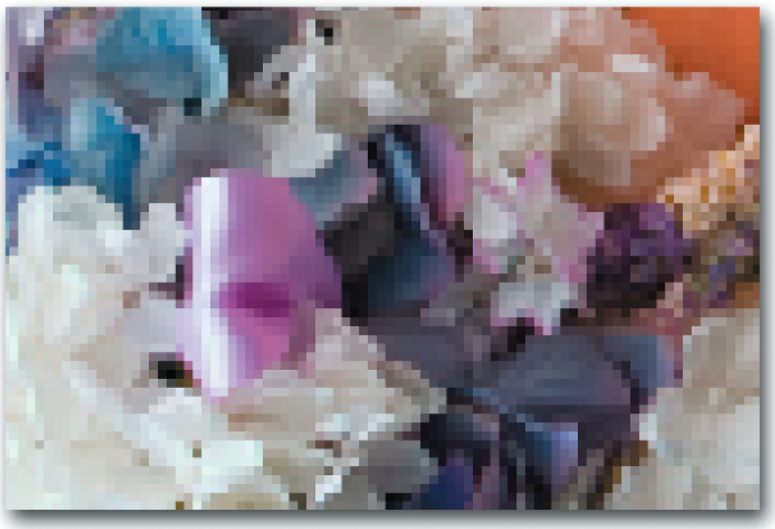


Figure 1.13
By zooming in to 1600%, you can begin to see the square pixels that make up this image.

Image resolution is determined by the number of pixels per inch (ppi for short) that an image contains. This is the measurement that tells us what each image's print size and quality will be upon output. To ensure that you will get a good print of your image, you need to first check the current resolution and document size before printing.

Although the default, suggested print resolution in Elements is 300 ppi, modern studies prove that an image really only needs to be 220 ppi at 100% of its intended print size to produce a high-quality print. If you are creating an image to be displayed on the Web or exclusively onscreen, the image resolution should be set to 72 ppi at 100% of its intended viewing size.

For example, an image that is 3×2.4 inches at a resolution of 220 ppi can produce a high-quality print, but contains more pixels than is needed for web display (web images should be as small as possible so that they can download quickly into a browser). The same 3×2.4 image at a resolution of only 72 ppi is small enough to display on the Web and to send as an e mail attachment, but cannot produce a high-quality print (see Figure 1.14).

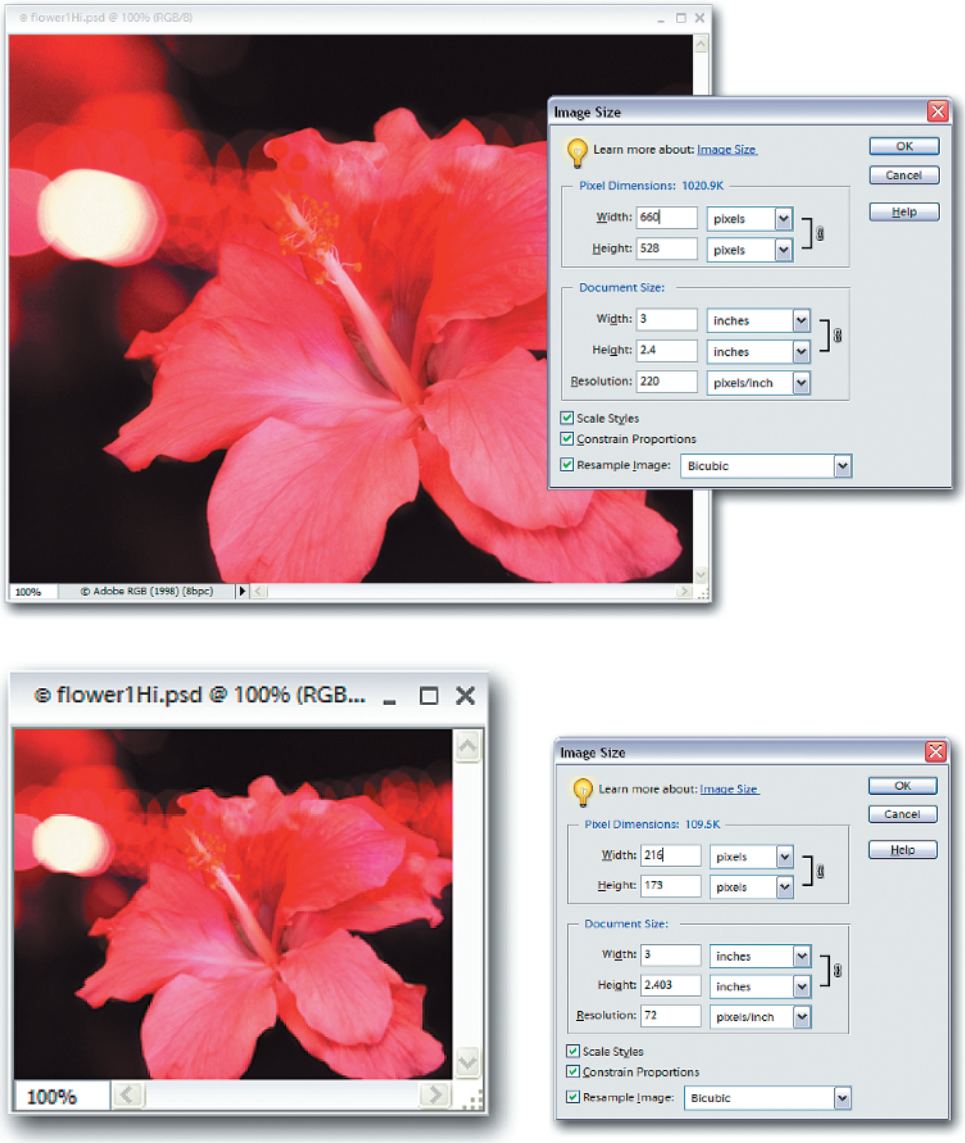


Figure 1.14 The top image is displayed at 100% in the Photoshop Elements editing workspace. The Image Size dialog tells us that it is 3" wide by 2.4" tall at a resolution of 220 dpi. For the lower image we've kept the dimensions at 3×2.4" and changed the resolution to 72 dpi. Notice that the onscreen display, as well as the pixel dimensions and the overall file size (shown at the top of the Image Size dialog), are significantly smaller for the lower image than they are for the top image.

When photographing an image for print, be sure to use the medium or large capture setting on your digital camera. Doing so allows enough resolution to produce a high-quality print at a normal output size. Most consumer-level digital cameras save captured images at a universal resolution of 72 ppi; however, at medium and large capture settings the pixel dimensions are increased, allowing for higher-quality output.

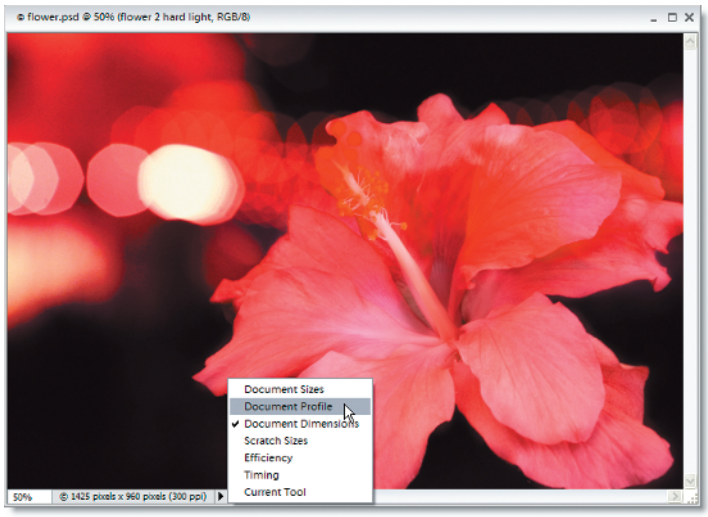
When scanning an image for print, be sure to import the image at 100%, using a minimum setting of 220 ppi.

Note: If you're not sure how large you want to use an image in a compositing project, always photograph or scan it using a higher input setting. Remember, you can always downsample to a lower resolution, but you can't upsample to a higher resolution.

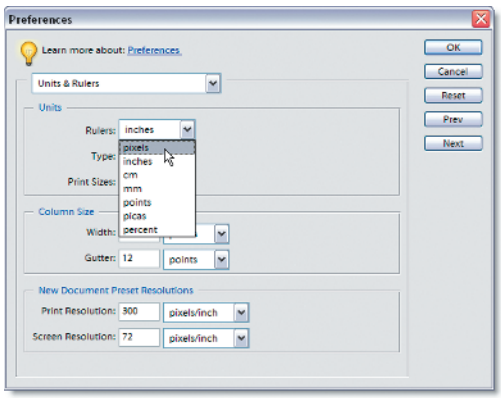
What's My Resolution?

By default, Photoshop Elements displays the current image dimensions in inches at the bottom-left corner of the document window, with the current image resolution shown at the end in parenthesis. By clicking and holding the left mouse button down on this value, you can access a pop-up window that displays the image width and height in pixels, as well as the number of channels (3 for an RGB image), and the current image resolution.

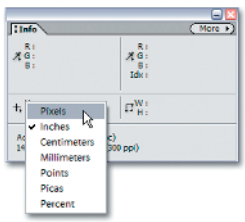
You can change the information that is displayed in the lower-left corner of the document window by clicking the black arrow to the right of the field. Choose another option from the pop-up menu, such as the color profile that is currently applied, or the tool that you currently have selected.



Elements uses inches as the default measurement for displaying document dimensions, but you can change this in the Units And Rulers panel of the Preferences dialog. Choose Edit > Preferences > Units And Rulers (Windows) or Photoshop Elements > Preferences > Units and Rulers (Mac), and select your preferred unit of measurement from the Rulers menu. To better understand resolution and image sizing, choose Pixels rather than Inches as you're working in this book. This can help you to start thinking of your images in terms of pixels, which is ultimately what you are working with.



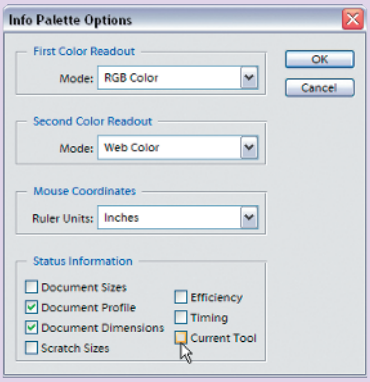
You can also choose a different unit of measurement from the Cursor Coordinates pop-up menu available in the Info palette. Choose Window > Info to display the palette, then click and hold the + next to the X/Y coordinates in the bottom left to access the menu.



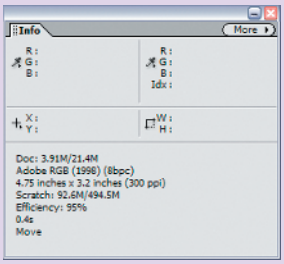
Changing the default unit of measurement in either location changes the measurement that is displayed at the bottom left of the document window and at the bottom of the Info palette (when it's visible).

Controlling the Info Palette Display

You can choose what document information you'd like displayed at the bottom of the Info palette. Choose Palette Options from the Info palette menu and check your preferred options at the bottom of the Options dialog:



You can choose as many or as few as you like. Click OK to apply. The Info palette here has been modified to display all status information:



Resizing Images

You can access image size and resolution information and make any necessary adjustments using the Image Size dialog. To display the dialog, choose Image > Resize > Image Size or press Alt+Ctrl+I (Windows) or Opt+⌘+I (Mac) (see Figure 1.15).

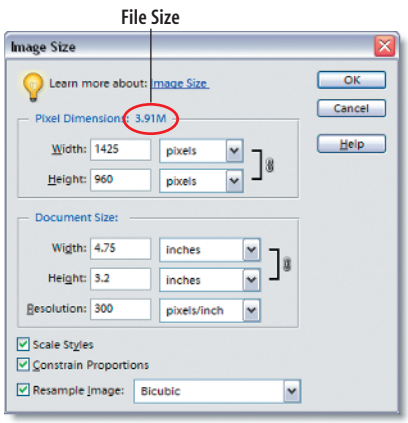


Figure 1.15
The top of the Image Size dialog displays the overall file size as well as the image width and height dimensions in pixels. The center of the dialog displays the current document size using the measurement of your choice (the default unit is inches), as well as the current image resolution value in pixels per inch.

With the Resample Image option checked, you can raise or lower the resolution value while maintaining the current document size. Lowering the resolution (called *downsampling*) decreases the pixel dimensions of the image by removing pixels and reduces the overall file size (see Figure 1.16). Increasing the resolution value (called *upsampling*) adds pixels to the image and increases the file size (see Figure 1.17). When compositing, you will most likely be downsampling your images rather than upsampling. Downsampling is a great way to resize large images before compositing them into a single document.

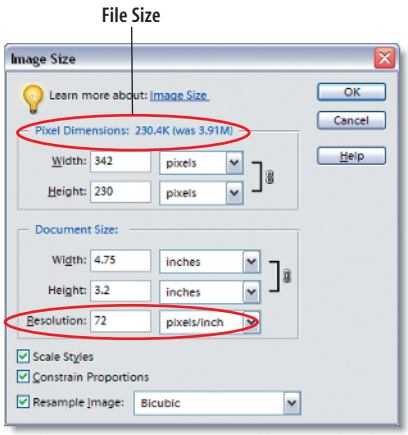


Figure 1.16 Downsampling from 300 ppi to 72 ppi; notice that the file size displayed at the top of the dialog has been reduced.

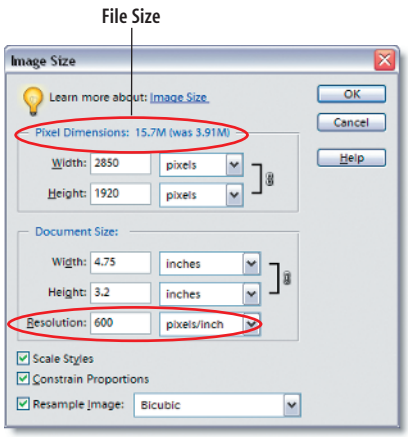


Figure 1.17 Upsampling from 300 ppi to 600 ppi; notice that the file size displayed at the top of the dialog has been increased.

With the Resample Image option deselected, you can raise or lower the resolution value and alter the document size while maintaining the current pixel dimensions. In other words, you can resize an image this way without adding or removing pixels. Doing so does not alter the file size or create a noticeable change in the image when viewed on screen. It only affects the document size and the quality of the image when printing (see Figure 1.18).

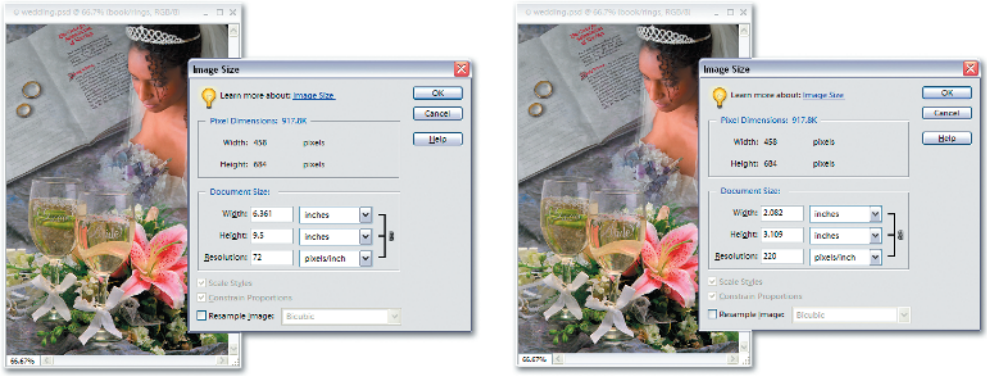


Figure 1.18 Left: The original 72 ppi image. Right: In order to get a high-quality print from this image, you must deselect the Resample Image option in the Image Size dialog and increase the resolution value to at least 220 ppi. Doing so outputs the image at a much smaller print size

Note: To produce a high-quality print of your project, make sure that your images are large enough to print at the intended size *and* are at least 220 ppi. It helps to size your images appropriately ahead of time; otherwise, they may be too small to include in your project.

RGB Color Mode

Photoshop Elements allows you to edit color images using RGB color mode. The letters stand for Red-Green-Blue, named for each color channel available in this mode. Every pixel in an image is made up of a percentage of grayscale information contained in each of these color channels. Photoshop Elements uses these percentages to calculate the amount of red, green, and blue light that make up the colors you see onscreen. Any edits you make to the image actually alter the information contained in all three color channels.

When compositing images in Elements, you will predominantly be working with 8-bit RGB images, which offers you 256 tonal variations in each RGB component. That amounts to almost 16 million possible colors! If that's not enough for you, you can also work with 16-bit RGB images, which greatly multiply the number of colors available, but also greatly increase your file size. Also, keep in mind that several important editing tools and functions required for compositing, such as layers, are not available when working with 16-bit images.

Color Settings

Before you start compositing, it makes sense to choose your preferred color management settings. Color management is intended to ensure that the colors you are viewing onscreen are displaying—as accurately as possible—a true representation of what your project will look like upon final output. The idea here is to maintain color consistency on every device (print and display) through the use of embedded color profiles. Color profiles are data files that describe the color behavior of a specific device. They act as a set of instructions that a device, such as a monitor or scanner, refers to in order to display color accurately.

A good way to start out with color management is to first calibrate your monitor. Calibration adjusts the output of your monitor to ensure accurate display. This is achieved by fine-tuning the brightness, contrast, and color balance settings.

You should take advantage of the Adobe Gamma software that is installed with Photoshop Elements. Choose Start > Settings > Control panel and double-click the Adobe Gamma icon. From here, you can use the Adobe Gamma Step-By-Step Wizard to assist you. Mac OS X users can calibrate using the Display Calibrator Assistant that comes with OS X. In System Preferences, choose Displays; click Color; then click the Calibrate button. The Assistant will walk you through the process from here.

If you're using a CRT monitor (as opposed to an LCD), you may also want to consider investing in a hardware calibration device, such as the Spyder by ColorVision. These hardware devices tend to be much more accurate than software calibration, since they do not rely on your eye as the above-mentioned software utilities do. Nowadays, some self-calibrating CRT monitors even ship with one of these devices.

Once it has calibrated your monitor, Adobe Gamma generates an ICC profile that Photoshop Elements can recognize on your system. You can then decide how you'd

like to use color profiles with your images—or if you'd even like to use color management at all. For a more in-depth look at calibration and color management, you might want to check out Tim Grey's *Color Confidence* book (Sybex, 2004).

Since there are so many different monitors and printers available, there is no one specific way to manage color. It's up to you to run some tests on your images and choose the color settings that produce the most accurate and consistent results. You can choose these settings from the Color Settings dialog. To display the dialog, choose Edit > Color Settings or press Shift+Ctrl+K (Windows) or Shift+⌘+K (Mac) (see Figure 1.19).

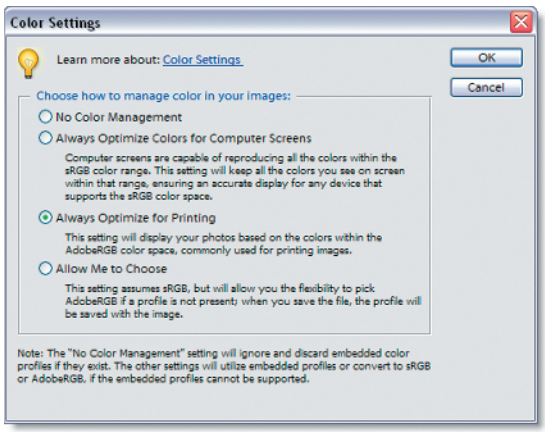


Figure 1.19
The Color Settings dialog

No Color Management This is the default setting for Photoshop Elements. If you don't want to use color management, keep this setting enabled and don't make any changes in the dialog. Doing so tells Elements to ignore the existing profile when opening an image. With this option, choosing File > Save will not embed a profile. As a partial alternative, however, choosing File > Save As gives you the option to embed your monitor profile. Select the Embed Color Profile check box at the bottom of the Save As dialog to embed the ICC color profile created for your monitor (see Figure 1.20).

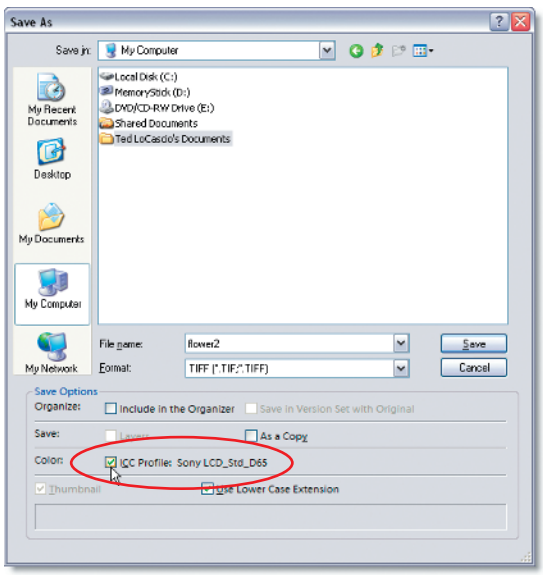


Figure 1.20
Even if you have selected No Color Management, the Save As window gives you the option of embedding your monitor's ICC color profile with an image.

Always Optimize Colors For Computer Screens In previous versions of Photoshop Elements, this setting was called Limited Color Management. This is because it uses the sRGB limited color space. sRGB has a narrower range of colors (called a *gamut*), which is considered best for images intended for onscreen and web display. Choose this setting to apply sRGB as your default working space. Choosing File > Save does not embed the sRGB profile, but File > Save As gives you the option to do so. Select the Embed Color Profile check box at the bottom of the Save As dialog to embed the sRGB profile.

Always Optimize For Printing In previous versions of Photoshop Elements, this option was called Full Color Management. This is because it uses the Adobe RGB color space. Adobe RGB has a wider gamut and therefore maps to a broader range of colors than sRGB. It is for this reason that Adobe considers it the best choice for color-managing images that are intended for print. Choosing this setting retains any existing profiles when opening an image. When you open images with no profile embedded, Elements applies the Adobe RGB profile. When you choose Save, the original profile is retained. Save As gives you the option not to embed the profile; simply deselect the Embed Color Profile check box at the bottom of the Save As dialog.

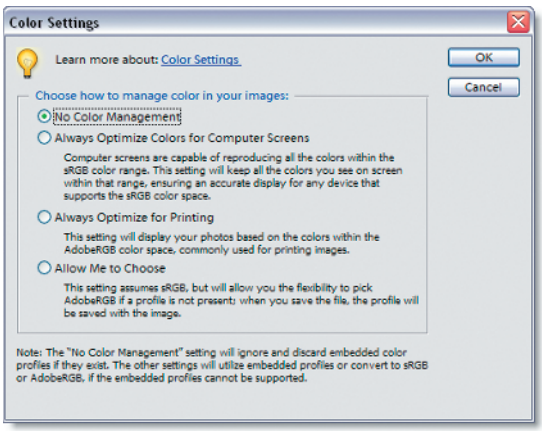
Allow Me To Choose New to Photoshop Elements 4.0, this setting assumes sRGB, but allows you to choose whether to apply either sRGB or Adobe RGB when opening images that do not contain existing profiles. Choose File > Save to embed the chosen profile with the image.

All of this is a lot to take in for first-time Photoshop Elements users, so if your head is spinning, just choose the Always Optimize For Printing option. This way, you can ensure that all of your images are color-managed for print output. If you decide later to use an image exclusively for onscreen display, you can always convert the profile to sRGB.

Converting Profiles

To convert an image from one color profile to another, use the following steps:

1. Close the image whose profile you want to convert.
2. Press Shift+Ctrl+K (Windows) or Shift+⌘+K (Mac) to display the Color Settings dialog and change your color setting to No Color Management.



3. Reopen the untagged image. You can verify that it is untagged by choosing Document Profile from the pop-up menu in the lower-left corner of the document window.

4. To convert the image to sRGB, open the Color Settings dialog again and choose Always Optimize Colors For Computer Screens or Allow Me To Choose. To convert to Adobe RGB, open the Color Settings dialog again and choose Always Optimize For Printing.

5. Choose Save As and select the Embed Color Profile check box at the bottom of the Save As dialog. Click Save. When the warning dialog appears, click OK to save over the original image. The new profile is now embedded.