

LESSON ONE: Dealing With Distracting Backgrounds-Part 1

Have you ever had a favorite photo of a loved one, but the background is so busy that it's hard to focus on that precious face? That's exactly the problem we're going to correct with this lesson!

Four techniques for dealing with distracting backgrounds are explained in these two lessons. Some of these techniques are easier than others (the first one in each lesson is easy, the second one in each lesson is more time consuming and involved), but they all require some practice to get the best results. For this lesson, I have provided you with several photos to use for learning the techniques. Then you'll be ready to move on and try the techniques on some of your own photos. Be sure to right-click on the photo links I have provided with the lesson download and save them to a place on your computer where you'll be able to find them when you need them.

METHOD ONE-VIGNETTE

This technique is about as easy as it gets! We're going to create a vignette effect to mask most of the background. Here are some examples.

Distracting Backgrounds-Creating a Vignette Method



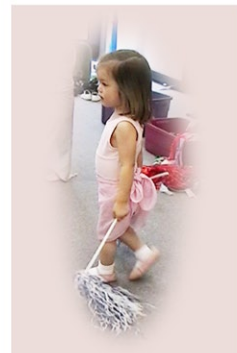
The area around this little ballerina is very busy!



Everything is still in the background but most of it is masked out.



Masks can be white, gray or black...



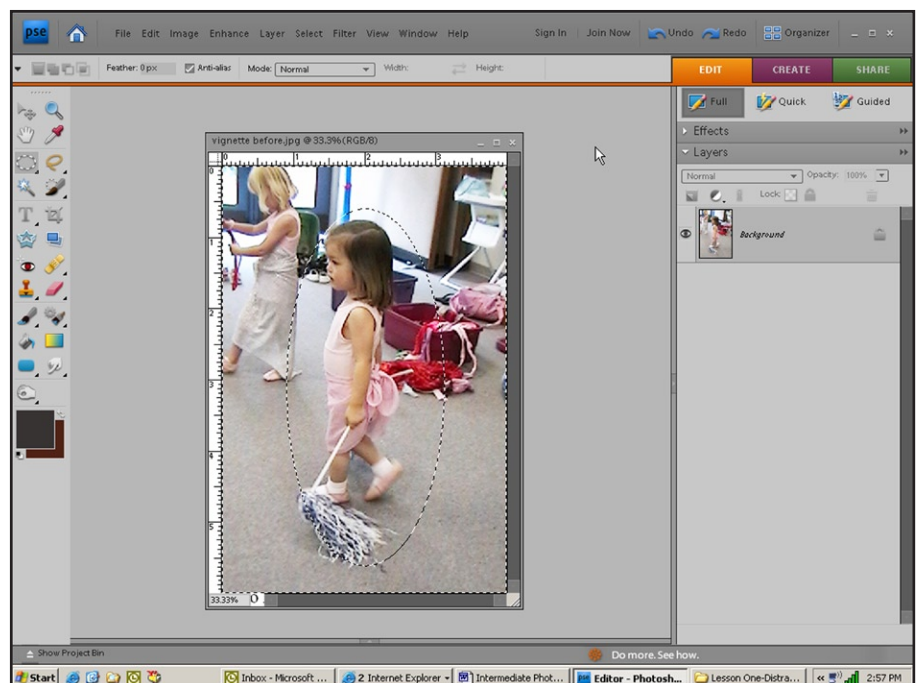
...or any color you choose!

1. Open the photo named "[VignetteBefore.](#)" Duplicate it and give the duplicate a new name like "Vignette Before edit" or something similar. Close the original.
2. Select the **Elliptical** Marquee Tool from the tool bar on the left side of your workspace. It is near the top of the tool bar and is housed with the Rectangular Marquee Tool. If your version of PS or PSE lets you choose a Mode for the Marquee tool, choose Normal.
3. Your cursor will be crosshairs. Position the cursor to the left and slightly above the area you wish to highlight. Holding down your mouse button, drag the cursor slowly down and to the right until there is an oval around the area you wish to highlight. After you release the buttons, you can reposition the oval by using your arrow keys. If you don't like the size or shape of the oval, press CTRL+Z (CMD+Z for MAC) to undo and try again. The shape of the oval is determined by the angle you drag the cursor down. You can have a short fat oval, a long skinny one or anything in between.

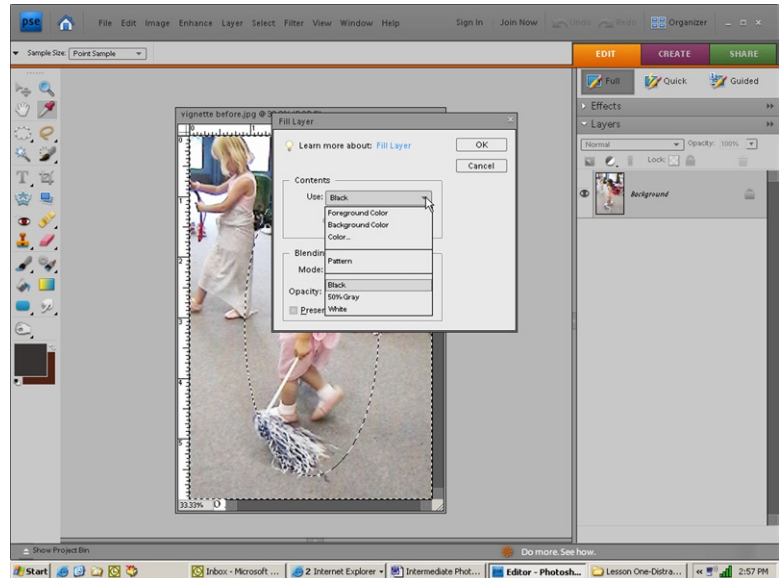
4. When you are satisfied with the shape and position of your oval, go to the top menu bar and choose Select>Feather. Choose a value somewhere between 20 and 50. The higher the value, the more the background will be masked. I chose a value of 50 for the vignettes I created. Click OK.

5. Go to Select>Inverse.

6. If you want a color other than black, white, or gray for your mask, go to the Foreground color square at the bottom of the left tool bar and choose it now.



7. Go to Edit>Fill and select the color you want to fill with.
8. When you click OK, you will have a vignette! Click CTRL+D (CMD+D) to get rid of the marching ants. Save your new photo.



METHOD TWO-REMOVE THE BACKGROUND

The next technique we're going to use is actually removing the background and filling it in with either a solid color or another background. This technique takes a little more time and patience, but it will really get rid of that objectionable background, like this.

Open the photo named "[Remove Background Before.](#)" Duplicate this photo and save the duplicate with a new name. Close the original photo. That way you can go back and practice again if you want to.

Distracting Background-Removing the Background Method



I thought the window behind Emma was distracting...

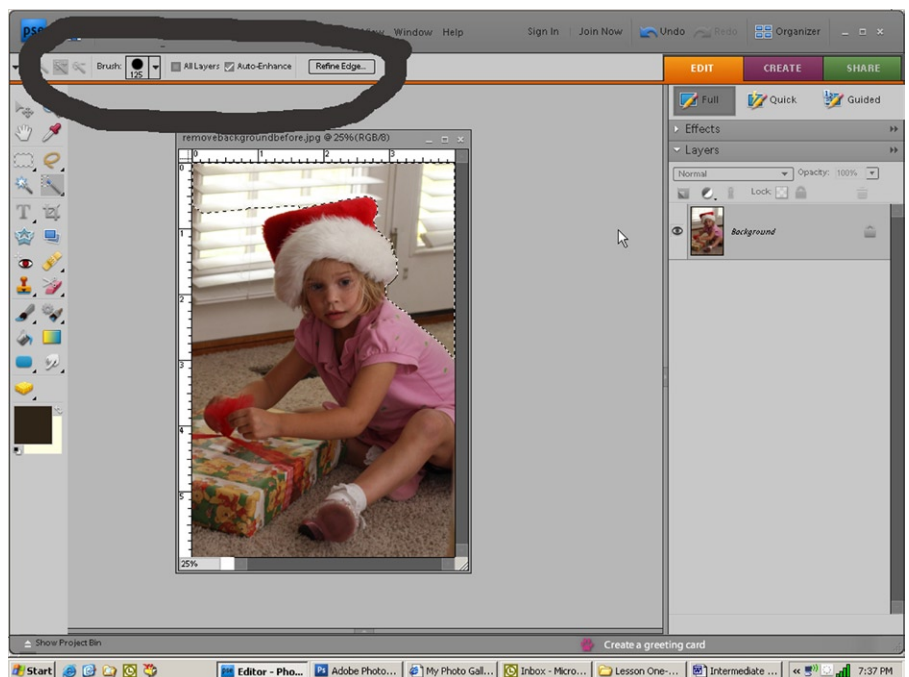


so I removed it!

We're going to be using the Quick Selection Tool which looks like a baton with a blue tip. It is near the top of the toolbar on the left side of your workspace. In PSE7, it is housed with the Selection Brush Tool. In some versions of PS or PSE, it is housed with the Magic Wand Tool. The Quick Selection tool is not available in PSE4 or before.

When you choose the Quick Selection Tool, you will see a small menu bar at the top of your workspace.

1. Let's start with the Brush Picker. Click on the triangle and you will get a dropdown menu from which to choose your brush. For this photo I chose a brush size of 150, 100% Hardness, and Spacing at 25%. You really will rarely need to change any of these settings except the brush size.



2. Still in the Quick Selection menu bar, make sure "Select All Layers" is **not** selected. For now we only have

one layer—our photo layer. Sometimes you may have multiple layers and may or may not want to delete the background from all layers.

3. Select Auto Enhance. This will automatically smooth out the edges of your selection.

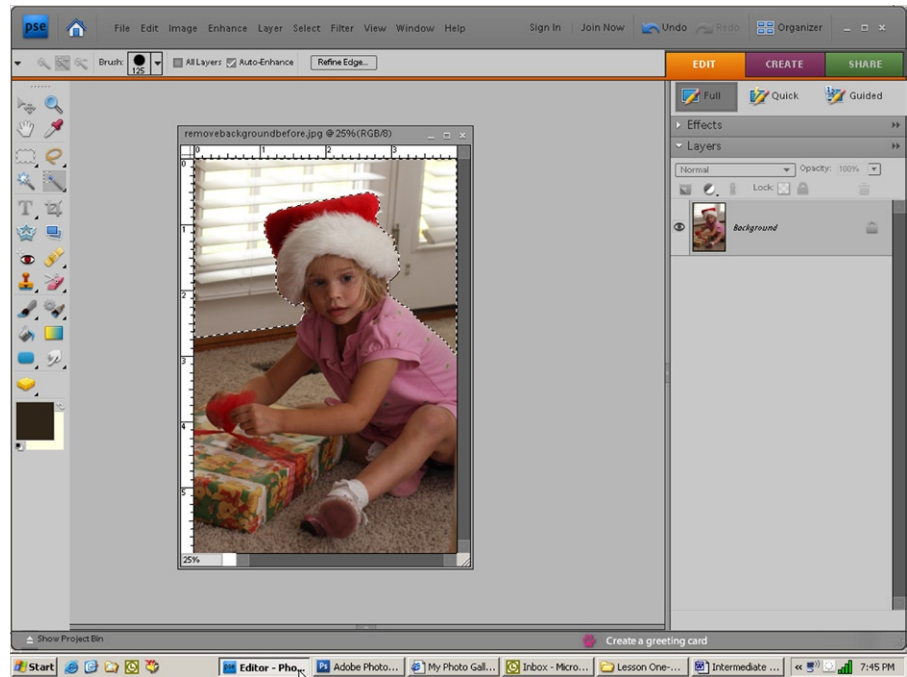
4. To the extreme left of the menu bar are three little wands. Click on the first wand to make a new selection.

5. Position your cursor, which is now a circle with a + inside, in the area with the window. You can choose one of two methods to select the area to be deleted.

- a. Holding down your mouse button, you can slowly “paint” the cursor over the area to be deleted **OR**
- b. Move the cursor slowly over the area, clicking every so often.

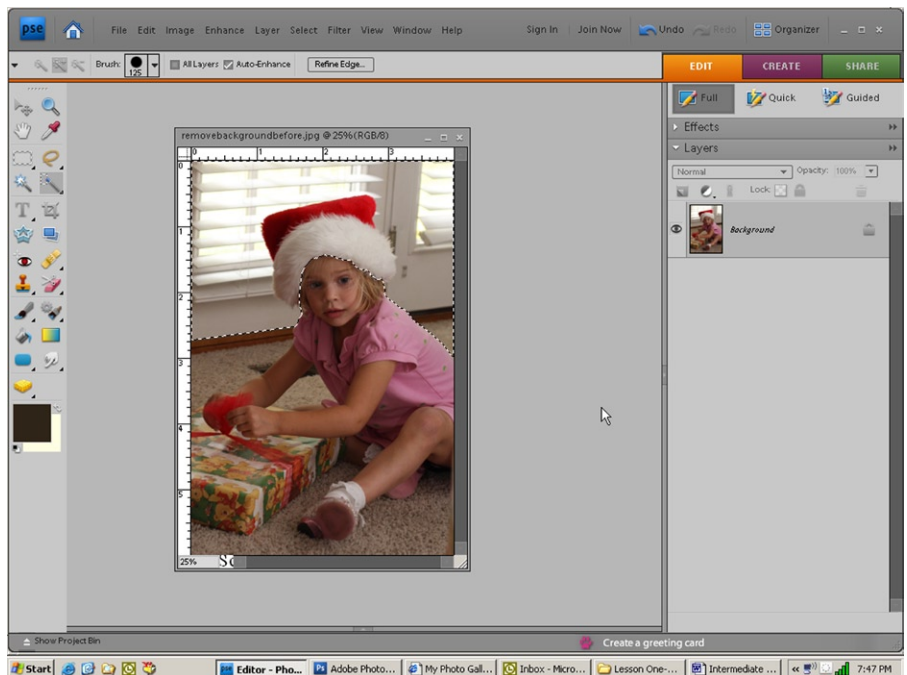
The area around Emma will become selected and have “marching ants” around it.

Did yours come out perfectly like mine? Or did it come out the way mine came out the first five times I tried it...like this:



Help! Her hat is selected and will be deleted unless it can be fixed! No fear! There is a way to fix this!

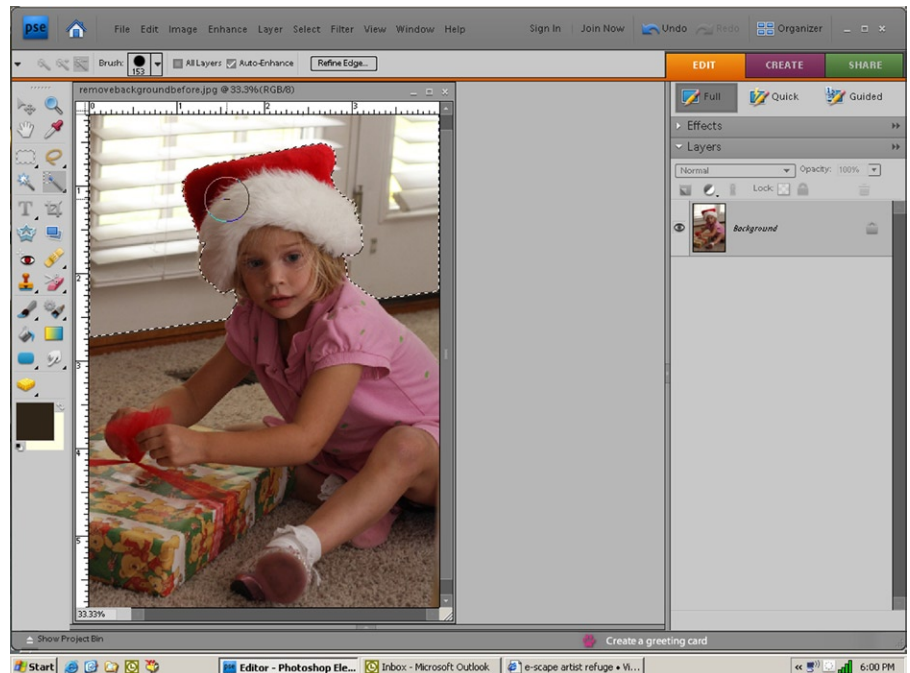
If you look back at the Quick Selection menu, on the left you will see three little “wands.” The one on the right is to “Subtract something from the selection.” If you click this (or paint it) over the hat, the hat should become deselected, and the marching ants will be around it. If you have trouble getting this to select the way you want to, you may need to make the size of



the tool a little smaller. Anytime you want to get rid of the marching ants and start over, you can Deselect by pressing CTRL+D (CMD+D).

Similarly, if you want to add something to the selection, you can click the middle “wand” and you can add something to the selection.

When your selection looks just like you want it to, zoom it in to 100% or more (by pressing CTRL and + a few times or CMD and + for MAC) and check out the edges of your selection. Since we chose Auto Enhance in the menu bar, the edges of our selection have been automatically smoothed. If you like the way the edges look, you are all set.



If you want to work on the edges a little more, click on Refine Edge and a dropdown menu will appear. From this menu you can choose:

Smooth. This removes the jagged edges from the edge of your selection. You can use the slider or simply enter a number of pixels out from the edge to smooth.

Feather. Feathering blurs the edges of your selection. Blurring the edge will make your selected area blend into its new location in a more believable way. Usually a feather of 1 or 2 pixels gives a natural look without too much blurring.

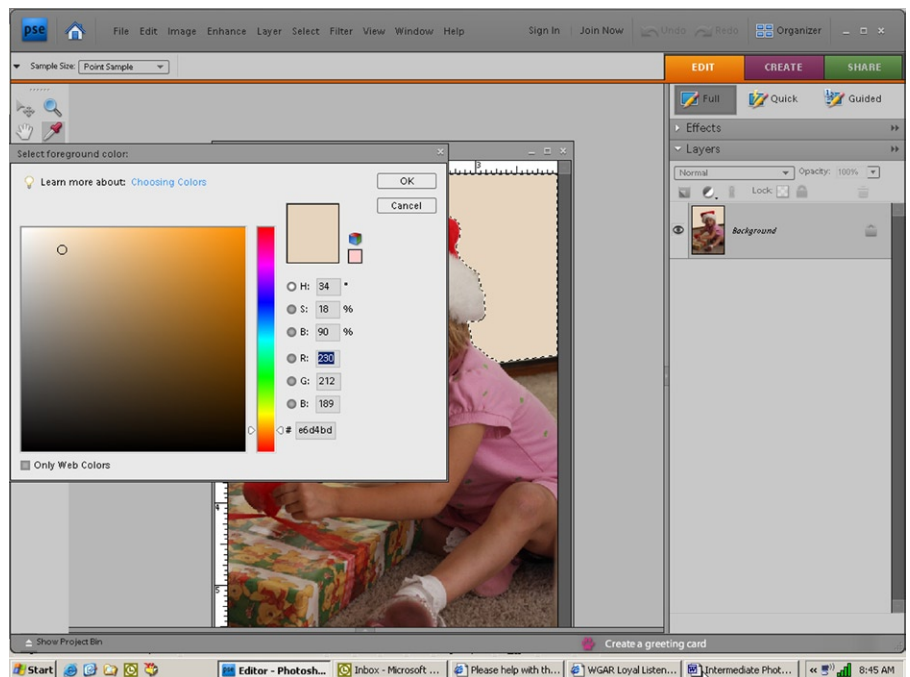
Contract/Expand. Move the slider to the left to contract your selection or to the right to expand it.

Be careful not to refine the edges of your selection too much. Adjust the sliders a little at a time until you like the look.

OK! Now we're ready to get rid of those windows in the background!

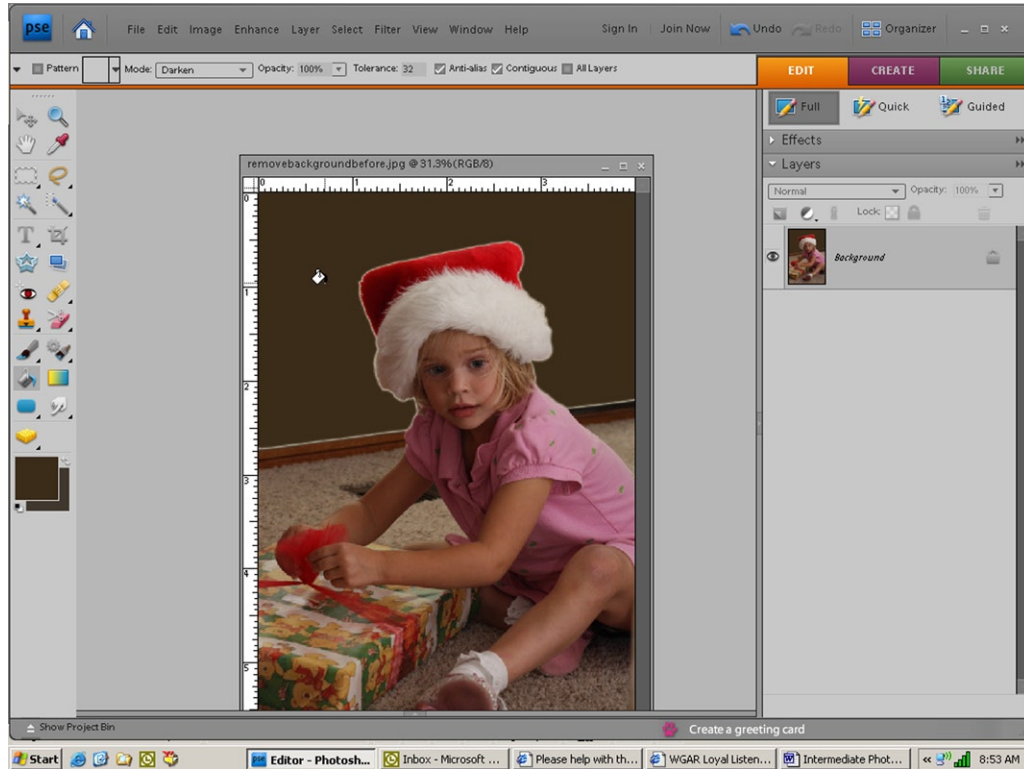
1. Press Delete and your selection should disappear!
2. Choose the Paint Bucket tool from your left toolbar. It looks like a paint bucket with paint spilling out. In some versions of PS and PSE, it is housed with the gradient tool, so you may need to look around a little. It is generally farther down on the toolbar.

3. There are two colored squares at the bottom of the toolbar. These set the Foreground and Background color. Click on the Foreground Color square and you will get a color selection box.



4. There is a long narrow box here containing a rainbow of colors. Click on the color family you think you would like to use in the background. You will see all values of that color family appear in the large box. Because the background that we chose was light, I would choose a light shade of the color you like. (FYI, I like to use beige, and the browns are found in the orange-ish palette).
5. Position the Paint Bucket cursor over the background area and Click. You should now have a plain background!
6. Press CTRL+D (CMD+D) to get rid of the marching ants or go to Select>Deselect from the top menu bar.

Note. I suggested you choose a light color because a dark color would show up a light outline around your selection like this. There is a way to get rid of this outline, but it's time consuming and can be avoided simply by choosing a light color!



Your photo should now have a beautiful uncluttered background and be ready to Save!

Be sure to check the Getting Started document for directions on how to post your before and after photos to the Gallery. I can't wait to see them!