Masking with Transparent Overlays

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Jen White

Masking with Transparent Overlays
by Jen White

Use the magic formula of 50% gray combined with a contrast blend mode to achieve a special masking technique.

The Problem:

I love to search for out-of-the-ordinary things to clip to masks. Recently I wanted to clip a transparent overlay to a fancy watercolor. I just wanted to utilize the shape and varied transparency of the watercolor, not the colors in it. So, I had to figure out how to make the watercolor disappear, yet still be able to clip to it.

NO   YES

The Solution:

The answer was found in the contrast blend modes.

The Contrast Blend Modes are Overlay, Soft Light, Hard Light, Vivid Light, Linear Light, and Pin Light. All of the Contrast modes work by lightening the lightest pixels, darkening the darkest pixels, and dropping the gray mid-tones (50% gray).

That last part is the key. If you set a layer's pixels to 50% gray and change the blend mode of that layer to Hard Light, for example, the layer appears to disappear… yet, it's still there.

Let's take a look at how that works in Photoshop.

Step One: Prepare Your Workspace

- **Download the Per Diem pack** to work with during this tutorial.

The download comes with a colorful watercolor overlay (which I'll use as a mask), a word overlay, and a piece of paper. This tutorial, however, will work with any mask, any overlay, and any paper.
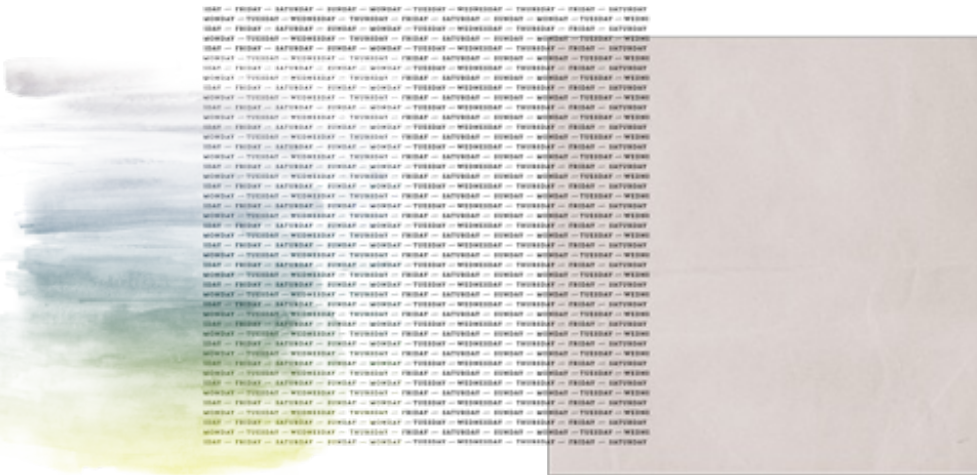
- Open the paper (File > Open) from the download folder.

- Open the watercolor from the download folder.

- Get the Move tool.

- Click and drag the watercolor onto the paper. Hold down the Shift key before you let go and the watercolor will land in the center of the paper.

- In the Layers panel, rename the layer WATERCOLOR.

Note: As I mentioned above, this tutorial will work with any mask. I'm using the watercolor as a mask.
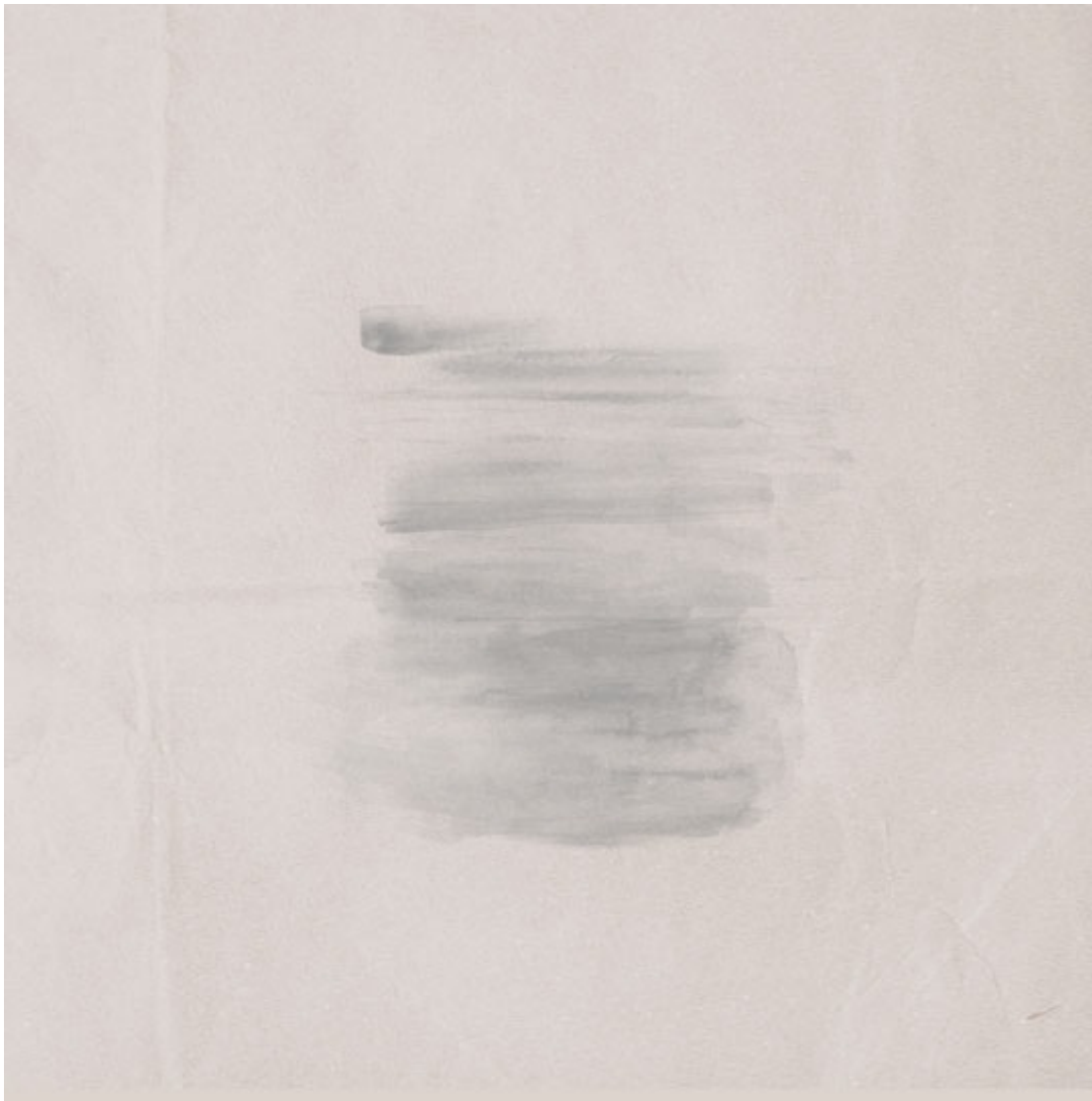
Step Two: Fill the Mask

The WATERCOLOR layer should be the active layer.

- In the Menu Bar, choose Edit > Fill.
- In the dialog box, set the Contents to 50% Gray, the Blend Mode to Normal, and the Opacity 100%. Check Preserve Transparency. Click OK.

Even if your mask already looks gray, it's important that it be exactly 50% gray.

Step Three: Change to a Contrast Blend Mode

The Contrast Blend Modes are Overlay, Soft Light, Hard Light, Vivid Light, Linear Light, and Pin Light. When combined with a color of 50% gray, the pixels appear to disappear.

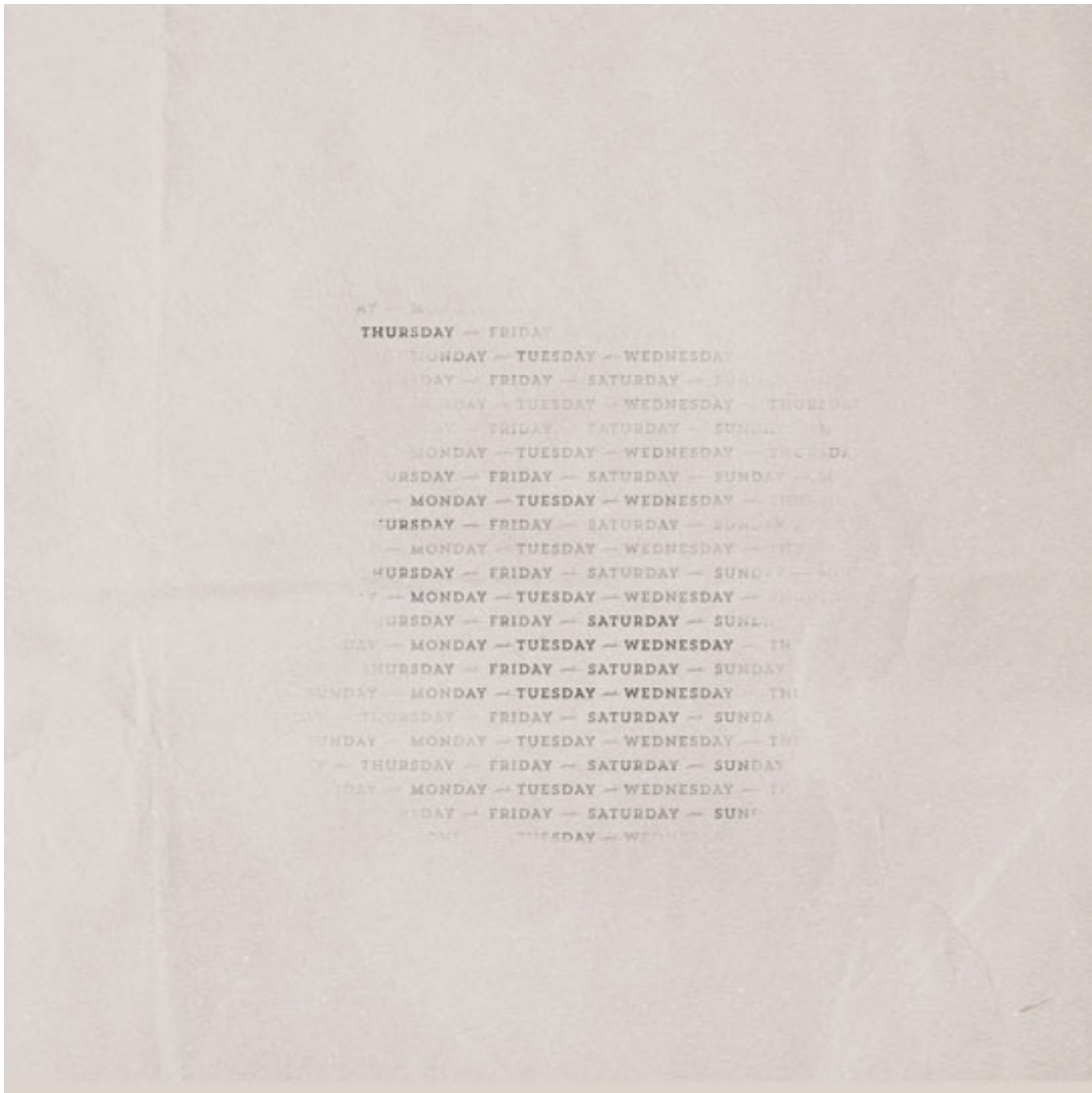- In the Layers panel, set the Blend Mode of WATERCOLOR layer to Hard Light.

Don't panic! The watercolor should no longer be visible on the paper.

Step Four: Clip a Transparent Overlay to the Mask

The WATERCOLOR layer should still be the active layer and the Move tool should be the active tool.

- Open the word-overlay from the download folder.
- Click and drag the word-overlay onto the paper. Hold down the Shift key before you let go and the watercolor will land in the center of the paper.
- In the Menu Bar, choose Layer > Create Clipping Mask.

Step Five: Try Other Contrast Blend Modes

Each of the six contrast blend modes will give a slightly different result, but they all do the job of making the 50% gray pixels in the mask invisible.

- In the Layers panel, activate the WATERCOLOR layer.
- Change the Blend Mode to one of the other five contrast modes to see the possible results.

Note: For best results, always have a paper or a colored layer below the mask you are using.
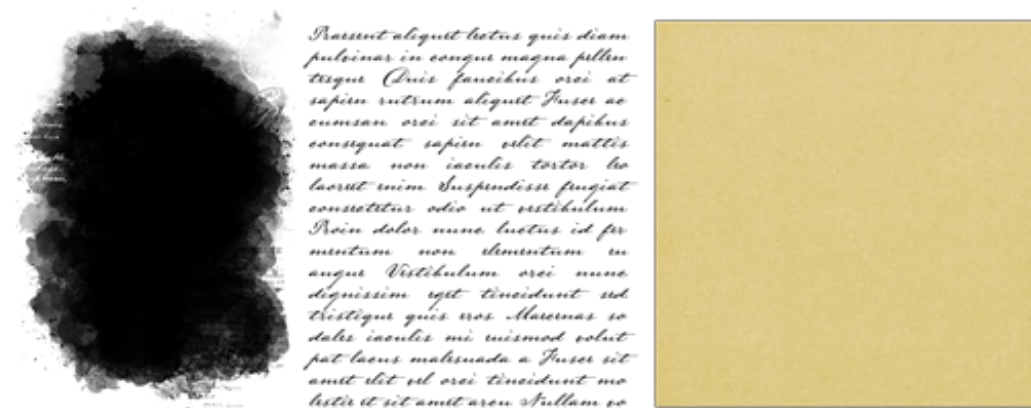
Here are a couple other combos I thought looked good:

This is a pattern-paint, overlay, and paper from Christmas Wishes by Kristin Cronin-Barrow.
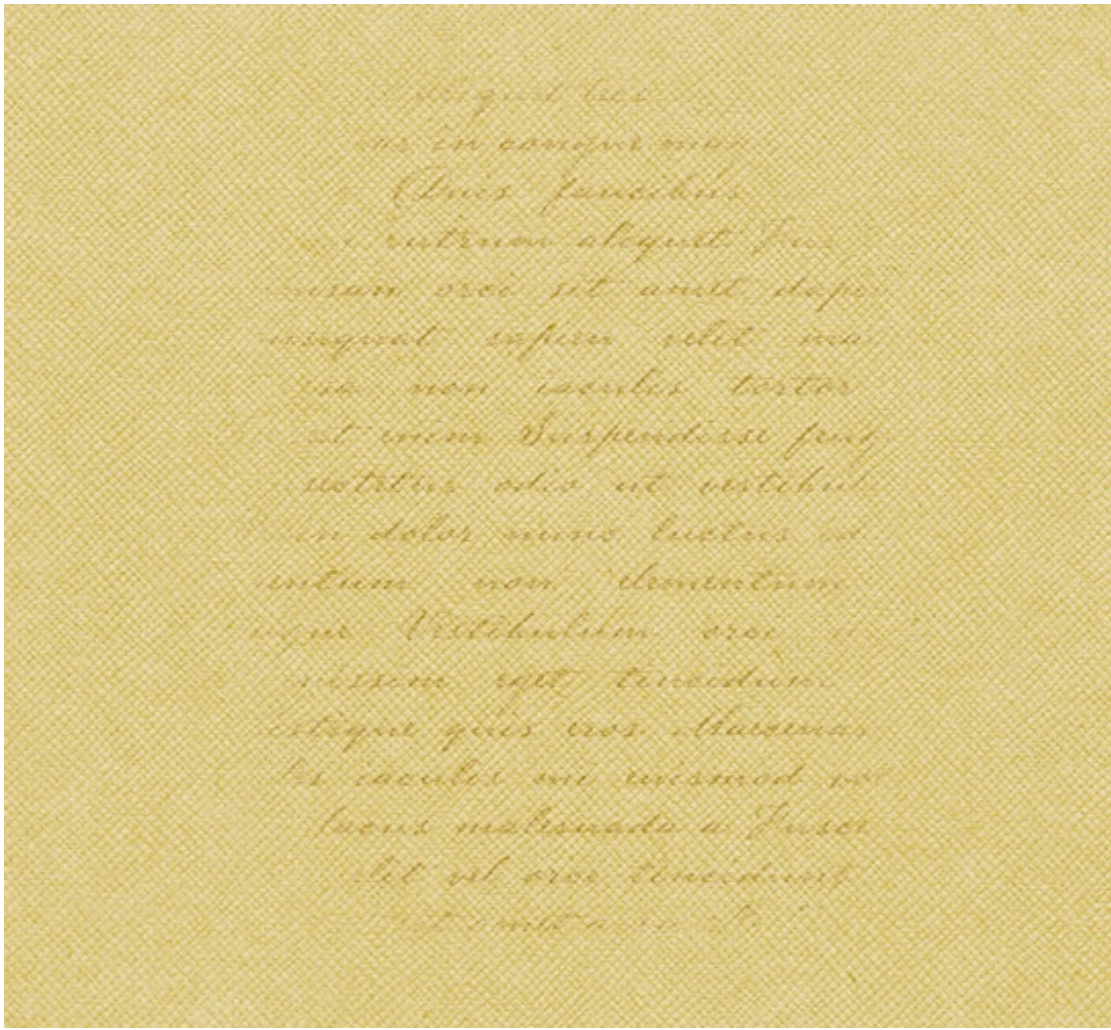
I followed the same tutorial steps, but this time I set the blend mode of the mask to Overlay.
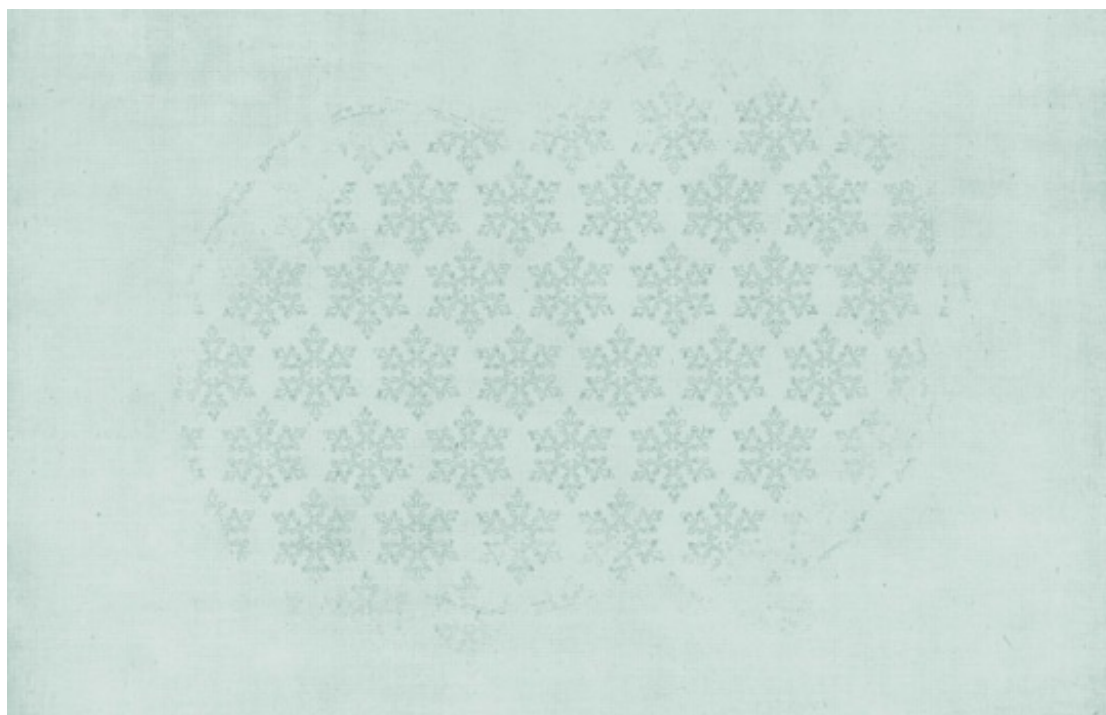
This is a mask, overlay, and paper by Susie Roberts.

I followed the same tutorial steps, but this time I set the blend mode of the mask to Soft Light.

Finally, here's a scrapbook page I created using this technique.

Page: Outside by Jen White
Photos: Jen White
Kit: Per Diem by One Little Bird
Fonts: Mathlete, DJB ANNALISE 2011

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