Adobe® Customer Support

Creating Transparent Images in Photoshop

What's Covered
Bitmap Images
Clipping Path Transparency
Grayscale and Color Images
Transparent GIF Files

An image's file format determines whether it is transparent or opaque. File formats that support transparency include 1-bit (black-and-white) TIFF images, 1-bit EPS images, and indexed color GIF images. File formats that do not support transparency include color or grayscale images saved in PICT, TIFF, or EPS format. You can create transparent images or the appearance of transparency in Adobe Photoshop 3.0 and later using several file formats.

Bitmap Images
Bitmap images (i.e., black-and-white, 1-bit, and line art images) designate black pixels as "on" and white pixels as "off." Because TIFF images do not specify whether the white pixels appear transparent or opaque, the application you import a 1-bit TIFF image into determines whether the white pixels are opaque or transparent. Most page layout applications (e.g., Adobe PageMaker, QuarkXPress) designate the white pixels in 1-bit TIFF images as transparent. The white pixels in a 1-bit EPS file saved in Photoshop can be either transparent or opaque.

To save a 1-bit (Bitmap mode) EPS file with transparent white pixels:
1. Choose File > Save As.
2. In the Save As dialog box, select EPS from the Format pop-up menu.
2. Name the file and click OK (Windows) or Save (Macintosh).
3. In the EPS Format dialog box, select the Transparent Whites option, then click OK.

Grayscale and Color Images
Grayscale images describe each pixel as a shade of four to 256 grays, rather than using black pixels to form patterns that simulate gray shades. The white pixels in grayscale images are always opaque, because they are defined as a shade of gray.

Color images describe each pixel as a color. RGB images describe colors using red, blue, and green values, and CMYK images describe colors using cyan, magenta, yellow, and black values. Index (Palette) images are similar to grayscale images, except that they use an index to map colors into an existing RGB color lookup table. The white pixels in color TIFF, PICT and EPS files are always opaque, because they are defined as a shade of color.

Clipping Path Transparency
You can create the appearance of a transparency in opaque images using a clipping path. A clipping path is a vector path that masks areas in an image. The pixels outside the clipping path are treated as if they are transparent, and the areas inside the clipping path treated as if they are opaque. (Note: If you use a clipping path to mask an object with a feathered edge, the clipping path defines the edge of the image and the image prints with a hard edge instead of a feathered edge.) Photoshop 3.0 and later can include clipping paths in images saved in Photoshop, EPS or TIFF file formats; Photoshop 2.5.x and earlier can include clipping paths in Photoshop or EPS images.

EPS files containing a clipping path appear transparent when saved with a Macintosh screen preview (i.e., PICT preview), but display opaque when saved with a Windows screen preview (i.e., TIFF preview). The EPS files print transparent to a PostScript printer, however, when saved with either type of preview.

To save an EPS file with a clipping path:
1. Create a selection around the portion of the image you want to be opaque.
2. Choose Windows > Palettes > Show Paths.
3. Select Make Work Path from the Path palette pop-up menu.
4. In the Make Work Path dialog box, set the tolerance value, then click OK.
5. Select Save Path from the Path palette pop-up menu.
6. Name the path, then click OK.
7. Choose File > Save As.
8. Select EPS from the Format pop-up menu.
9. Name the EPS file, then click OK (Windows) or Save (Macintosh).
10. In the EPS Format dialog box, select the path from the Clipping Path pop-up menu, set the other format options (e.g., Encoding, Preview), then click OK.

TIFF files containing a clipping path print transparent to both PostScript and non-PostScript printers.

To save an TIFF file with a clipping path:
1. Create a selection around the portion of the image you want to be opaque.
2. Choose Windows > Palettes > Show Paths.
3. Select Make Work Path from the Path palette pop-up menu.
4. In the Make Work Path dialog box, set the tolerance value, then click OK.
5. Select Save Path from the Path palette pop-up menu.
6. Name the path, then click OK.
7. Select Clipping Path from the Path palette pop-up menu.
8. Choose your saved path in the Path field of the Clipping path dialog, then click OK.
9. Choose File > Save As.
10. Select TIFF from the Format pop-up menu.
11. Name the TIFF file, then click OK (Windows) or Save (Macintosh).
10. In the TIFF Options dialog box, choose Byte Order and LZW Compression options, then click OK.

For more information about clipping paths in Photoshop, refer to the Adobe Photoshop User Guide.

Transparent GIF Files

When you save an indexed color image as a GIF file using the GIF89a plug-in, you can designate certain colors as transparent. (GIF files created by selecting the CompuServe GIF file format in the Save As dialog box are opaque.) Photoshop (versions 3.0.5 and later) includes the GIF89a plug-in.

To export a transparent GIF file in Photoshop using the GIF89a plug-in:

1. Install the GIF89a Export plug-in into Photoshop's Plug-ins folder (Windows) or the Acquire/Export folder in Photoshop's Plug-ins folder (Macintosh).
2. Restart Photoshop, then open the your file and convert it to Indexed Color mode by choosing Mode > Indexed Color. You must convert to Indexed Color mode to access transparency options in the GIF89a Export dialog box.
3. Choose File > Export > GIF89a Export.
4. In the GIF89a Export dialog box, select the colors you want to designate as transparent, then click OK.
5. Name the GIF file, then click Save.

Several applications and utilities can designate an opaque color in a GIF file as transparent, including Adobe PageMill, the Transparency shareware utility for the Macintosh, and the LView Pro shareware utility for Windows.