

Adobe Photoshop is arguable the most resource intensive program that your computer will ever have to endure, therefore it is necessary to be sure that your machine will be set to optimize its performance with Photoshop.

Photoshop needs RAM, lots and lots of RAM. Did I mention that Photoshop needs RAM? Also plenty of hard drive space. RAM and HD space are more important than processor speed for image processing programs. So max out your machine with RAM (its cheap) and clean up the HD by archiving that 6 months of shoots that you still have sitting on your desktop. Ideally you want to get a second HD to use for your Photoshop “scratch disk”. Photoshop uses “virtual memory” temporary files on your HD when you have used up your available RAM. You will use many times the actual file size in memory. Layers, history states, adjustment layers, etc. all adds to the memory usage. More on setting your scratch disk later.

Every time that you close Photoshop, you are rewriting and saving the “preference file”. This is the file that loads when you launch Photoshop that tells it how you want the program set up. Since this file is rewritten so often, it is easily corrupted. If the program starts acting..well, just weird, you probably need to rebuild your preference file. You accomplish this by pressing the control/alt/delete (windows) or the Command/option/shift (Mac) simultaneously immediately after launching Photoshop. This is a critical timing thing, so if you do not see a dialog box that asks “Delete the Photoshop settings file?” you missed and should try again. Rebuilding your preference file is often referred to as the *Chicken Soup* for Photoshop in that it cures most problems. Be aware that this will reset the program as if you had just installed it.

Now, let’s have a look at how we want to change the default setting. I have listed only the changes that I recommend. Your mileage may vary. For Windows users, under the edit menu choose preferences. Mac users look under Photoshop/preferences.

GENERAL

Change image interpolation to Bicubic Smoother (when uprezing your images, you want to use bicubic smoother. When downsizing, use bicubic sharper.) If you are using a wheel mouse, be sure to check the box “zoom with scroll wheel” as this will allow you to zoom in and out with your mouse wheel.

File Handling

Uncheck enable large document format (.psb) unless you expect to be working on documents larger than 2 gigabytes. Change maximize PSD and PSB file compatibility to “always”. This will embed a flattened version of your layered file for use in other programs as well as speeding up thumbnail rendering in Bridge.

Be advised that this will also double your file size, so if you don't need it, choose never.

Displays and Cursors

Check the box that reads "full sized brush tip" only if you wish to see a simulated version of your feathered cursor (personally I don't like this feature). Check "show crosshair in brush tip" to create a small crosshair in the center of your cursor (this helps with precise cloning).

Plugins and Scratchdisks

If you have installed any third party plugins in a separate folder (recommended), you should check this box and select "choose" to browse to its location. If you have more than one hard drive (recommended), you will want to choose any drive other than "start up" as your first scratch disk. Follow down until you run out of drives and then choose your startup drive as the last scratch disk. DO NOT use an external drive as a scratch disk as this will degrade Photoshop's performance.

Memory and Image Cache

Set the cache levels to 4 if you find that Photoshop runs sluggish. Leave maximum RAM set to the default of 55% unless you have more than 2 gigabytes of RAM on your system. If you set this higher you run the risk of starving your operating system of RAM and this will cause Photoshop to slow down and sometimes actually crash (losing all of your valuable work)!

Type

I recommend un-checking Font Preview. This feature is a memory hog and adds little benefit. Turning off this feature has been known to radically speed up Photoshop on many machines.

There are some other default settings that you will want to change:

Choose the eyedropper tool and on the options bar, change the sample size from "point sample" to "3x3 average".

Open any image and choose Image/adjust/curves. Double click on the white eyedropper and input the number 247 in each of the R,G,&B boxes. Click OK and then double click on the black eyedropper. Change the R,G,&B values each to 14 and then once again, click OK. Now click on the "options" button and check "find dark and light colors" as well as "snap to neutral midtones". Then change the shadow and highlight clipping to .15. Be sure to check "save as defaults" and then click OK. If you are prompted to save the new target colors as defaults, choose yes.

Under view, choose show and highlight "smart guides".

Once you have a clean set of preferences, you might want to make a copy of them for future use. Simply navigate to the proper folder on your machine (see below) or simply do a search for .PSP files.

Under Win 2k/XP the preference file will be found at:
%windir%\Documents and Settings\~username\Application
Data\Adobe\Photoshop\[version #]\Adobe Photoshop [version #] Settings

[NOTE: You need to set Window's Explorer Options to "View Hidden Files and Folders" to display the Preference file]

With the Mac OS, open the Preferences folder in the Library folder.

Copy this file and keep the copy somewhere on your hard drive. In the event of problems, simply copy your copy (huh?) in the proper folder.