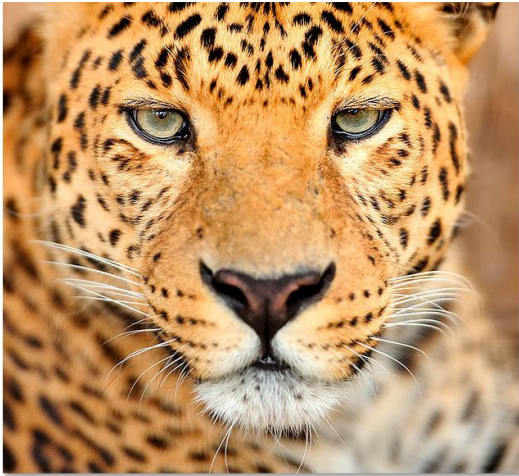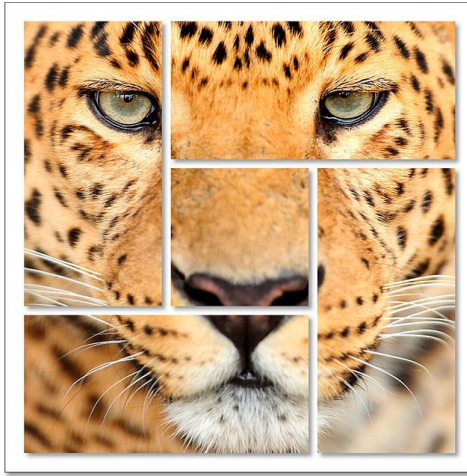# Shape Cluster Photo

Written by Steve Patterson
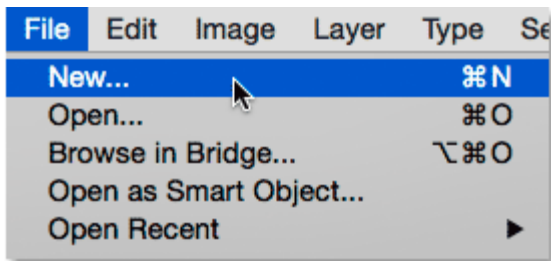

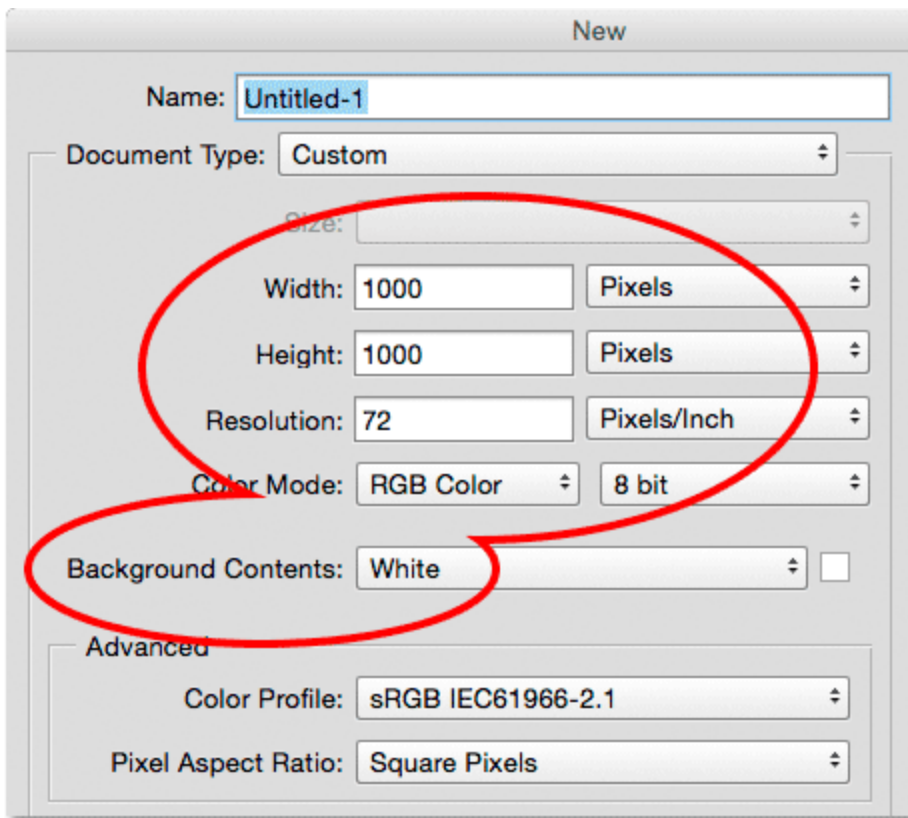Before   After

Step 1: Create A New Document

Let's begin by creating a new Photoshop document. Go up to the **File** menu in the Menu Bar along the top of the screen and choose **New**:
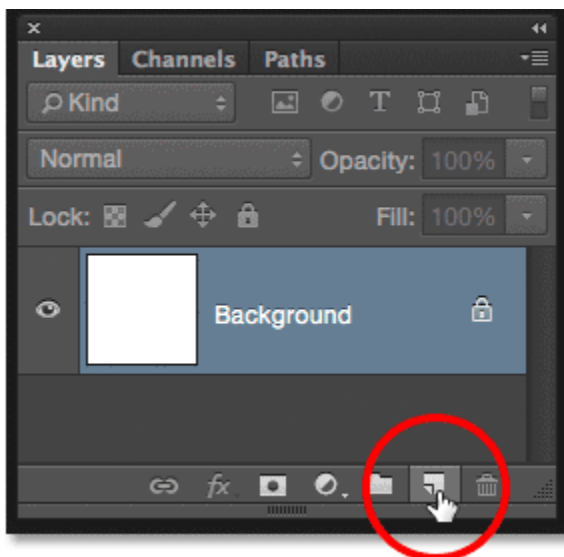

Go to File > New.

This opens Photoshop's New dialog box. You can use whatever dimensions you need for your effect, but a square-shaped document works best. For this tutorial, I'll set both the **Width** and **Height** of my document to **1000 Pixels**, and since I'm not planning on printing this, I'll leave the **Resolution** value set to **72 Pixels/Inch**. If you're creating this effect for print, you'll most likely need a larger document with a resolution of around 300 pixels/inch. Set the **Background Contents** to **White**, then click OK to close out of the dialog box. A new document, filled with white, will appear on your screen:
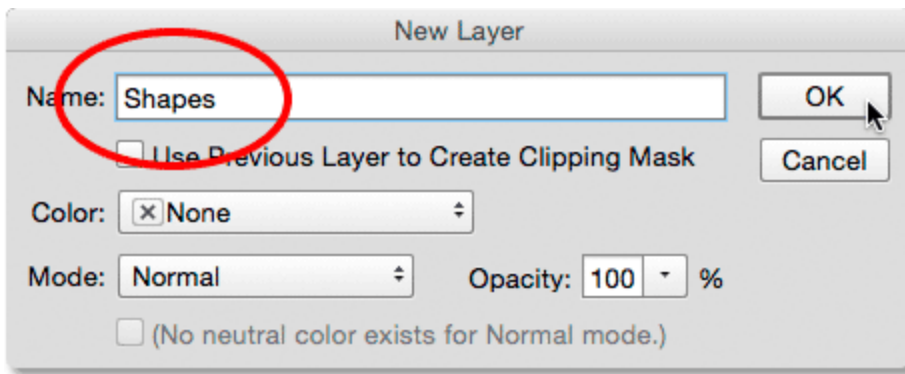
The New dialog box.

Step 2: Add A New Blank Layer

Next, we'll add a new layer to hold the various shapes we'll be using to divide up our image. Press and hold the **Alt** (Win) / **Option** (Mac) key on your keyboard and click on the **New Layer** icon at the bottom of the Layers panel:
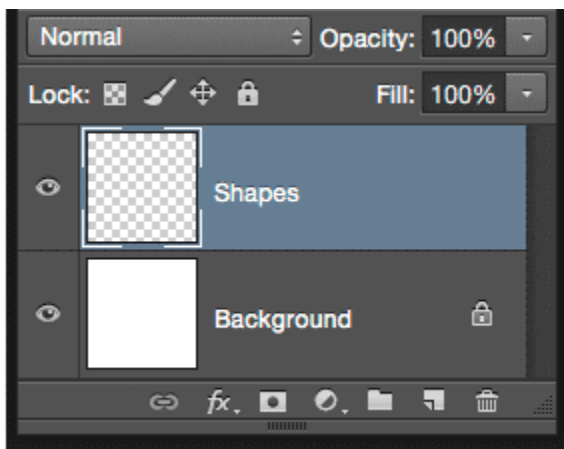

Press and hold Alt (Win) / Option (Mac) and click the New Layer icon.

This opens the New Layer dialog box, giving us a chance to name the new layer before it's added. Name the layer "Shapes", then click **OK**:
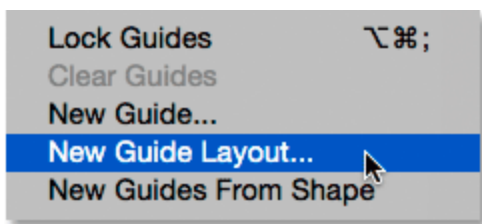
Naming the new layer "Shapes".

A new blank layer named "Shapes" appears above the Background layer:

The Layers panel showing the new "Shapes" layer.

Step 3: Select "New Guide Layout"

Let's add some guides to the document to help us create the shapes. To do that, we'll use Photoshop CC's New Guide Layout feature. Go up to the **View** menu at the top of the screen and choose **New Guide Layout**:

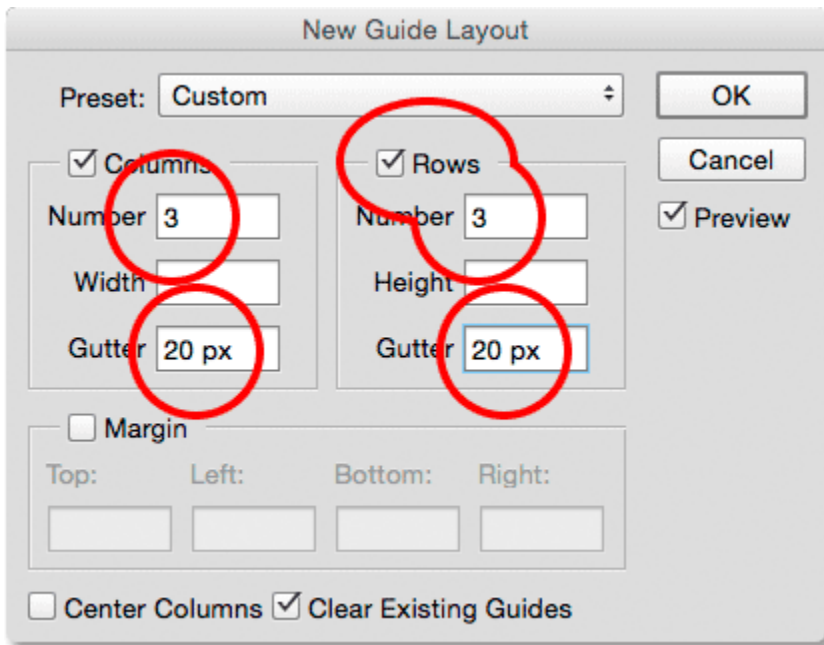
Going to View > New Guide Layout.
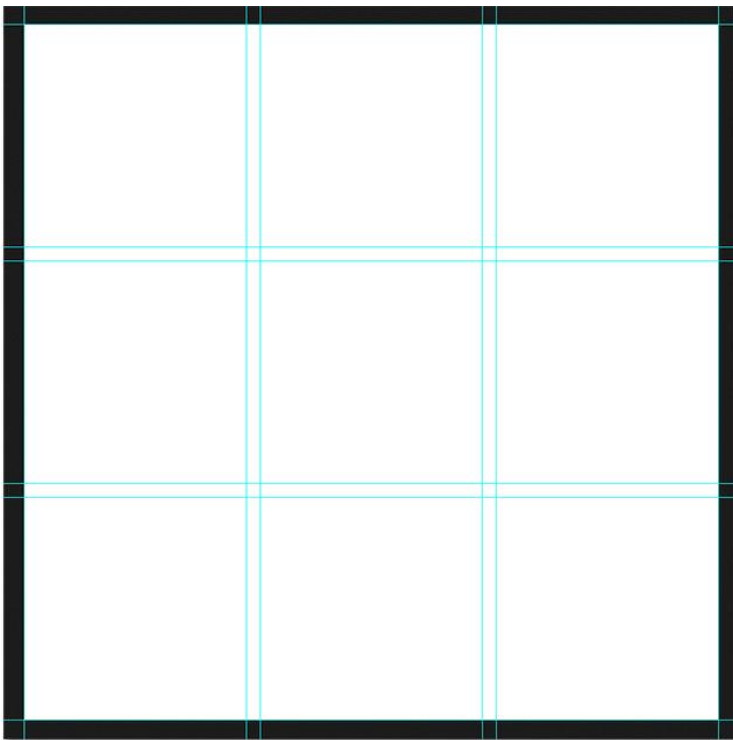
Step 4: Create A 3 x 3 Guide Layout

This opens the New Guide Layout dialog box which lets us easily add rows and columns, gutters, and margins to our document. We'll use it to create a simple 3 by 3 grid. First, in the **Columns** section on the left, set the **Number** of columns to **3**, leave the **Width** field empty (so Photoshop will space the columns equally) and set the **Gutter** (the space between the columns) to **20 px**.

Then, in the **Rows** section on the right, first click inside the Rows **checkbox** to enable rows (they're turned off by default), then set the **Number** of rows also to **3**. Leave the **Height** field empty to let Photoshop space them out equally, and set the **Gutter** (the space between the rows) to **20 px**:
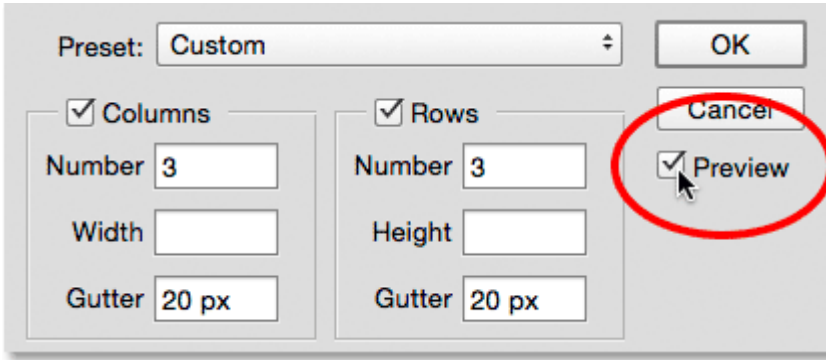

Creating the columns and rows for our guide layout.

Here's what the guide layout should look like so far in the document, with three columns, three rows, and a gutter between each column and row of 20 pixels:
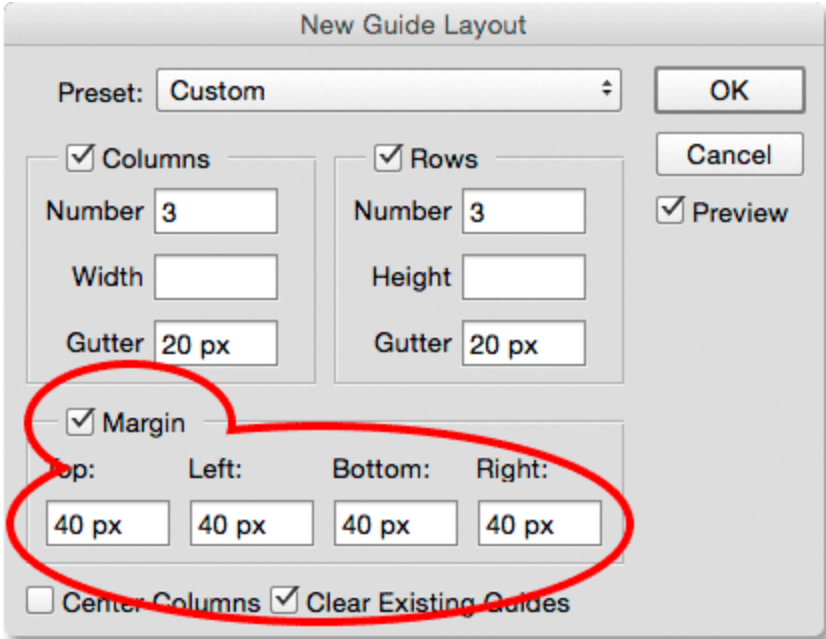

A 3 by 3 grid with a 20 pixel gutter.

If you're not seeing your guide layout updating on the screen, make sure the **Preview** option in the dialog box is selected:
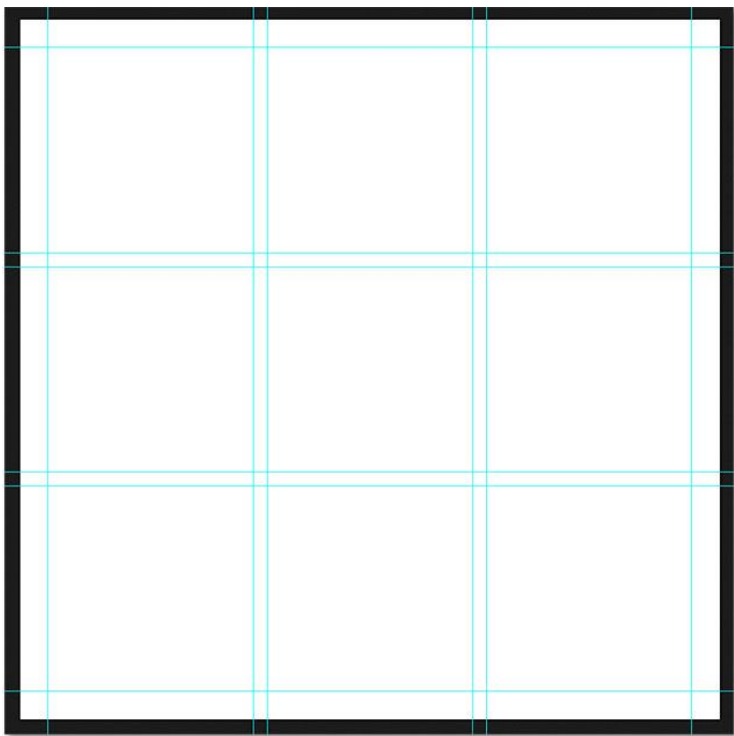

Making sure Preview is checked.

Next, let's add some margins around the edges of the document. Click in the Margin **checkbox** to enable the margins, then set each of the four options (**Top**, **Left**, **Bottom**, and **Right**) to **40 px**:

Adding margins around the document.

When you're done, click **OK** to close out of the New Guide Layout dialog box. Here's what the final guide layout should look like with the margins added. Note that if your Photoshop document is larger (or smaller) than the 1000 x 1000 pixel document I created, you may need to try different Gutter and Margin values to get the same results. Generally, I like to use a margin value twice the size of the gutter value, but feel free to experiment:

The final guide layout complete with margins along the top, bottom, left, and right.

[Learn all about the New Guide Layout feature in Photoshop](#)
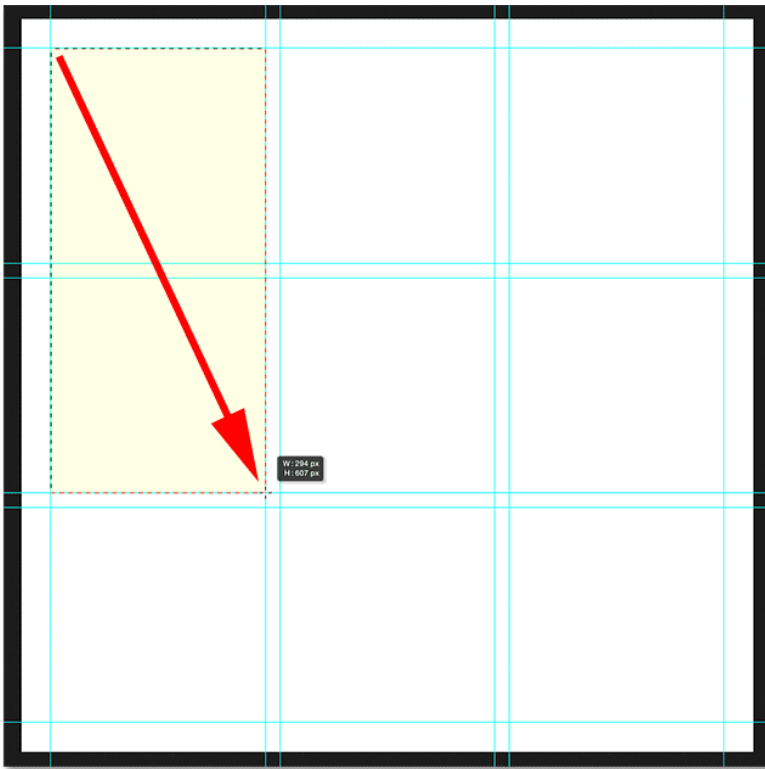
Step 5: Select The Rectangular Marquee Tool

With the guide layout added, select Photoshop's **Rectangular Marquee Tool** from the **Tools panel** along the left of the screen:
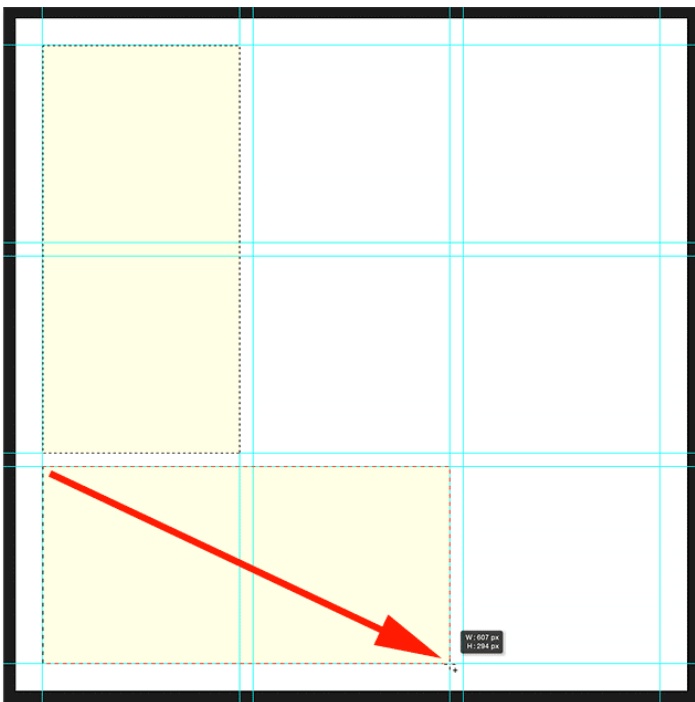

Selecting the Rectangular Marquee Tool.

Step 6: Select Different Sections Of The Grid

We'll use the [Rectangular Marquee Tool](#), along with our guide layout, to draw our shapes. To do that, we need to drag selections around different squares in the 3 by 3 grid. Start by clicking in the top left corner of the square in the **upper left** of the grid (ignore the margins around the edges of the document) and, with your mouse button held down, drag to the bottom right corner of the square directly **below it**. Include the gutter between the squares in the selection. To make things easier to see, I've highlighted the area to select in yellow:
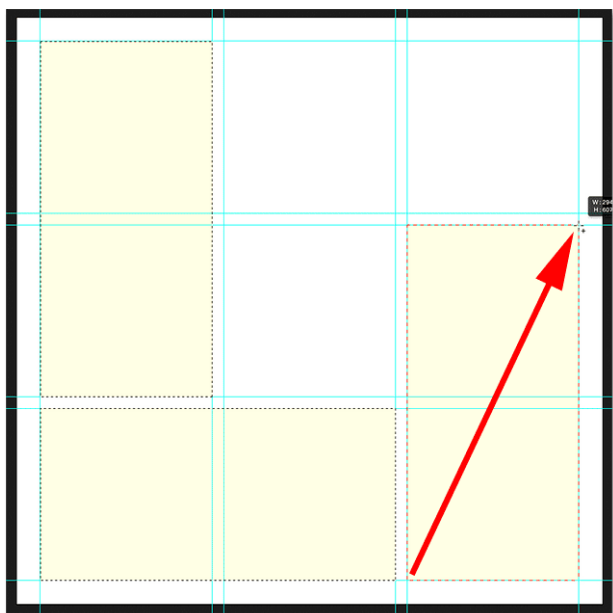
Selecting the first square in the top row and the first square in the middle row, along with the gutter in between.

Next, press and hold the **Shift** key on your keyboard. This will add the selection we're about to create to the selection we've already created (you'll see a small **plus sign** (+) appear in the lower right of your mouse cursor letting you know you're in **Add to Selection** mode). With your Shift key held down, click in the top left corner of the square in the **bottom left** of the grid and, keeping your mouse button held down, drag to the bottom right corner of the square **beside it**. Again, include the gutter between the squares in the selection. You should still see your original selection outline around the first two squares, plus now we have two more squares added:
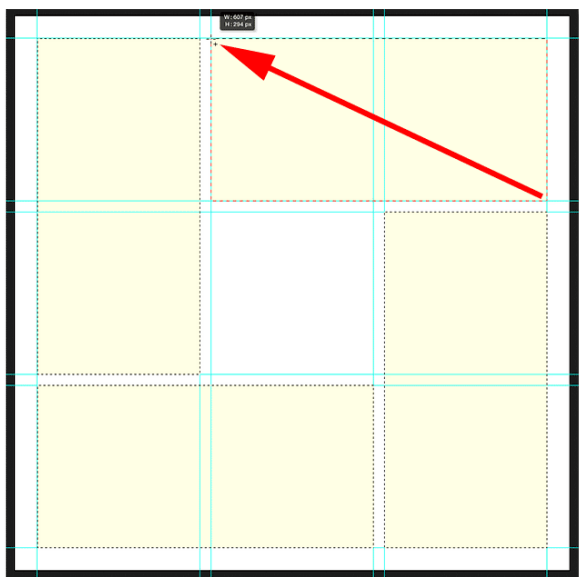

Adding the square in the bottom left and bottom center, plus the gutter in between.

With your Shift key still held down, click in the bottom left corner of the square in the **bottom right** of the grid and drag up to the top right corner of the square directly **above it**. You should now have three sections of the grid selected:

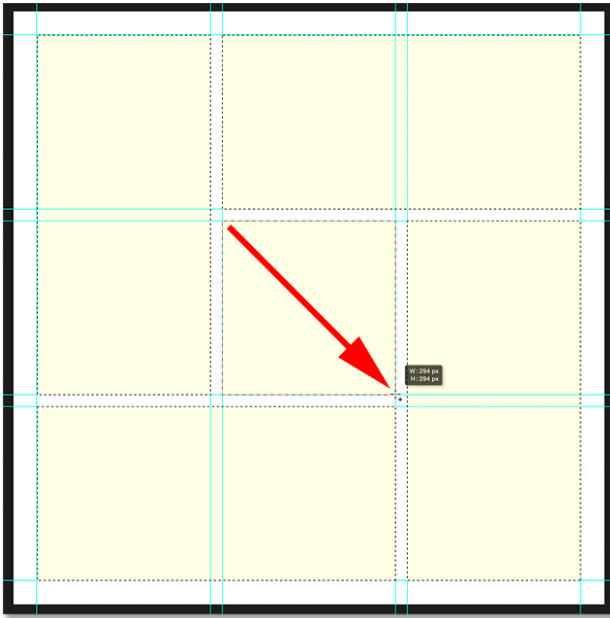Adding the squares in the bottom right and middle right.

We're almost done. Still pressing and holding the Shift key, add the top right and top center squares to the selection by clicking in the bottom right corner of the square in the **top right** and dragging over to the top left corner of the square in the **top center**:

Adding the squares in the top right and top center.

Finally, add the square in the center of the grid by pressing and holding Shift, clicking in the top left corner of the square and dragging down to the bottom right corner:
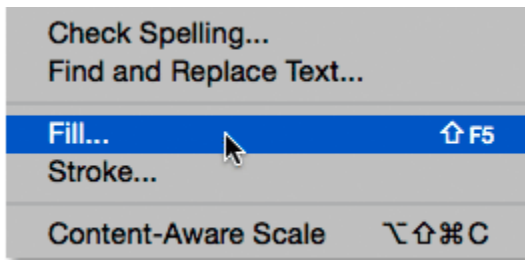
Finishing up the selection by adding the square in the center.
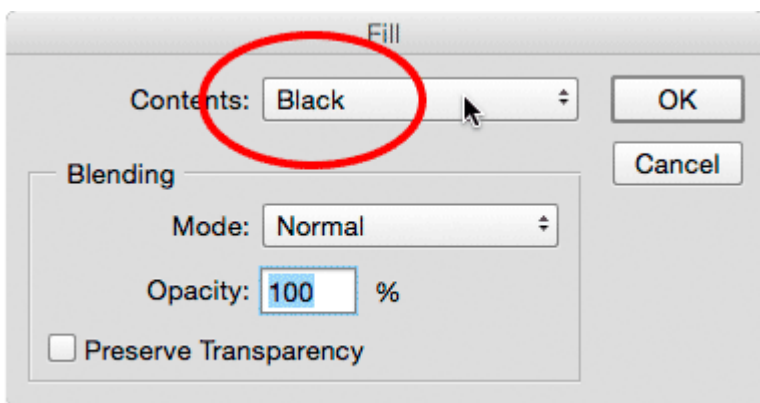
Learning Photoshop has never been easier!

Step 7: Fill The Selection With Black

Let's fill all of the shapes we've selected with black. For that, we'll use Photoshop's Fill command. Go up to the **Edit** menu at the top of the screen and choose **Fill**:
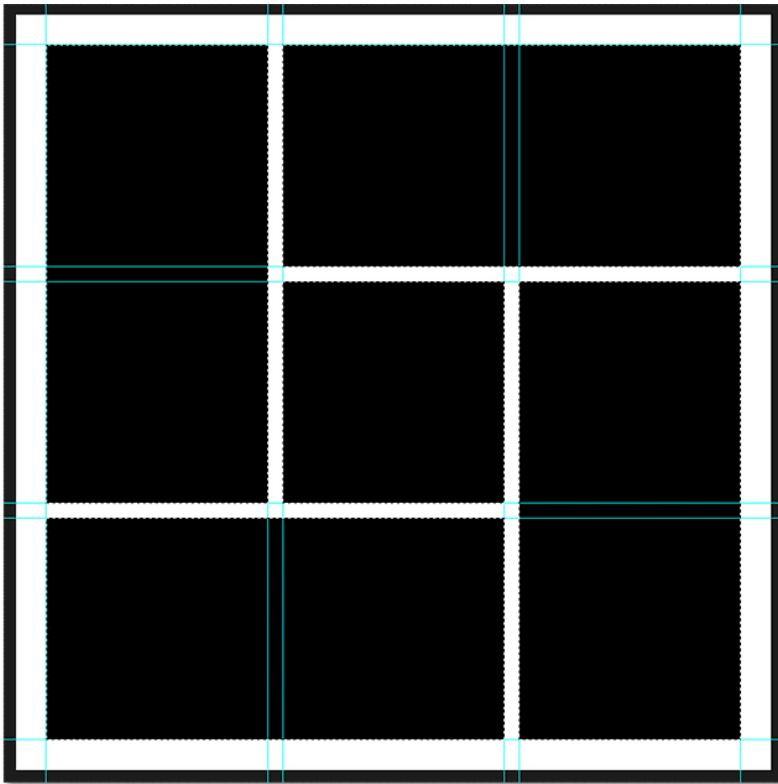

Going to Edit > Fill.

This opens the Fill dialog box. Set the **Contents** option at the top to **Black**, and make sure the **Mode** option is set to **Normal** and **Opacity** is at **100%**:
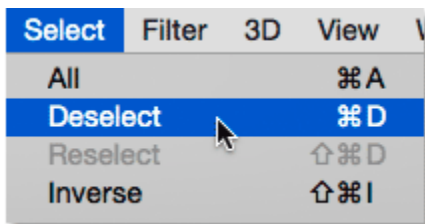
Changing Contents to Black.

Click OK to close out of the Fill dialog box. Photoshop fills the selection with black:

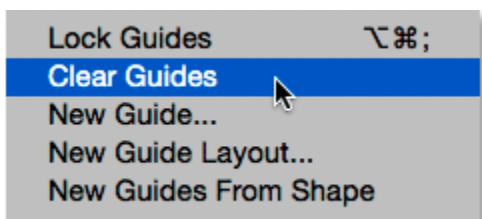The document after filling the selection with black.

We're done with the selection outlines and the guides, so let's clear them from the document. To remove the selection outlines, go up to the **Select** menu at the top of the screen and choose **Deselect**, or press **Ctrl+D** (Win) / **Command+D** (Mac) on your keyboard:
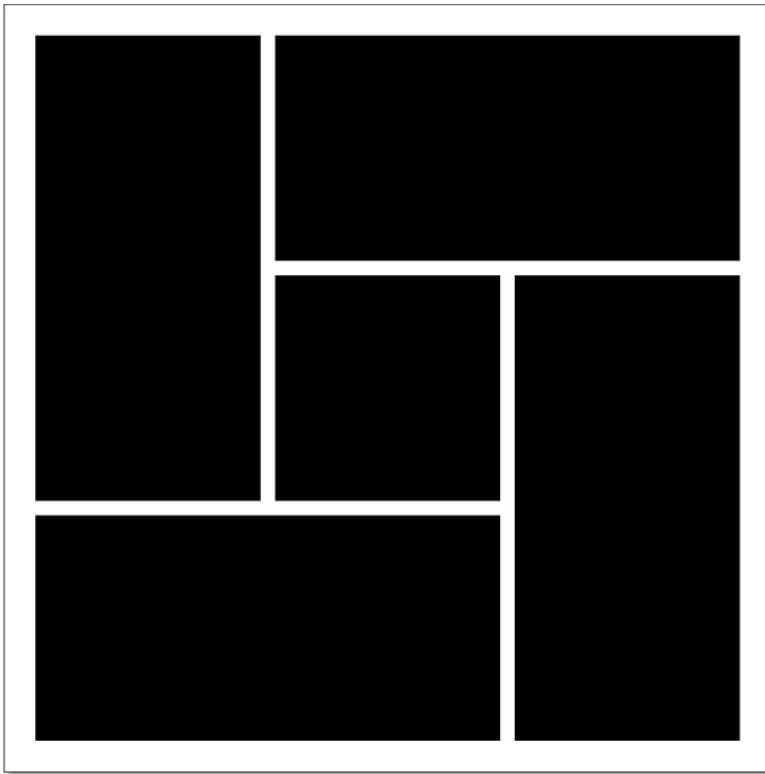

Going to Select > Deselect.

To remove the guides, go up to the **View** menu and choose **Clear Guides**:
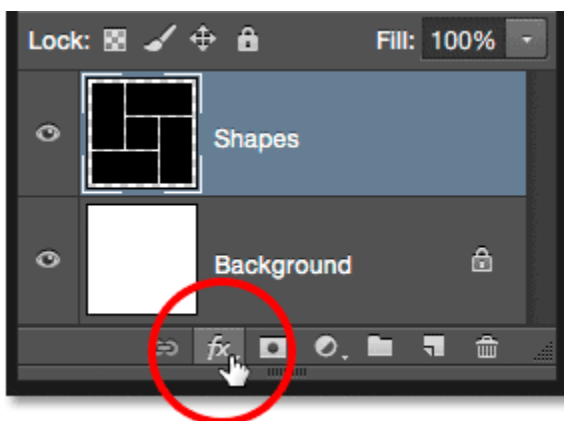
Going to View > Clear Guides.

With the selection outlines and guides now gone, we see just our black-filled shapes against the white background:

A much cleaner looking document.

Step 9: Add A Drop Shadow

To make the effect pop out a bit from the background, we'll add a shadow behind the shapes. With the "Shapes" layer selected, click on the **Layer Styles** icon (the **fx** icon) at the bottom of the Layers panel:
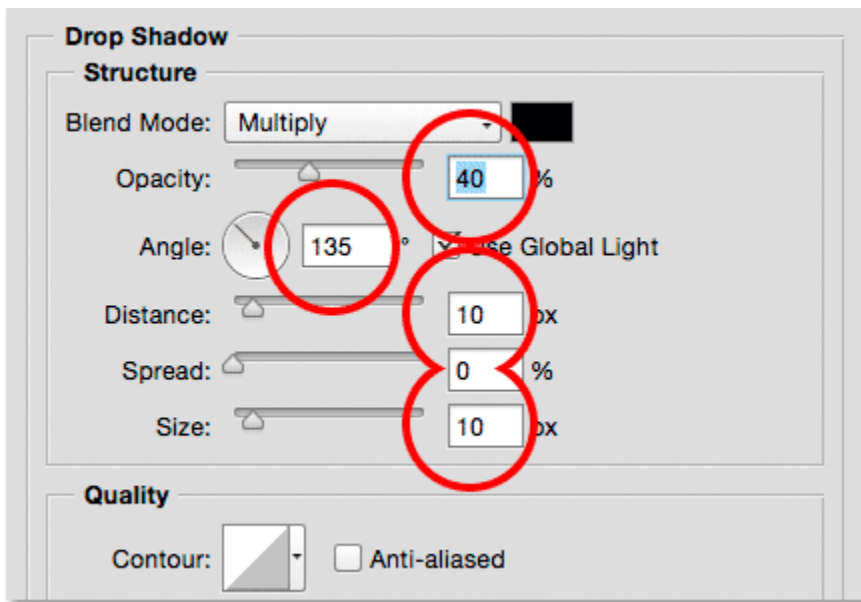

Clicking the Layer Styles icon.

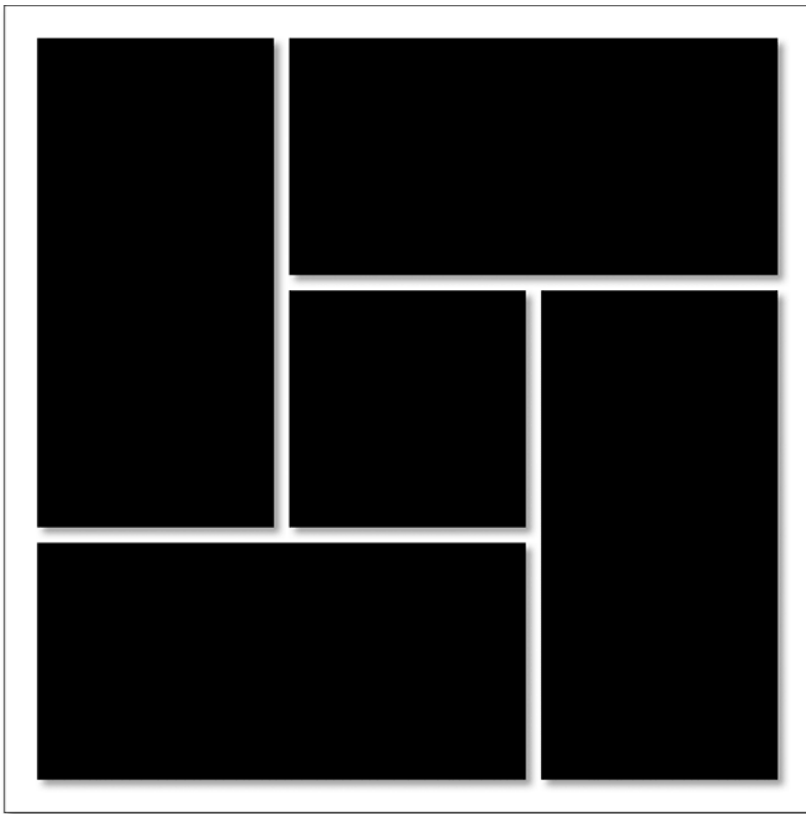Choose **Drop Shadow** from the list that appears:

Choosing a Drop Shadow layer style.

This opens Photoshop's Layer Style dialog box set to the Drop Shadow options in the middle column. I'll set the **Angle** of my shadow to **135°** so the light source appears to be in the upper left, then I'll set both the **Distance** and **Size** values to **10 px**. Distance controls how far away the shadow appears from the object, while Size controls the hardness of the shadow edges. You may want to experiment with these two values if the size of your document is different from mine. Finally, I'll set the **Opacity** of the shadow to **40%**:
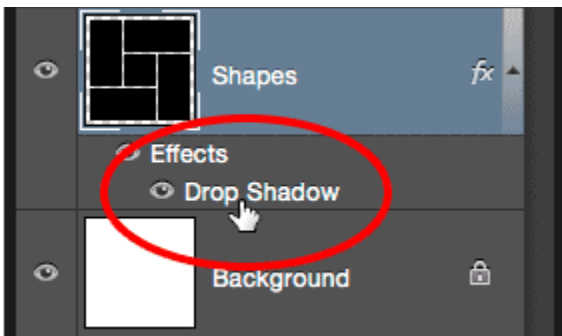

The Drop Shadow options.

Click OK when you're done to close out of the Layer Style dialog box. Here's my shapes with the drop shadow applied:
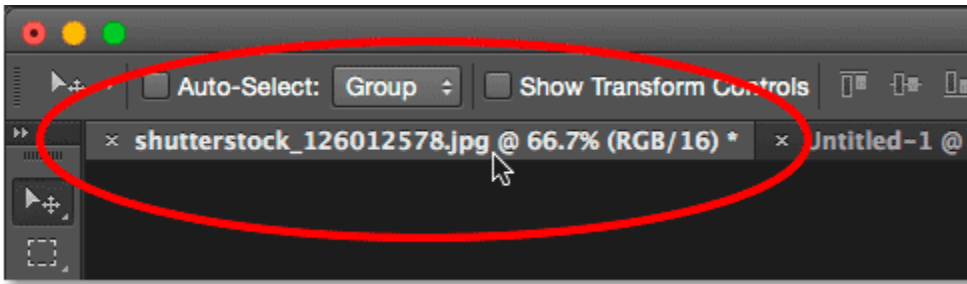
The document after applying the drop shadow.

One of the great things about layer styles in Photoshop is that they remain fully editable even after we've applied them. If we look again in the Layers panel, we see the Drop Shadow effect listed under the "Shapes" layer. If you decide, either now or later on when you've added the photo, that you're not happy with how the shadow looks, simply double-click on the words **Drop Shadow** to re-open the Layer Style dialog box and make whatever changes you need:

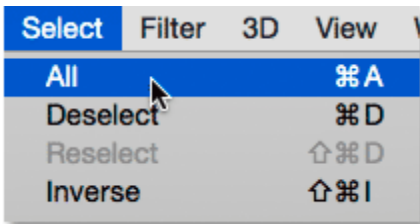Double-click the words "Drop Shadow" at any time to edit its settings.

Step 10: Select And Copy Your Photo

If you haven't done so already, open the photo you want to use for the effect. It will open in its own, separate tabbed document. You can switch between documents by clicking the **tabs** along the top. Here, I'm switching over to my photo's document by clicking on its tab:
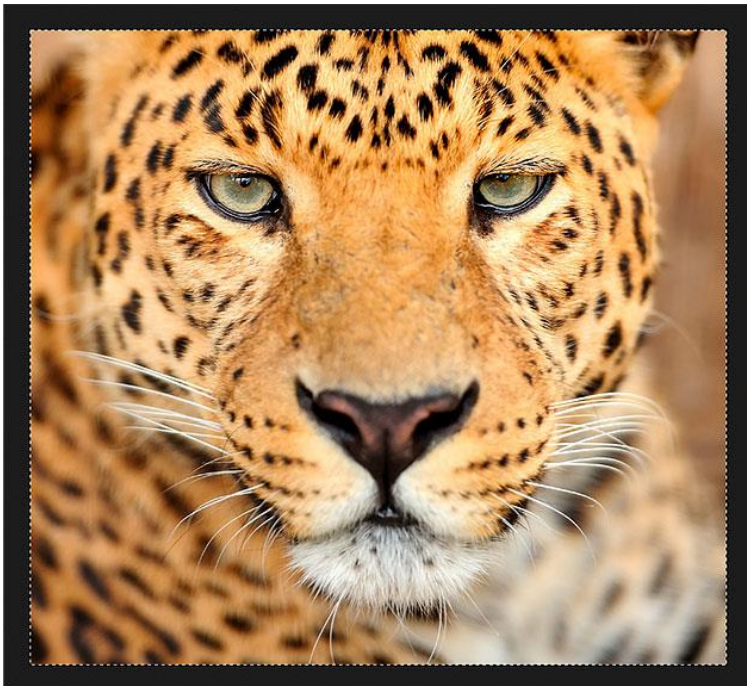
Selecting the main photo's document.

We need to copy and paste the photo into the shape cluster effect's document. Go up to the **Select** menu at the top of the screen and choose **All**, or press **Ctrl+A** (Win) / **Command+A** (Mac) to choose Select > All from the keyboard:
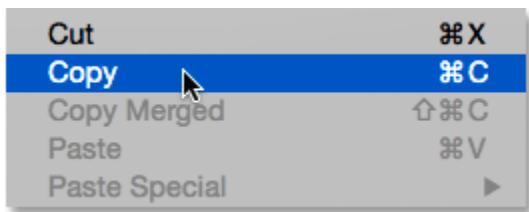

Going to Select > All.

This places a selection outline around the photo:

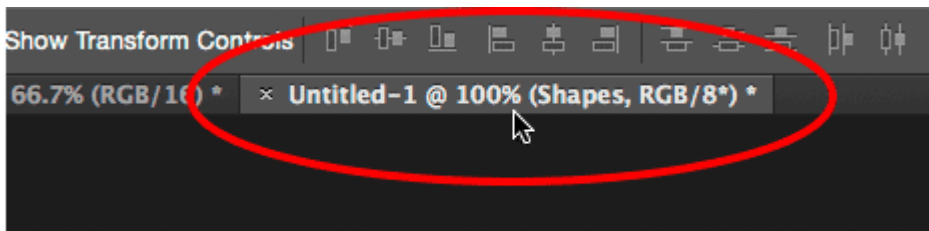

A selection outline appears around the image.

With the photo selected, go up to the **Edit** menu and choose **Copy**, or press **Ctrl+C** (Win) / **Command+C** (Mac) on your keyboard:
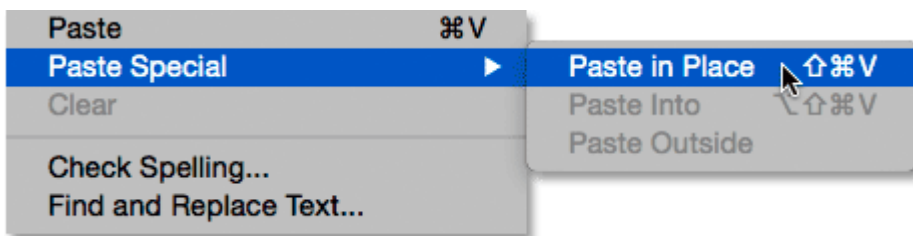
Going to Edit > Copy.

Step 11: Paste The Photo Into The Shape Cluster Document

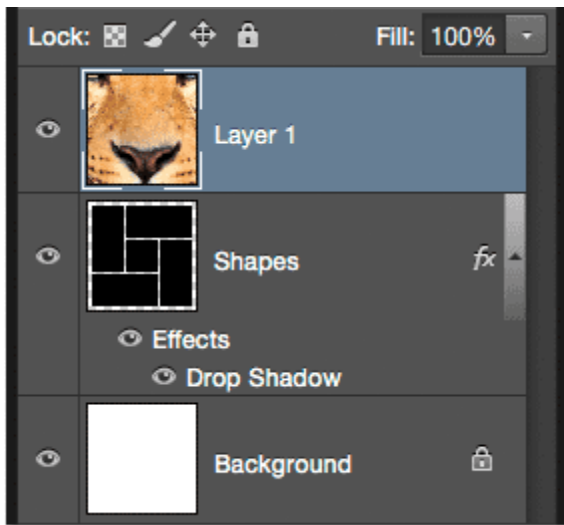Switch back over to the shape cluster's document by clicking on its **tab**:

Switching back to the effect's document.

To paste the photo and center it in the document, go up to the **Edit** menu, choose **Paste Special**, then choose **Paste in Place**, or press **Shift+Ctrl+V** (Win) / **Shift+Command+V** (Mac):

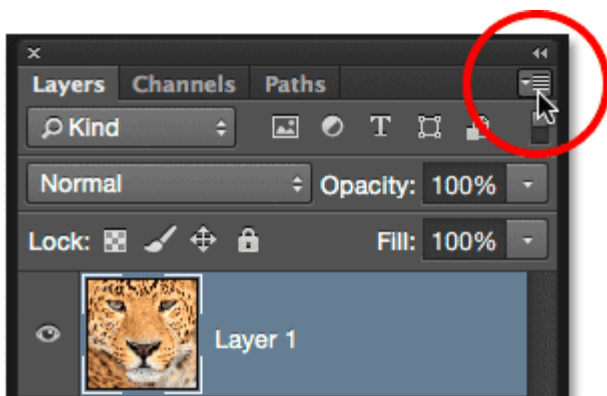

Going to Edit > Paste Special > Paste in Place.

Photoshop pastes and centers the photo in the document. If we look in the Layers panel, we see that Photoshop has placed the photo on a brand new layer named "Layer 1" above the "Shapes" layer. Don't worry if your photo is too big for the effect. We'll see how to resize it in a moment:

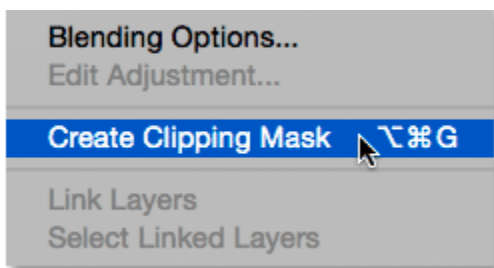The photo appears on its own layer above the others.

Step 12: Create A Clipping Mask

Currently, the photo is blocking the shapes on the "Shapes" layer from view. We want the photo to appear *inside* the shapes, and we can do that easily using a [clipping mask](#). With the photo layer ("Layer 1") selected, click on the small **menu icon** in the upper right corner of the Layers panel:

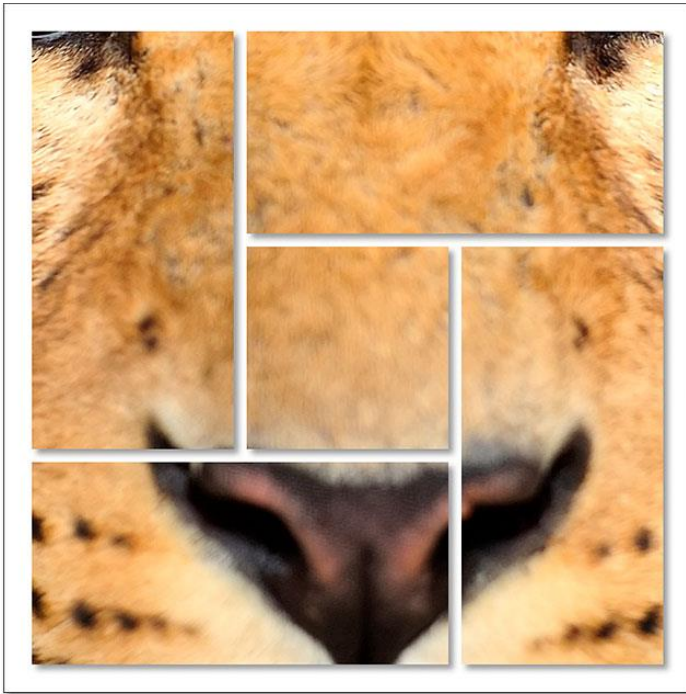

Clicking the Layers panel menu icon.

Choose **Create Clipping Mask** from the menu that appears:

Choosing "Create Clipping Mask".

This "clips" the photo to the contents of the layer directly below it, creating the illusion that the photo is now inside the shapes. Here, we see that my photo is too big to fit properly within the shapes, but I'll fix that next:
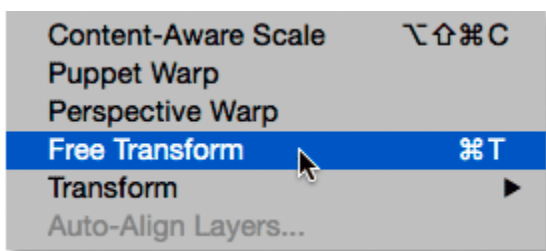
The effect after clipping the photo to the "Shapes" layer.
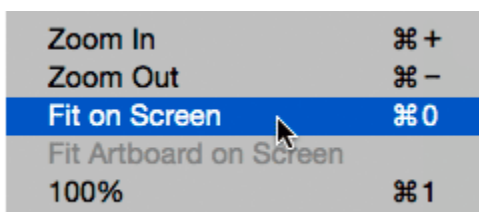
[Learn all about clipping masks in Photoshop](#)

Step 13: Resize And Reposition The Photo With Free Transform

To resize and reposition the photo inside the shapes, make sure "Layer 1" is selected in the Layers panel, then go up to the **Edit** menu at the top of the screen and choose **Free Transform**, or press **Ctrl+T** (Win) / **Command+T** on your keyboard:
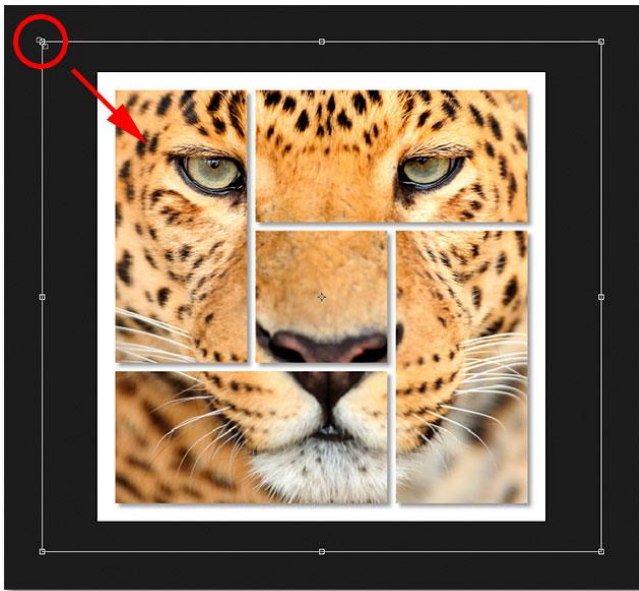

Going to Edit > Free Transform.

This places the [Free Transform](#) box and handles (the little squares) around the photo. Even though we can only see the parts of the photo that are inside the shapes, the Free Transform box appears around the photo's actual dimensions. If you can't see the entire Free Transform box because your photo is so large it extends off the screen, go up to the **View** menu and choose **Fit on Screen**, or press **Ctrl+0** (Win) / **Command+0** (Mac). Photoshop will instantly zoom the image out so everything, including the Free Transform box, is visible:

Going to View > Fit on Screen.

To resize the image, press and hold your **Shift** key as you click and drag any of the four **corner handles**. Holding Shift as you drag will lock the aspect ratio of the photo in place as you resize it. If you press and hold **Shift**+**Alt** (Win) / **Shift**+**Option** (Mac) as you drag the corner handles, you'll not only lock the aspect ratio in place but will also resize the photo from its center rather than from the corner, which is often easier.

To move the image around, simply click and drag anywhere inside the Free Transform box. Here, I'm dragging the top left corner handle in towards the center of the document to make the image smaller and fit more of it within the shapes:

Resizing the photo inside the shapes using Free Transform.

When you're done, press **Enter** (Win) / **Return** (Mac) on your keyboard to exit out of Free Transform mode. And with that, we're done! Here, after resizing my photo, is my final "shape cluster" effect: