Introduction To Photoshop Actions

A Photoshop action is simply a series of recorded keystrokes or menu items which are intended to speed up your workflow by eliminating the need to manually perform repetitive and time-consuming steps. The most useful ones are typically the simplest ones. You can even assign a function key to perform an action. For example, I have an action which invokes the "unsharp mask" dialog box by pressing the F10 key. These simple actions eliminate the need to mouse up to the menu bar and find the specific item. Conversely, there is no limitation to the number of keystrokes in an action. Therefore, actions can get quite complex and even generate shapes and graphics. You can download hundreds of these actions, free, from the Internet

To get started with actions, go to "window > actions". If you haven't used actions before, you will only see a folder named "default actions". These are the actions that Photoshop has loaded as default, however more action folders are available by clicking on the menu bar in the actions palette, and then clicking on one of the selections such as "commands", "image effects", "frames", etc.

At the bottom of the actions palette there are a series of icons, one of which is a right facing arrow, this is the "play action" button. Simply select the action you want and press the play button.

Creating your own Actions

First open an image. Before we can create an action we need to create a folder or select one for it to reside in. To create a new folder, at the bottom of the actions palette click on the icon that looks like a folder and name that folder "my actions". To start recording a new action, again at the bottom of the actions palette, click on the icon that looks like a new page and give your action an appropriate name. You will note that at the bottom of the actions palette the record button is now illuminated in red, indicating that whatever steps you perform will now be recorded. The first step in every action should be "create new snapshot" so that you can easily go back to that history state prior to recording or playing the action. (If you want to stop the recording at any time, click on the icon that looks like a square "stop" button). While recording an action, in addition to recording every step, Photoshop will be performing that step on the current open document. When you're finished recording your action press the stop button. In order to check your action, go to the history palette and select the state just prior to the first step in the action, or if you created a new snapshot as part of the action, click on "snapshot 1". Now go back to the actions palette and click on the action you created and press the play button. The steps you created will be performed in the blink of an eye.

Notes

1- When recording a step that requires specific settings such as "unsharp mask" or one of the Photoshop filters, those specific settings will also be recorded. To view the settings in a step, click on the right facing arrow in that step. If you want to see those settings when the action is played, or change them during playback click on the box just to the right of the check mark that looks like a menu icon.
You can however have "unsharp mask" as a step in your action without any specific settings at all. To do this click on the menu in the actions palette and select "insert menu item". From the main menu bar go to filter> unsharp mask and click OK. Note that a "menu item" step will have no right facing arrow because there are no specific settings.
2- Should you wish to delete a specific step, click on that step and drag it to the trash icon at the bottom of the actions palette.
3- Move the order of steps by simply dragging and dropping them to a new location.
4- Add steps to an action by first clicking on where you want to start recording and then clicking the record button. The new step will be inserted below the step where you started recording.
5- In the left column of the actions palette, all of the steps in your action will have check marks by default. The check marks indicate that this step will be performed. To disable a step click the check mark to turn that step off.
6- Many Photoshop filters only work on 8 bit images. If incorporating one of those filters in your action, you may want to start the action with a step to convert the image to 8-bit mode.
7- Edit a step that has specific settings by double-clicking on it. Note the record button is now illuminated. The dialog box for that step will be visible and you can edit the settings and click OK, at which point the record light will go out and those new settings are now saved.