



A Study of Shadows for Photoshop Elements 6  
by LaWanna Desjardin  
[www.desjardindigitaldesigns.com](http://www.desjardindigitaldesigns.com)

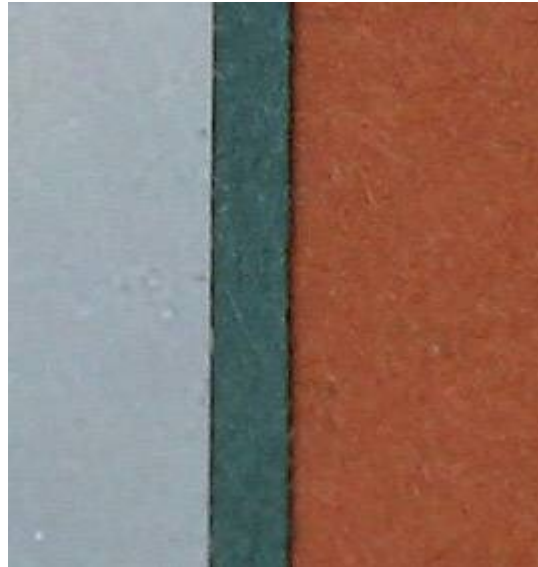
Almost every paper-style digi-scrapper strives to achieve realistic shadowing for their elements, photos and papers. It's part of what makes a digital layout appear dimensional. However, it can be a tricky process. I have been digital scrapbooking for more than 5 years and still struggle with effective shadows. So I decided to study real-life shadows to mimic on my pages. I also took some flash-free photos to study. To get a good shadow, these photos were taken in open shade with no flash.



For demonstration purposes, I've created this layout. For now, as you can see above, it is completely free of shadows, but I've added a number of items that are fairly representative of the ones you find on a layout. This includes flat items such as paper, photos and ribbons; dimensional items, such as buttons, alphas and elements with dimension; and variable-dimension items, such as crumpled or curled paper or items that appear to come off the page.

### **Mostly Flat Elements**

First let's talk about mostly-flat elements – paper and things made from paper, photos, stickers, and flat ribbons. The shadow they make is dark and it is also close. There is a very slight blur too. See the shot below to see what I mean. The blue and orange parts are papers and the white is a photo. You can see how their shadows differ.



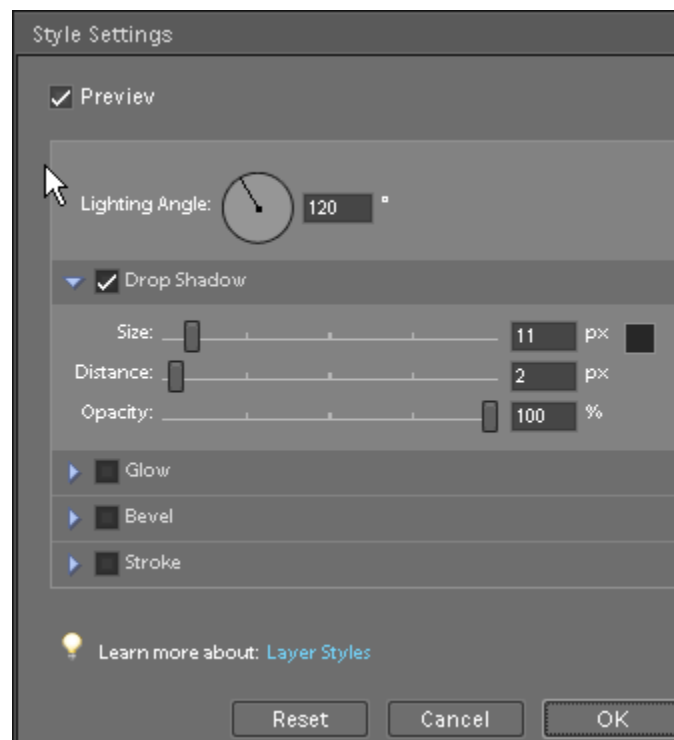
Now I've mimicked this effect in my layout. Here is a 100% shot of the papers in my layout. Pretty close, right?



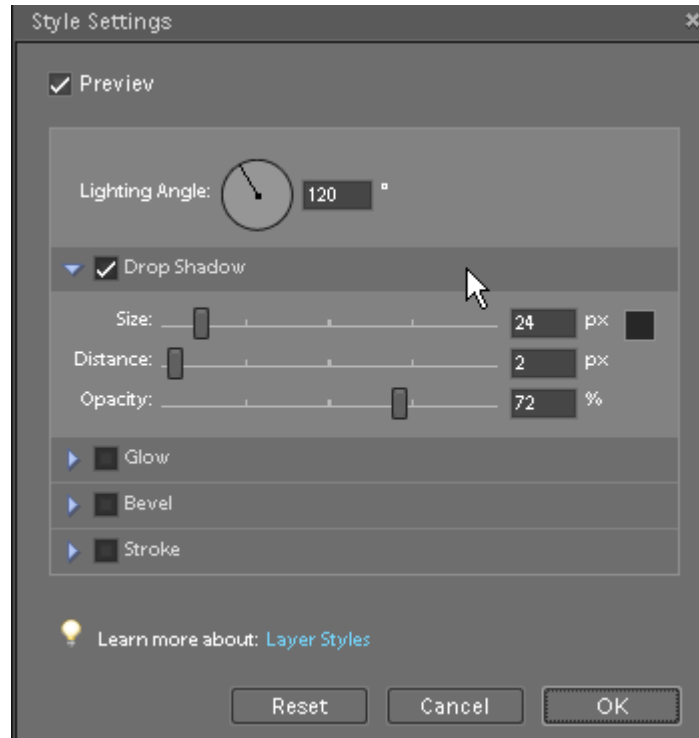
Now I have to confess something. PSE is somewhat limiting in what you can do with shadow styles, So I have to muck with it a bit to get a shadow that's as close to the real thing as possible. There are a few ways to do this, but in this example I've duplicated the layer in question and applied two different layer styles to them. I do this for two reasons. First I want to make sure a bit of shadow shows on both the left and right sides of the paper layer. Secondly, this way I can better control the transparency and blur of the shadow.



The style for the top-most layer looks like this:



And here is the style for the bottom layer:



### Evenly-Dimensional Elements

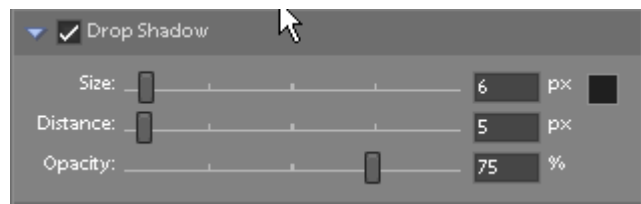
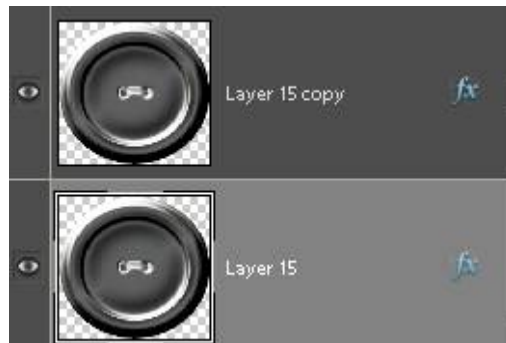
The next type of element we'll discuss are evenly-dimensional elements. These are elements that lay flat against the page, but that have actual depth (unlike paper and photos which have very little depth). Examples are buttons, alphas, or thicker tags. Here's an example of a button. You can see how the shadow falls. It's offset enough that there is no shadow on the opposite side. The shadow is transparent and not as dark as the shadow for the paper. It's also fairly defined and not very blurry.



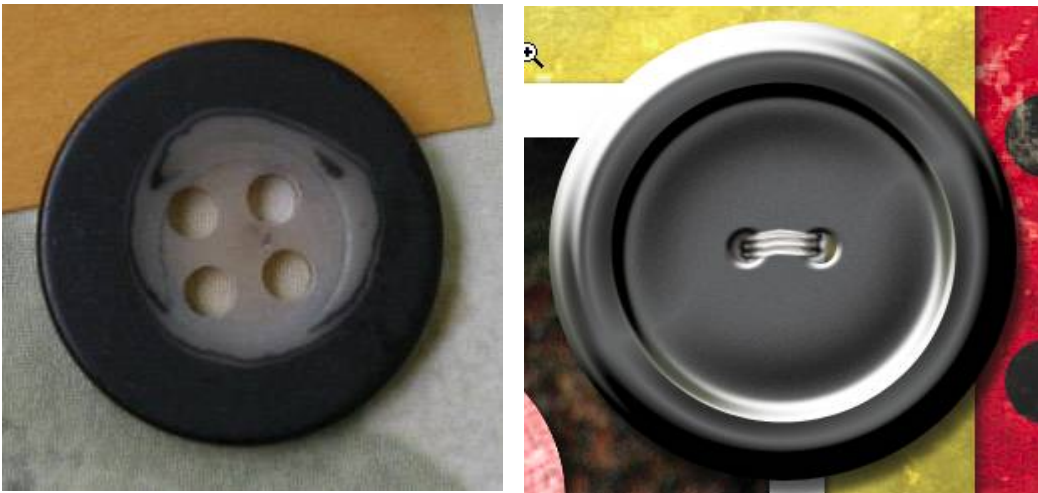
Here I've tried to duplicate that on my digital button using these settings:



However, being the fussy scrapper that I am, I'm not quite satisfied with the result, mostly because there appears to be a narrow “glow” just to the outside of the button. So here we go again. I'm going to duplicate the layer and add a slightly different style to it. (This style is for the bottom-most button layer.) **I have also lowered the opacity of the bottom-button layer to about 56%.**



Here is a side by side of the real button photo with the digital button. I think it looks much nicer.



## Elements with Variable Dimension

The last type of element we're going to study is the variable-dimension element. I know that's a mouthful, but it's the best explanation I could come up with. These types of elements have parts that lay flat against the page and other parts that come up off the page. Think of a crumpled piece of paper, a leaf, a flower, a bow. These types of elements are very tricky to deal with because the shadows are not evenly transparent or even blurry and the actual shadow may appear to be warped. Here are two examples, a silk leaf and a silk flower.



Let's look at the leaf first. Look at the shadow. Now this leaf is pasted down to a page, but not flatly. Some of the shadow is dark and close, like the paper from earlier in this lesson. Other parts are more transparent, come away from the leaf and are more offset from the leaf.

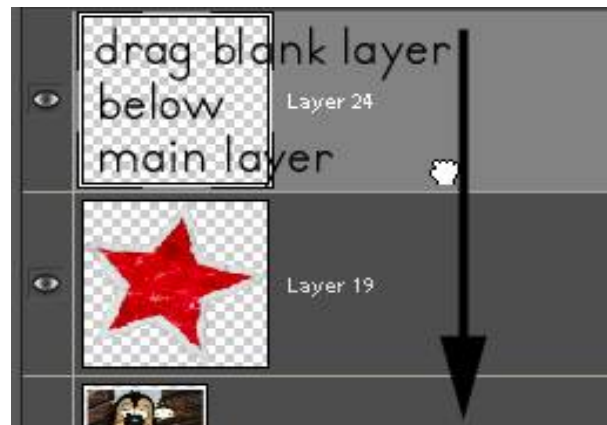


Now the flower. Notice how the bottom of the flower's shadow is dark and a little blurry and on the right side the shadow is very transparent and has no definition.

Variable-Dimension elements cannot be shadowed properly with layer styles. These types of elements need custom shadows. Luckily those are easy to do and I'll show you how. On our layout there are two variable-dimension elements. That is the torn-edged star and the torn paper. To be honest, these could lay flat against the page, but I think they look much more interesting if they appear to be coming off the page a bit. First let's deal with the star. Unfortunately I do not have a "real" image to compare, but just by varying the transparency, distance and blur of the shadow I can achieve a realistic look.

First we need to make the shadow layer. We'll put the shadow on a separate layer to easily manipulate it

1. Because the shadow should be on a separate layer, I need to add a new layer, just beneath the main layer. Go to Layer>>New Layer. Just Click OK in the New Layer Dialog Box. Now you have a new layer. If necessary, click this new blank layer in the palette and drag it to just below the main layer.



2. Press the Ctrl-Key to and click the main layer thumbnail. This will select the layer content of the element. It will also put “marching ants” around the layer, like this.



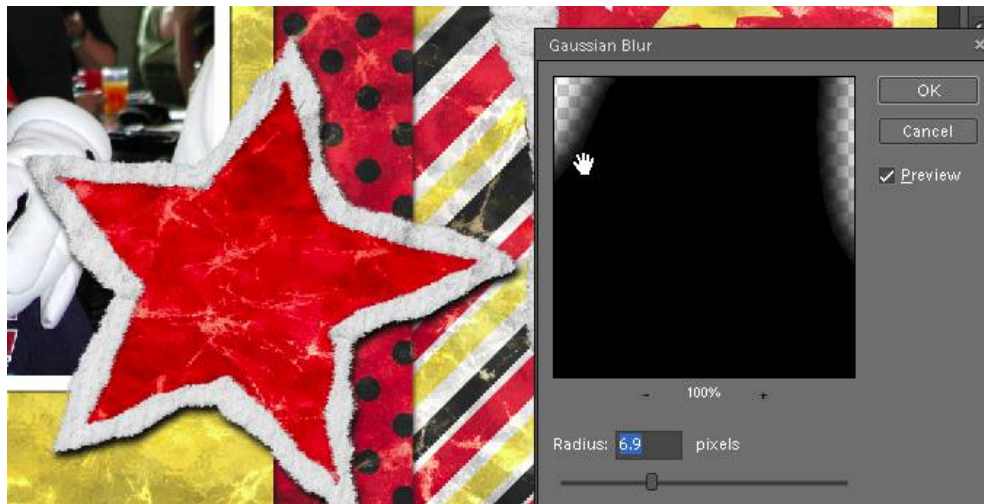
3. Now you are going to fill the blank layer with black for your shadow. Keep the selection (the marching ants) active and activate the blank layer in the layers palette. Now Click inside the selection *on the canvas* to fill the area with black. You will be able to see it in the layers palette. You can now deactivate the selection, with Select>Deselect.



4. Because we need this shadow to appear to have the same light source as the others we need to shift its placement on the canvas. The default light source for layer styles is 120 degrees, which we'll try to duplicate with this custom shadow. Use your arrow keys to shift the shadow very slightly down and to the right, as though light were shining on it from the top left.

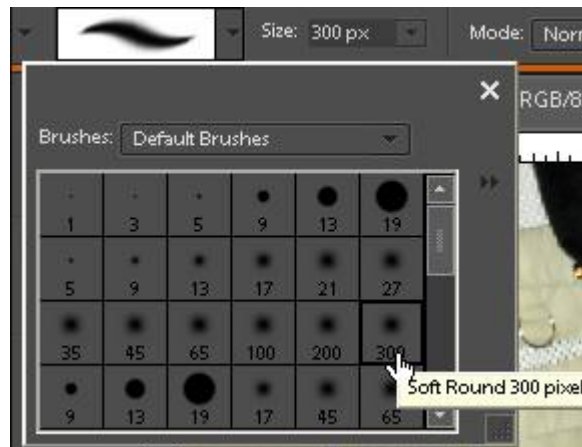


- Now we'll blur this shadow. With the shadow selected, choose Filter>Blur>Gaussian Blur. Adjust the settings until it looks like the element is coming off the page a bit. I used a setting of 6.9. Choose OK, when you are ready.



At this point, you need to alter the shadow layer to make parts of the shadow to appear closer to the canvas than other parts. I like the smudge tool for this. You can find this tool in the tool box, along with blur and sharpen.

Select a large soft brush from the options menu, I'm using a brush Soft Round 300 from the default brushes.



6. Make sure the shadow layer is active in the layers palette. Now use your mouse to push against the shadow in some places so that it the element looks closer to the page on those parts. Do this in several places along the edges of the shadow.



Now use the smudge tool to push other parts of the the shadow away from the element in a few places.

You can see here where I've smudged the shadow toward and away from the element in different places.



Here is are screen shots of before and after the smudge treatment.

**Before:**



**After:**



In the last step, we moved basically warped the shadow, which made enhanced the “crumpled” look of the paper. Now we'll adjust the opacities of the shadow in different places. The parts that are warped away from the element need to more transparent than the rest.

7. First adjust the overall opacity of the shadow to about 85% in the opacity slider in the layers palette.

Select the eraser tool from the tool box. Again, choose a large soft brush. I'm using Large Soft 200 from the default brushes menu. In the options bar, adjust the opacity of the eraser to about 25 percent or lower.

Now we are going to erase a bit of the shadow, *but only in the parts of the shadow that are coming away from the element.*

Using your eraser, paint lightly along these areas, reducing their opacity slightly. You can see from the arrows in the shot below that I've only erased the areas that that are coming off the page.



That's it. Here's another before and after comparison of the shadow before and after.

**Before:**



**After:**



Remember, having the shadow on a separate layer mean you can still shift it, adjust its opacity, duplicate it, or manipulate it in other ways.

I've used this exact same process on the torn paper to get a looser, more realistic shadow along th edge.

Here is the completed layout.

