Spreadsheets to Lower Thirds

Automate your Lower Third creation

Have a long list of names in a text editor or spreadsheet and need to make lower thirds for them? You can use an easy Photoshop trick to automate the task. Here, we'll use a Google Docs spreadsheet as our starting point, and make Photoshop generate our lower thirds automatically!

Say you're making a documentary about magicians and magic shops in Scandinavia. You have lots of interviews with Scandinavian magicians, shop owners, etc. You've even talked to some American magicians. You want the flag of each interviewee's country to show on the lower third, and of course their name and occupation. You've collected all this info in a spreadsheet, and you've gathered the necessary flag images. Now let's make Photoshop do all the hard work for you!

Data preparation in the spreadsheet

Google Docs can't save in TXT, so we'll stick to CSV.

File > Download As > CSV

Make sure the columns in the spreadsheet have proper names. We need to save the data in a format that Photoshop can import. That means CSV or TXT.

Give your CSV file a meaningful name. I very creatively named mine *Lower_Thirds. CSV.* Now let's jump to Photoshop for the fun part.

Image preparation in Photoshop

Sample PSD and CSV files plus flags are included in the free chapter download.
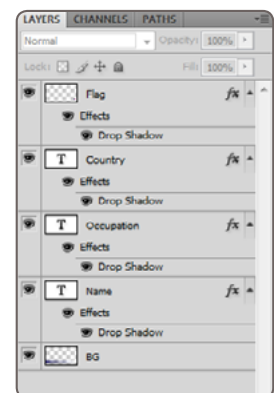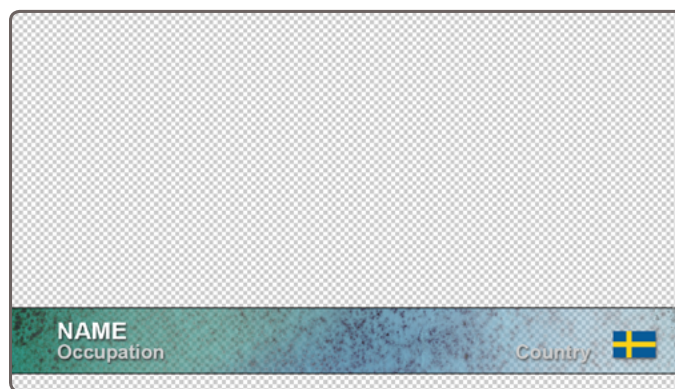
You need a PSD with layers that correspond to the spreadsheet columns. I'll use a predesigned lower thirds file. Our sample Photoshop document has five layers; *Background, Flag, Name, Occupation, Country.* We need to define four of these as fields that will be altered.

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Define Variables

Image > Variables > Define. Choose the *Flag* layer and check *Pixel Replacement* as the Variable Type. Name it *Flag*, to match the spreadsheet.

Photoshop is somewhat picky about this, so the names need to match the spreadsheet exactly, upper/lower case and all.

Now do the same thing with the text layers, but choose *Text Replacement*. Pixel replacement is not available for text layers. Name them *Occupation, Name* and *Country* respectively, again exactly like in the spreadsheet.
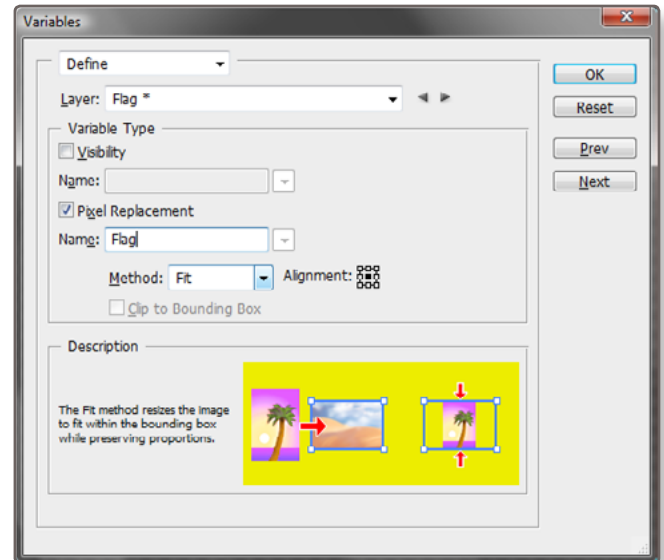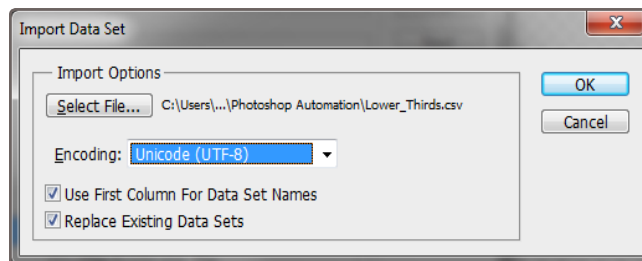
Get the data and export files

About time we import our data. *Image > Variables > Data Sets > Import*. Choose our newly made *Lower_Thirds.CSV* file and make sure the settings look exactly like in the image here. Then hit OK.

Choose Unicode (UTF-8) for encoding, or else characters like the Norwegian Æ, Ø and Å will be interpreted wrongly.

Å becomes Ã¥ etc. This is kind of bad…

Now you can see each of the different rows from the spreadsheet as a separate data set. Try viewing a few just to see if everything is working OK. Hit *Preview* to see how each data set will look.
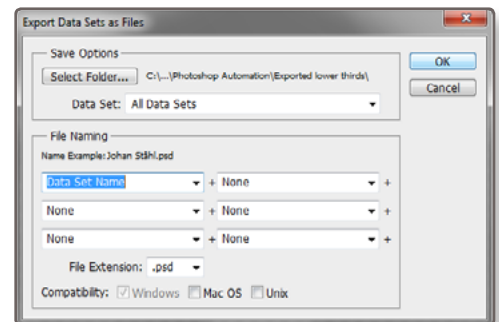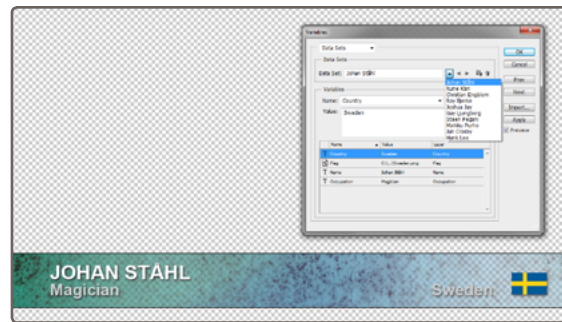
If everything's looking good, you can start exporting files. *File > Export > Data Sets as Files*. Watch Photoshop work its magic!

You just shaved *hours* off the production time of your documentary!

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Every lower third is ready to be imported into Premiere Pro, complete with Name, Occupation, Country, Flag and all. Photoshop Automation is really, really cool stuff! Imagine the amount of work this will save on a TV documentary with 80 lower thirds!
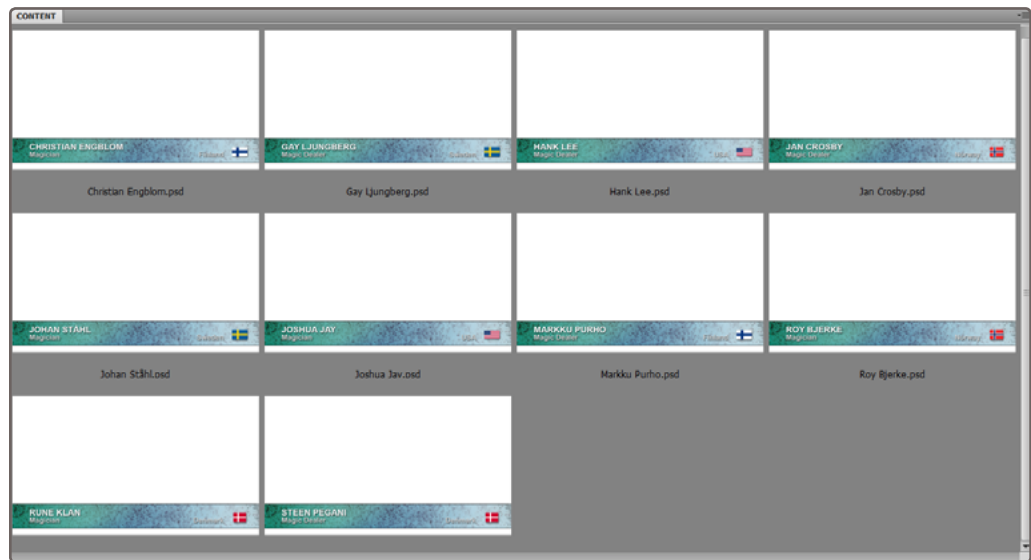

And there's an added bonus: **They will all be correct.** Why? Because you can save the spreadsheet as an HTML file from Google docs – or even share the doc itself with others in the cloud – and send them a link. So say goodbye to wrongly spelled names!

Getting the lower thirds into Premiere Pro

Unfortunately, there's no "do this for all remaining files" check box in Premiere Pro. *Hint, hint, Adobe!*

Import the whole folder with your lower thirds into Premiere Pro, and hit *Enter* to confirm the choice *Merge All Layers* for every PSD file you made.

If you don't exactly love to hit Enter that much, make a Photoshop action that merges the layers of every file, and run it in batch mode before import. Or do it from Bridge.
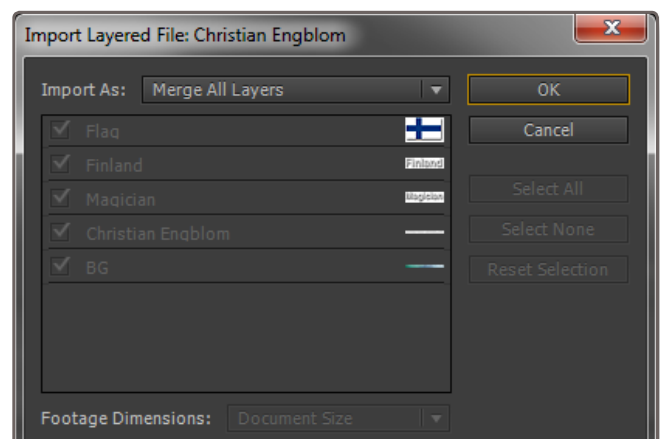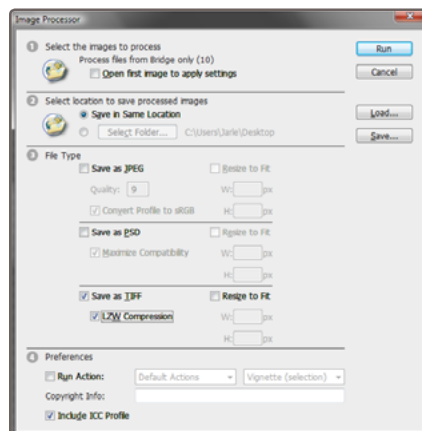
You can save as PSD or TIFF, as both these support *alpha channels*. JPG is a no go here.

You might want to set your *Default Still Duration* to, say, 5 seconds in **Edit > Preferences > General**
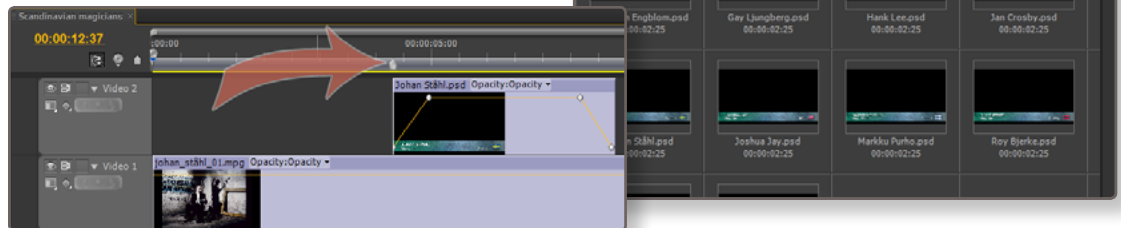
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Inside Premiere Pro, the files show up with black background.

before you import the stills. Now drop the files onto the timeline where they belong. If you've placed some Markers where they need to go, you can even automate this part! Read on!

Automate Lower Thirds to the Timeline

A great way to place Lower Thirds is to set Sequence Markers. On a numeric keyboard, hit ***** to set markers, on the fly while playing, or when paused. With all the Sequence Markers in place, **lock all tracks but your Titles track**. Then sort the PSD files in the bin in the order they need to appear in the timeline.

Now click the **Automate to Sequence** button at the bottom of the Project Panel. Set *Sort Order* and *At Unnumbered Markers*, and Premiere Pro will put every file on its marker, and all the persons have a lower third.
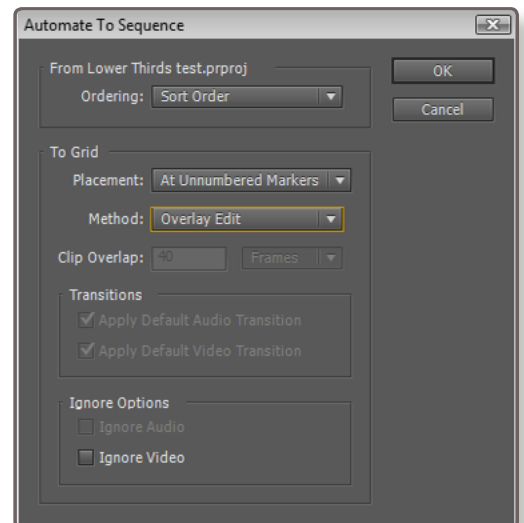
Animate in/out

Photo of Johan Ståhl by Alex&Martin

alexochmartin.se

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Don't have a favorite preset? Save a fancy Position, Opacity and Blur animation in one preset and name it *Lower Third Animation*.

The preset used here even has the Hard Light blend mode applied.

Now select all the clips in your Titles track and throw your favorite lower third animation preset on one of them. All of them are now animating the same way. Ready for prime time!

Export your film and thank the Photoshop team for saving you a lot of your valuable time.

Don't want Google Docs? Use your favorite spreadsheet app. Using a Google Docs spreadsheet has several advantages over Excel. You can send a link to the people involved so they can check the spelling etc without having Excel installed. Or you can send it as an Excel or PDF e-mail attachment.

There might be reasons why you want to use Excel, Numbers or OpenOffice. By all means do so. I've had some problems with the CSV from Excel in the past, so you might want to export to TXT, not CSV if you use Excel.

There's one variable we didn't use here

There's one kind of variable we didn't use in this tutorial. Using the "*Visibility*" Variable Type, a layer can be visible or invisible based on a True/False entry in the spreadsheet. We could have a shiny gold medal appear only for world champion magicians in our documentary.

Credit where credit's due

I want to credit *Marcel Izidoro* from *Brazil*, who created a tutorial for the *Pixel Corps* to share his knowledge with fellow PXC members back in July 2007. That's where I learned the basics of this technique. The rest I learned from the built-in Photoshop Help.

If you want to know more about this stuff, I recommend reading the relevant chapter in Adobe's excellent online Photoshop Help documentation. http://tinyurl.com/672fhla

Read more stuff like this in The Cool Stuff in Premiere Pro

This chapter is an excerpt from Jarle Leirpoll's upcoming book *The Cool Stuff in Premiere Pro*. Planned release date: October 2011. Note: This chapter is not 100 % finished. The layout will definitely change before publishing, there might be more images, and the text will probably be rewritten a little.

www.PremierePro.net

Take a closer look at the book at www.Premiere-Pro.net, where you'll find free sample chapters, advanced video tutorials, useful tips and free Premiere Pro project templates that can speed up your workflow dramatically.

If you have ideas for improvement, please send me an e-mail: leirpoll@online.no.

Please do not share this PDF file. Instead, point people to www.PremierePro.net where they can download their own free copy.

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Random Tips

Make sure you choose a Video format image size for your document. HDTV 720p or HDTV 1080p are the most commonly used.

I recommend saving the PSD file, the CSV file and the replacement files (Flag PNGs in our case) in the same folder so Photoshop (and you) can easily locate them .

You can add an extra column in the spreadsheet and an extra invisible layer in the PSD file with a number that corresponds to the order in which the persons appear in the film. That way, they'll be already sorted when you've imported them.

Remember to re-import the Data Set file if you make changes to it, and make sure Replace Existing Data Sets is ticked.
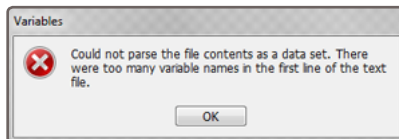
Gotchas

Keep the spreadsheet tidy to avoid trouble.

Empty fields and wrong column names, among other things, can trigger error messages.
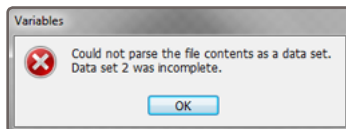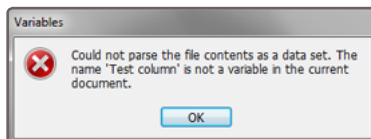
You can have **no empty fields** in the spreadsheet, or you'll get this message.

This message will pop up when your first row has more entries than the amount of variables you've defined in the PSD file. If you have too few, the text will change to "not enough variable names".
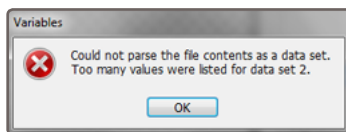
You'll get this message if one row has an extra column that's not present in the first row.

This message means your column names and your variables do not match.

No replacement layer can be a smart object, or you'll only get one choice for variable - Visibility. You'll need to rasterize the layer before you can use Pixel Replacement.

Elverum, Norway, June 2011. © Jarle Leirpoll