Before learning about Layers, it is important to know a few basics, which are covered here.

Creating a new document

When you create a new document, Photoshop presents a dialogue box offering you three choices of background colour for your document: White, Background colour or Transparent.

Background colour in this context means the colour in the right-hand square in the toolbox (see right). In this case, the background is the default, ie, white.
(Similarly, the foreground colour here is *its* default, ie, black)

Once created, your new document is displayed in a window and a thumbnail representation of it appears as 'Background' layer in the Layers palette.

(If you cannot see the Layers palette, go to Window from the Main Menu and click on Layers.)

Should you want a particular colour background for your new document, you could set that colour in the right hand square of the foreground/background colours in the Tools palette (shown above) *before you open the new document.* Then, when you select File>New, your chosen Background colour will fill your new document.

About Layers

If you think of the Background of your new document as a blank canvas, and imagine piling several sheets of acetate on top of it – each one with an image on it – then you have the principle of layers. Look at this pile of acetates through your document window, and you would see all the images, right through to your Background canvas at the back.

NB: You might find it confusing that Photoshop uses the term 'Background' for two slightly different meanings. In the Tools palette 'Background' means the background colour. However, in the Layers palette the term 'Background' means the base layer. This base layer could be a thumbnail of an image (eg, a photograph opened in Photoshop) or a background colour that you have selected for a new Photoshop document.

The Layers palette

The Layers palette gives you a thumbnail view of the layers which make up your canvas. It displays a representation of a horizontal view: as if you were looking at a stack of filing trays on your desk. Imagine the Background layer is in the bottom tray of the stack, with subsequent layers sitting in the trays above.

Why are layers useful?

One of the advantages of layers is that each one is separate and you can make each layer more (or less) visible, add separate effects, make adjustments to individual layers, etc. You can edit one layer without affecting any of the others and you can re-arrange the order of your layers, simply by dragging them. Layers are especially useful in image montages.

To use Layers, you need the Layers window open (Window>Layers). Select an individual layer by clicking on its name or the thumbnail. You can create a new layer in the following ways:

• by clicking on the notepad icon at the bottom of the Layers palette (next to the trash icon);

• by clicking the tiny black, downward-pointing triangle, top right of the layers palette and choosing New Layer from the drop-down menu;

• by selecting Layer>New>Layer in the Main Menu bar

• by holding down Shift+Command+N

A new layer will be generated automatically when you create text, and/or Paste anything.

Background Layer

There are a couple of points to note about the Background layer—it is different from a normal layer in the following ways:

• A Background layer determines the initial size of your document;

• A Background layer can't have any transparent *areas;* (if it's a transparent Background layer, it's called 'Layer ~' instead of 'Background';

• You can't move any other layer below the Background layer – nor can you move the Background layer up to sit above another layer. However, simply renaming your Background layer, by double clicking the name and OK-ing 'Layer 0' (or typing in a new name) will turn it into an ordinary, well-behaved layer!

Opacity

You can alter the Opacity of a layer (but not a Background layer). In the top right of the Layers palette, there is an Opacity slider. Move it to the left to bring the opacity down.

Layers Palette - Lock Transparent Pixels

Locking transparent pixels allows you to preserve any transparent pixels while working on an image. The following section explains how to do this.

To Demonstrate Transparency:

• Create a New Document with a transparent background.
To do this choose Transparent in the Background Contents of the dialogue box which appears when you choose File>New.

(Notice that your new document contains 'Layer 1' instead of 'Background' and that the transparent background is displayed as a grey and white chequerboard pattern.)

• Draw a square with the rectangular marquee.
Make sure Lock Transparent Pixels, in the top left of the layers palette, is selected.
Choose Edit>Stroke and select a colour and stroke width. Click OK. Nothing happens— because Photoshop has locked all transparent areas.

• Now deselect Lock Transparent Pixels and choose Edit>Stroke again. The stroke appears.
• Next try selecting the Paintbrush and just paint across the rectangle. *Because there is a selection*, you can only paint inside that selection. Press Command-D to Deselect. If you now paint with the paintbrush, you can paint anywhere.

Layers Palette - Eye icons

On the left hand side of the Layers palette, you will see eye icons. Click on an eye icon to turn off that particular layer. (Click in the empty space to turn the layer back on.)

It is sometimes useful to be able to turn layers off from view if you are working with many layers.

Above the eye icons, see 'Lock:'. The first icon locks transparent pixels. The paintbrush icon next to it will lock the pixels in a layer. The cross will lock a layer's position and clicking the padlock icon locks everything.

You can lock layers together, too. Highlight several layers (hold down Shift as you click each one). Select the downward pointing triangle in the tab at the top of the Layers palette and choose Link Layers.
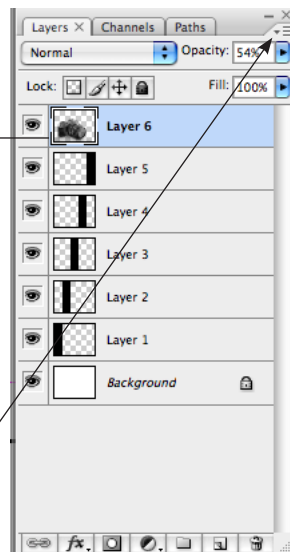
Linking layers together in this way enables them to be moved all together as a group.

Notice also in this drop down menu the various options of merging (or 'sandwiching') layers together into one single layer (also called 'Flattening').
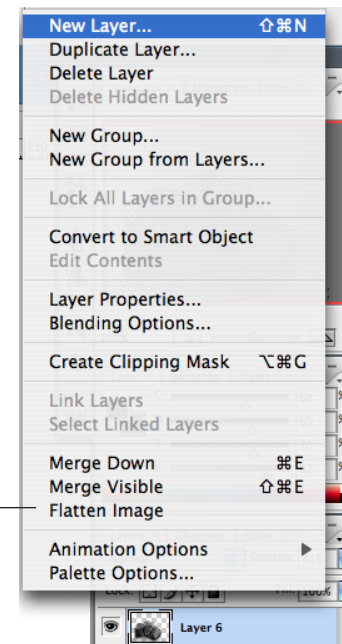
The downward pointing triangle in the tiny tab of the Layers Palette is hard to find!