Introduction to After Effects

USE AFTER EFFECTS FOR VIDEO COMPOSITING AND MOTION GRAPHICS.

The Interface

The After Effects user interface consists of three main and several supplementary panels. You'll do most of your work in the composition panel, which allows you to edit the composition's layers and animation. You have a choice between a graph view and a linear view of the timeline (see Figure 5). Drag the Current Time Indicator for a rough preview of your work, or use it to find a specific frame.

![Figure 1: The three most important areas of the After Effects interface.](image)

Another important area of the After Effects interface is the viewer panel. You may choose to preview your entire composition or its constituent layers and footage here. Simply double-click on an item to open it in the viewer. Additional buttons along the panel's lower border allow you to modify the view to suit your purposes (see Figure 2). For example, clicking the alpha channel button allows you to see your work's transparency. Or, using the point-of-view dropdown, view your composition from another angle.
The third useful panel is the project panel. This area displays all the compositions, layers and footage used in your project. From here you may drag layers into the composition panel or onto the timeline. Buttons lining the bottom of this panel allow you create and delete new compositions (see Figure 2), search for assets and footage, and create folders to organize your work.

Take advantage of the default workspace configurations found under WindowÆWorkspace. These workspaces display commonly-used panels for tasks such as animation, applying effects, working with text and painting. You may also save your own custom arrangements of panels. And if you close a panel by mistake, choose WindowÆWorkspaceÆReset... to restore the interface to its standard condition.

**Workflow**

**Importing Footage**

You may either drag-and-drop footage directly into the project panel or right-click in the panel and choose ImportÆFile or ÆMultiple Files. When dragging-and-dropping a folder, holding the ALT key allows you to keep the folder’s structure intact; a folder containing your files will appear in the project panel.

Some file types trigger dialogs requiring your input. For example, After Effects can import Photoshop files (PSDs) as flattened footage—a picture—or as compositions with editable layers.
Importing a Photoshop document as a composition allows you to animate the independent layers of your picture.

Vector graphics files—those from Adobe Illustrator or Fireworks—undergo rasterization upon import and become flattened images. You’ll no longer be able to edit the paths and fills. However, you can copy and paste paths directly into After Effects from Illustrator, Fireworks or Photoshop.

Building Compositions

Creating Compositions and Adding Layers

In After Effects, you work on compositions comprised of individual layers. A layer may be video, pictures, sound, shapes, adjustments or even another composition. Create a new composition by either:

- clicking Composition→New and specifying the composition’s properties, or
- clicking the New Composition button at the bottom of the Project panel.

Use the Composition Settings dialog to specify the size, format and duration of your composition. This dialog automatically appears when you create a new composition from the Composition menu item. You may access it at any time from Composition→Composition Settings (see Figure 4).

Once you’ve defined your composition, you may begin adding layers to it from the menu (Layers→New…) or by dragging your footage directly onto the composition panel or timeline (see Figure 6).

Adding Animation and Effects

Reveal a layer’s properties and effects by clicking the small triangle left of the layer’s name. Reveal each property’s variable characteristics by clicking on its small triangle. Add animation to a characteristic by clicking on the stopwatch icon; notice the appearance of a yellow diamond, the key frame symbol, on the timeline. Move the time indicator to another point on the timeline and change the value of the characteristic you are animating. After Effects will generate another key frame. Drag the time indicator between the key frames to preview the animation.

Click the graph view icon. You can adjust your animation from this view by dragging the animation curve’s points, or by adjusting the type and degree of curvature along the line.
Click the mode button and find the ‘Parent’ column (Figure 5). ‘Parenting’ the animation of one layer (the child) to another (the parent) allows the child layer to mimic all of the transformations applied to the parent. It keeps animations among a group of layers synchronized and saves time as well.
Apply effects from the ‘Effects’ menu item, or drag and drop an item from the Effects panel (WindowÆEffects & Presets) onto a layer. Control and animate an effect’s parameters from its layer or from the Effects Controls panel, located behind the Project panel.

**Previewing and Rendering a Composition**

You can achieve a more exact preview of your work by using the RAM preview, located in the Time Controls panel. The length of your preview is proportional to your computer’s total RAM.

When satisfied with your work, add your composition to the Render Queue by clicking CompositionÆAdd to Render Queue or by right-clicking it in the project panel. If you cannot see the Render Queue panel, activate it by clicking WindowÆRender Queue.

Adjust the parameters of your render and give it a file name. Click the Render button to begin the process.