



Seven Tips for Using Illustrator's Gradient Mesh

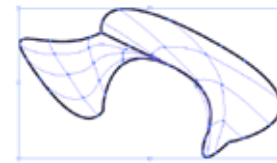
by Jack Cole

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Using Illustrator's Gradient Mesh tool can give great results when you want to create objects with realistic shading and highlights. It also has its own brand of tedium, though, placing points and contours and choosing the right colors. Here are a few tips I learned the hard way to ease that tedium.

#1: Use Simple Shapes



Complex Shape

Shape broken into two sections - much easier to work with in Illustrator

The Gradient Mesh tool creates its grid from an object you've drawn. If you draw something that is really complex, like an hourglass shape, the gradient will actually flow outside the lines, and will be messy to deal with. Instead, break your complex shapes into simple shapes, and convert each one into its own gradient mesh. They can even overlap—several simple meshes to work on is much easier than one, large, complex shape.

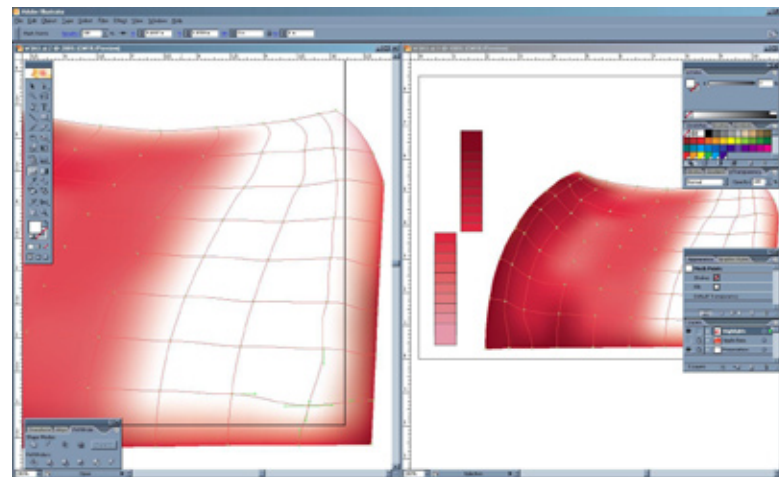
#2: Create Gradient Swatches Using the Blend Tool



Blend from orange to yellow - ready for coloring your mesh

The easiest way to get a full palette of colors to work from is to create two small squares in Illustrator, color one with the darkest color you'll need, and the other with the lightest color, then make a blend of them using "Specified Steps" of 6 or 8. Leave them in their Blend state, and you have a small, movable palette that you can drag around your Art Board wherever you need it.

#3: Open a Second View of your Illustration in a New Window



Two views of the same file - one zoomed for detail work, the other for overall viewing

You can work on the same illustration in two different windows, using one Zoomed in to show the detail, and the other to give you access to the Palette (from Tip #2), and allows you to see your work from a distance (important for working with fine-tuning your overall gradient effects). To open a new window of the same file, go to Window -> New Window, then Window -> Tile.

#4: Use Different Keyboard Shortcuts - [U] and [I]

You **never** want to use the menus to work with gradient meshes, trust me. Instead, remember that when you're picking each point's color, you can switch back and forth between the Mesh Tool [U] (to choose the point you want to color) and the Eyedropper Tool [I] (to choose the color for that point from your Blend from #2) using the keyboard shortcuts.

#5: Start with a Small Mesh

The default setting for creating a gradient mesh is usually a 4 x 4 grid, which gives you 16 points to color. This may be a bit much to start with, so start instead with a 2 x 2. You can always add a new grid section by clicking anywhere inside of the grid – matter of fact, you'll probably do this at least a half-dozen times without meaning to during the process.

#6: Lock All Other Layers!

One of my main frustrations with Illustrator and Photoshop is clicking on an area and selecting it without meaning to. To avoid this while working on your gradient mesh, go to the Layers menu, and lock (and even hide) all other layers. This will keep the process manageable.

#7: Use CTRL-Z...often

Gradient meshes do not have the same level of Undo-ability that other processes in Illustrator do. It's helpful to go slowly through the process, and use **CTRL-Z** to keep control of your mesh.