



How to digitize your hand lettering using Illustrator's Image Trace

February 9, 2015 · Design · Comment

The great thing about hand lettering is that it allows you to step away from your computer and completely unplug for a while. You can even go full-on Do Not Disturb and get lost in the practice of drawing for hours on end. It's the perfect way to [spend a weekend morning](#).

UPDATE 3/9/15: This post was originally published on November 1, 2014, but I've since updated it to include a helpful video tutorial. Check out the video at the bottom of this post, and please [subscribe](#) to my YouTube channel for more tutorials!

Once you hit a certain level of completion, it's in your best interest to digitize your lettering pieces so that you can publish them on the web, add them to a portfolio, or use them in a print project.



HOW TO *digitize*

LETTERING USING ILLUSTRATOR & IMAGE TRACE

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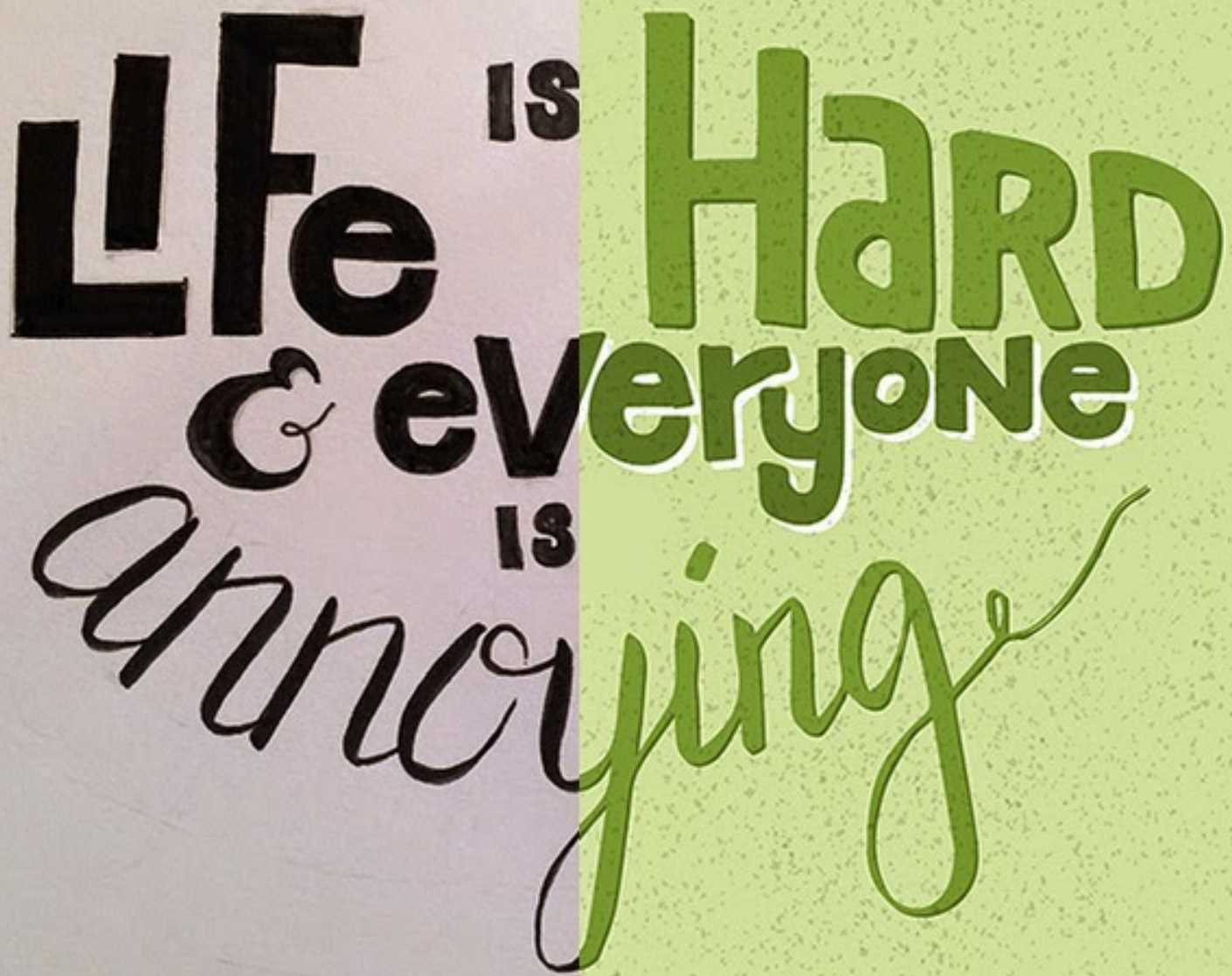


Video tutorial on how to digitize your hand lettering and calligraphy using Illustrator and Image Trace

And as cool and intricate as hand drawn effects can be, it is definitely fun to see what you can sit back and let the computer do for you. Think 3D effects, shadows, adding the perfect color palette, etc.

There are tons of ways to digitize your hand lettering art, all of which I plan to go over on this blog in time. (Want to learn all the ways? Make sure to sign up for my [newsletter](#).)

In this post, I'll teach you my favorite way of digitizing my doodles and lettering by using **Image Trace** in **Illustrator**. It's a great way to capture the quirkiness that comes inherently with hand lettering while still allowing it to be scaled up to any size without losing image quality, since your result is vectorized art.



Paper to Digital: Digitize Your Hand Lettering Using Illustrator - Tutorial on Hello Brio - Sketch before and final vectorized product after

Tools Needed for Digitizing Your Lettering

To take your designs from paper to digital with this method, **you need your work to be completely finished**. Quick pencil sketches or really rough work just won't cut it. Your work should be colored in, preferably in black, and be on a clean piece of paper.

To bring your art into your computer, you can either use a **scanner** (I use a [Canon LIDE 110](#)... affiliate link alert... I

only recommend products I use and love, and this scanner is so affordable and does a good job) or you can use your camera **phone** .

Finally, **Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop**. While Photoshop isn't necessarily needed, it is best for preparing your scan or photo so that it translates best in Illustrator. You will see more about this in a bit.

Step 1: Scan or Take a Photo of Your Work

Again, make sure your work is in a finished state, preferably black and white. If it isn't B&W, you can work around it, but this method of using Image Trace works best with crisp, B&W line art.



Paper to Digital Step 1: take a photo of your hand lettering work - using your iPhone and good lighting is fine

I'm so self-conscious about my hands in this photo!

If you're taking a photo of your artwork, make sure to eliminate shadows or get them as even as possible, and take your photo square-on so you don't have any weird perspective skewing.

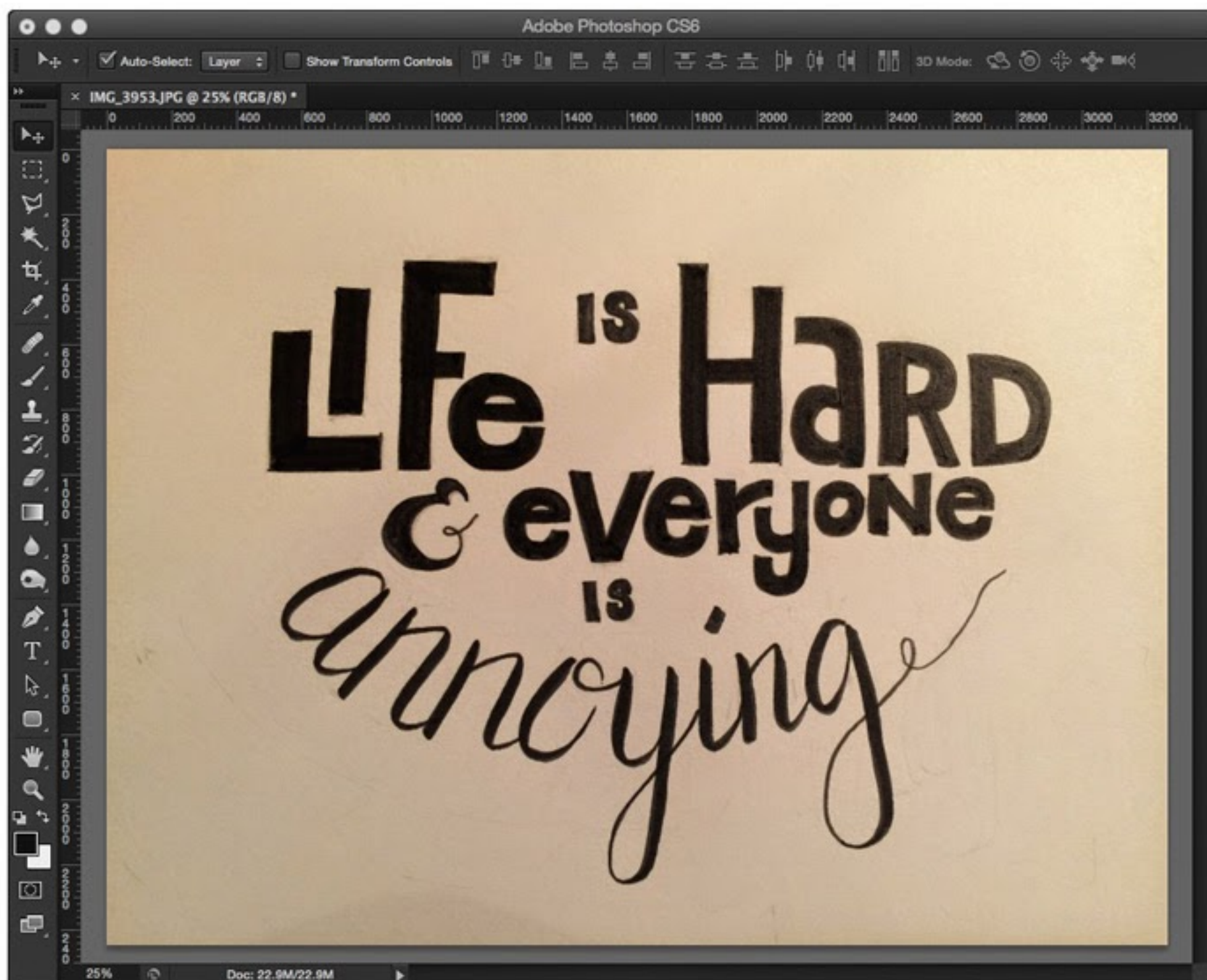
A photograph of a piece of light-colored paper with handwritten text in black ink. The text is arranged in four lines: 'Life' in a large, bold, sans-serif font; 'is' in a smaller, bold, sans-serif font; 'Hard' in a large, bold, sans-serif font; and '& everyone' in a bold, sans-serif font. Below this, 'is' is written in a smaller, bold, sans-serif font, and 'annoying' is written in a large, cursive script font. The paper has a slightly yellowed appearance and some faint smudges.

Even though this photo is yellowed, the shadows are relatively even and there isn't too much glare. It will be cleaned up in Photoshop in the next step.

Even though this photo is yellowed, the shadows are relatively even and there isn't too much glare. It will be cleaned up in Photoshop in the next step.

Step 2: Open your Photo in Photoshop

Once you've loaded your photo onto your computer, open it up in Photoshop.

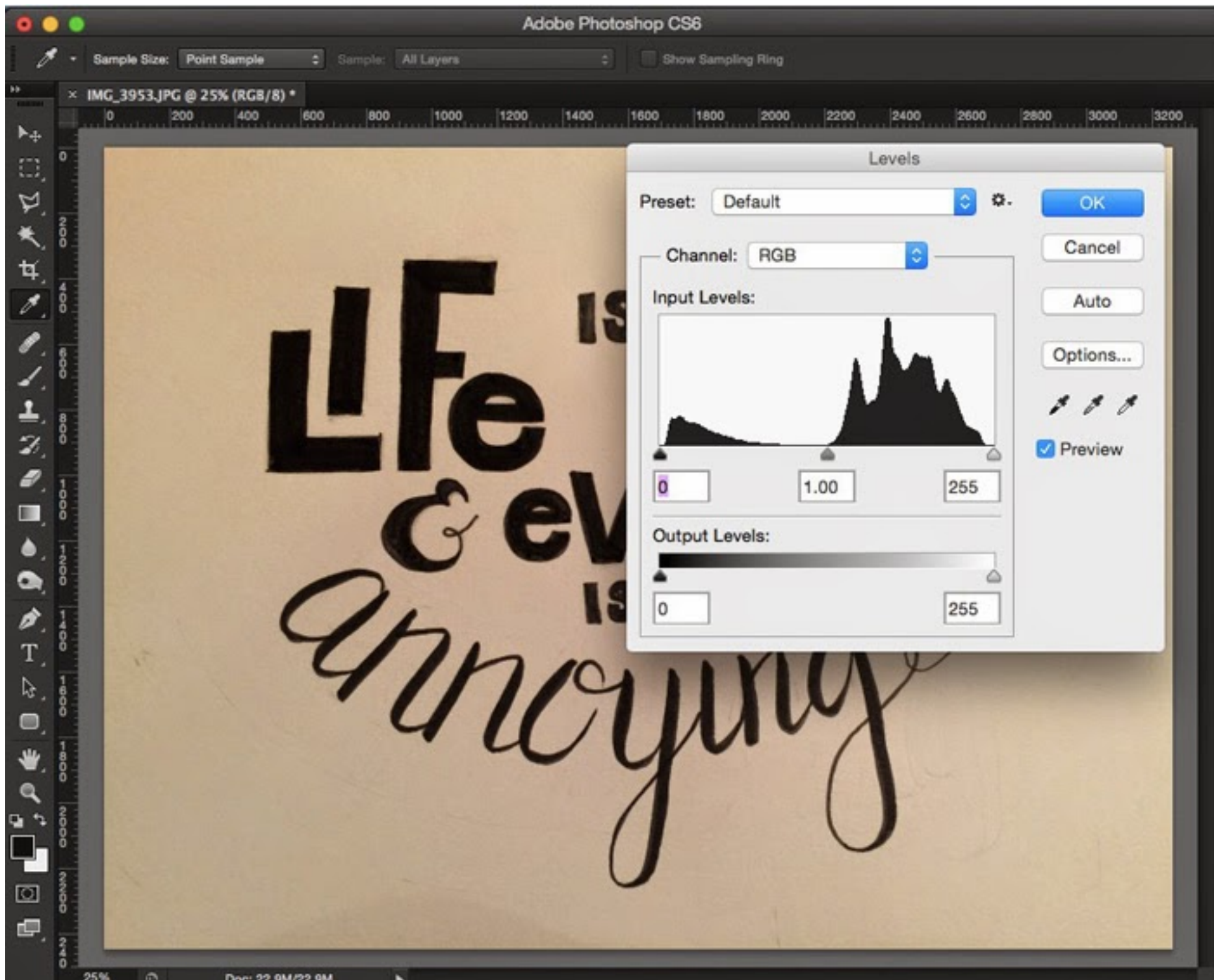


Open your hand lettering photo in Photoshop - Paper to Digital, how to Digitize your hand lettering using photoshop and illustrator

Here we are going to adjust the levels so the black art becomes blacker, and the page becomes white.

Go to Image → Adjustments → Levels... or type CMD+L on a Mac or CTRL+L on a PC. (I should note that **desaturating** your image — converting it to pure black and white in Photoshop — may make this process easier, especially if you're working with a non B&W image. To desaturate, type CMD+Shift+U or CTRL+Shift+U or go to Image → Adjustments → Desaturate.)

Here's the Levels dialog box.

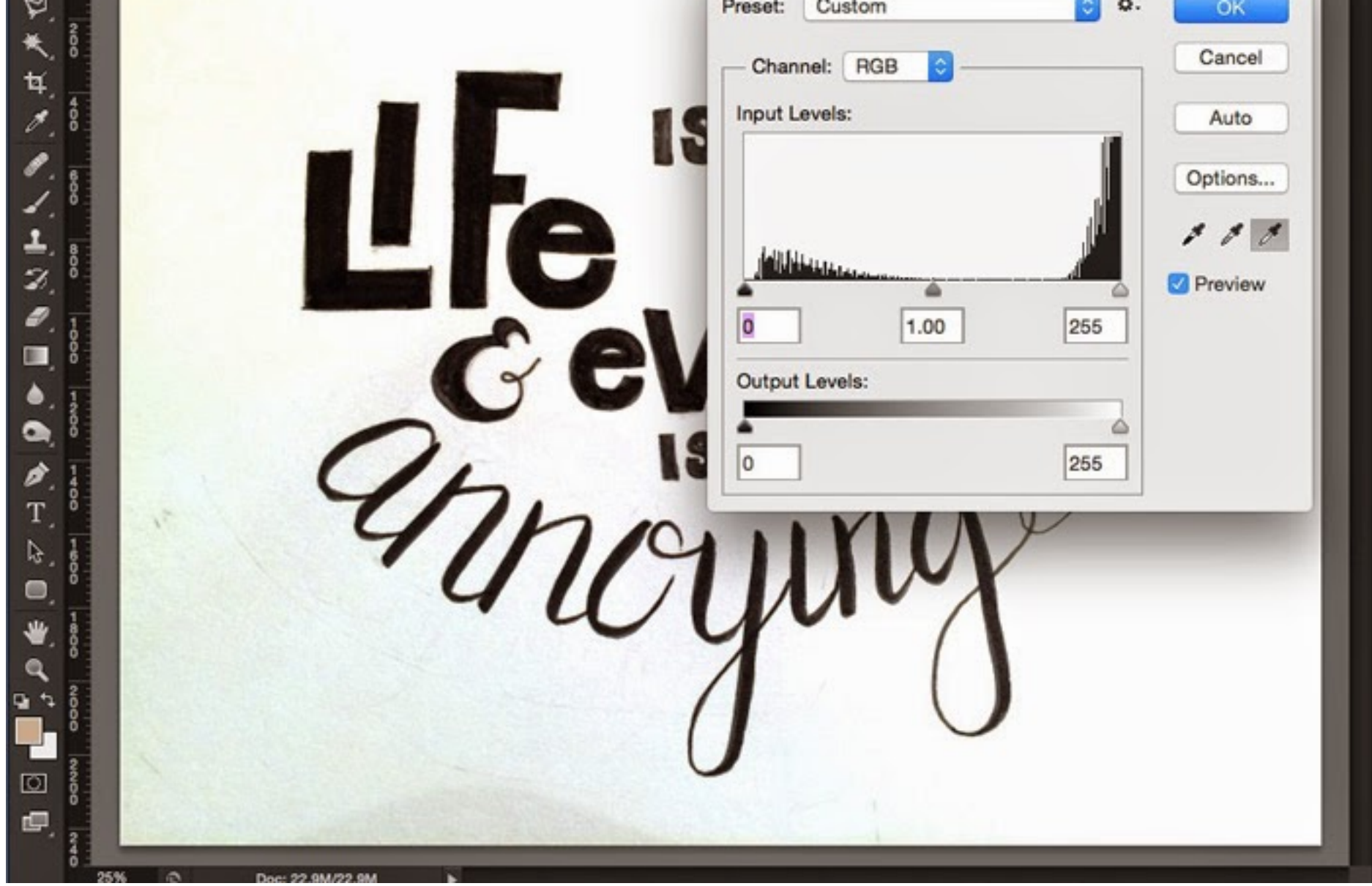


Levels dialog box will help you transform your photo into crisp black and white art in Photoshop

From here, click the white eye dropper and click around on the white parts of the page until the background looks pure white without a lot of noise (the grain and weird shadowing that can start to pop out when you're playing with levels).

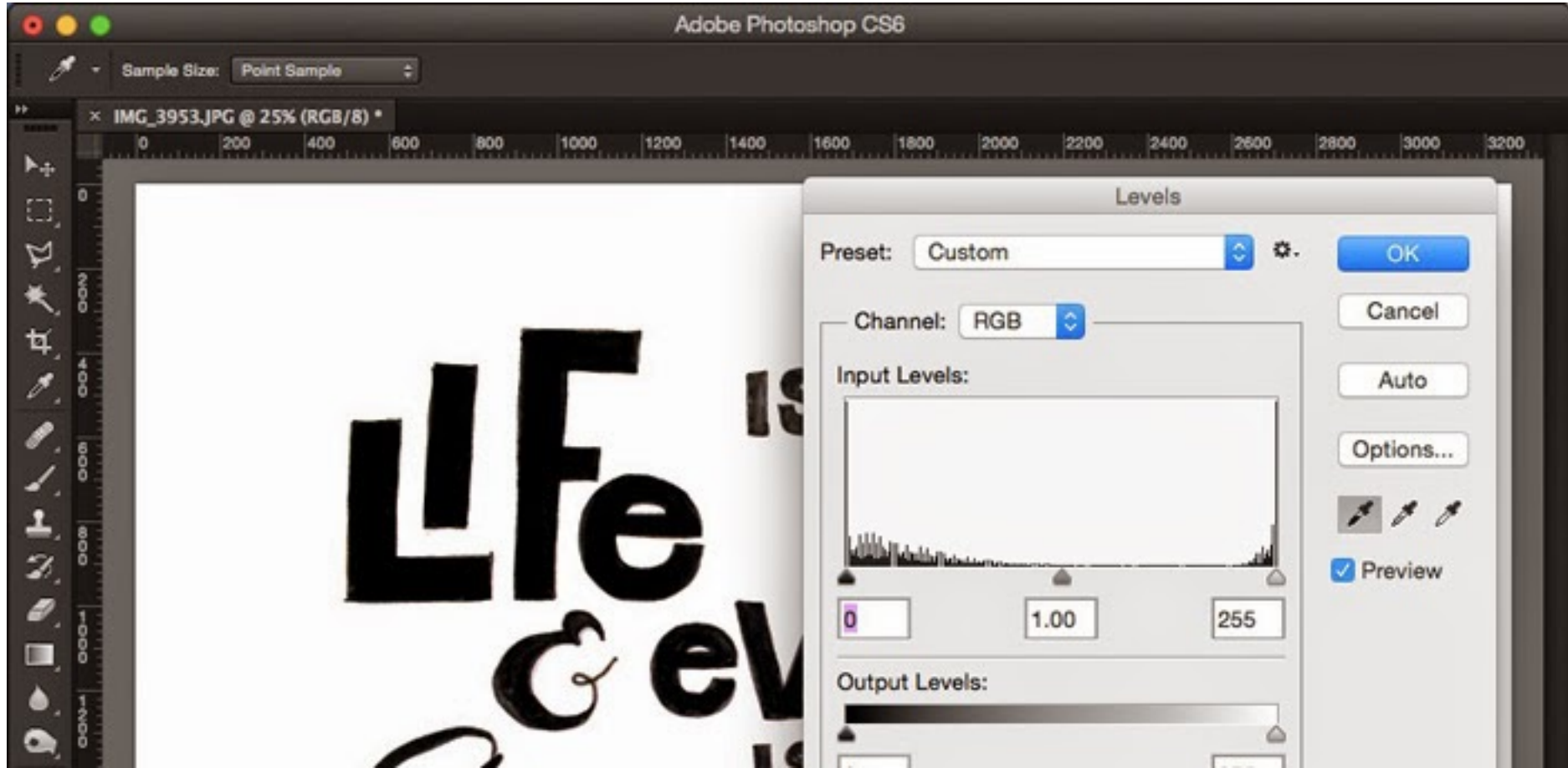
Aim for the darkest white part of your drawing that still allows your artwork to be visible.





Paper to Digital: Digitize Your Hand Lettering Using Illustrator

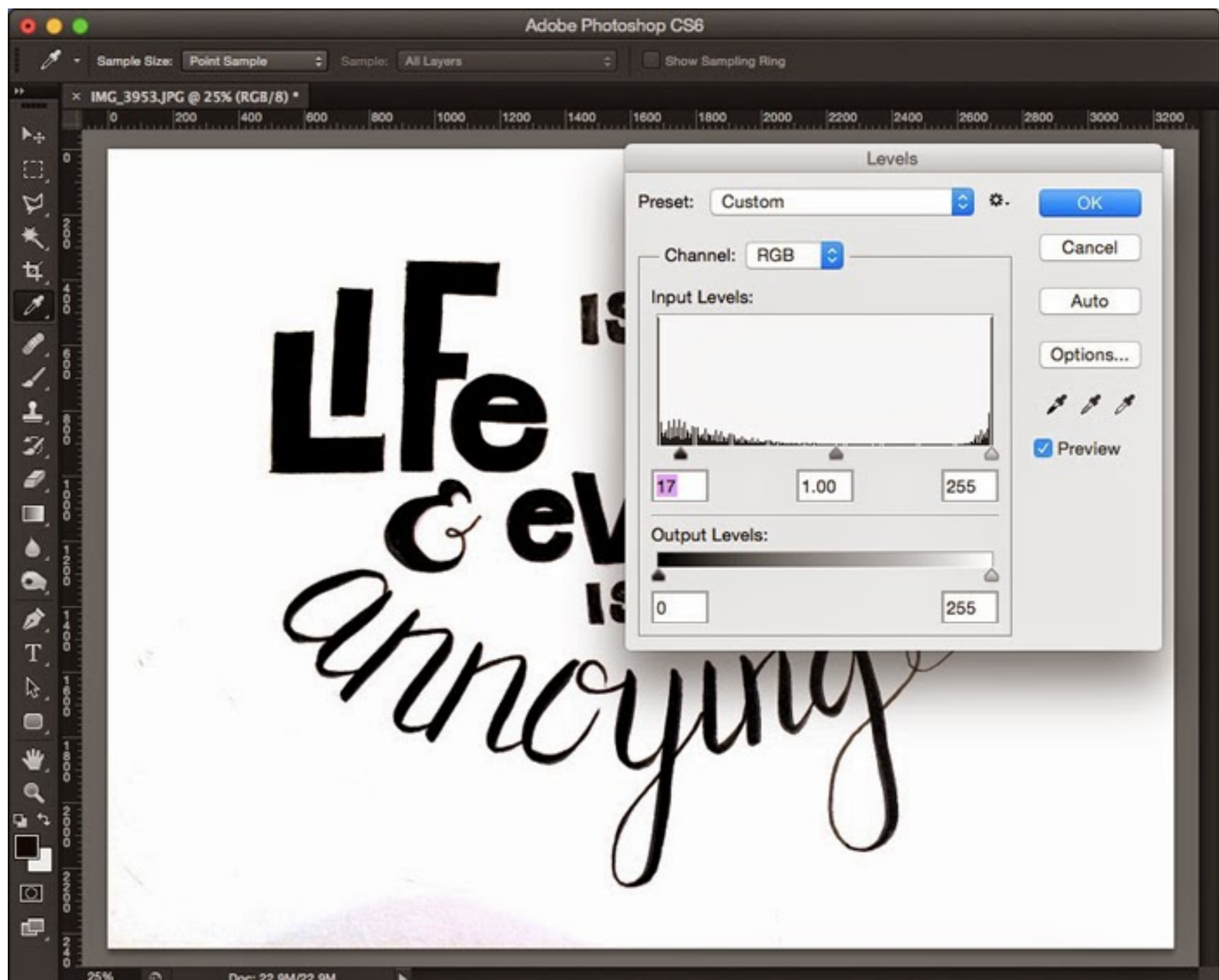
Then, use the black eye dropper to **click on the lightest black** on your drawing.





Paper to Digital: Digitize Your Hand Lettering Using Illustrator

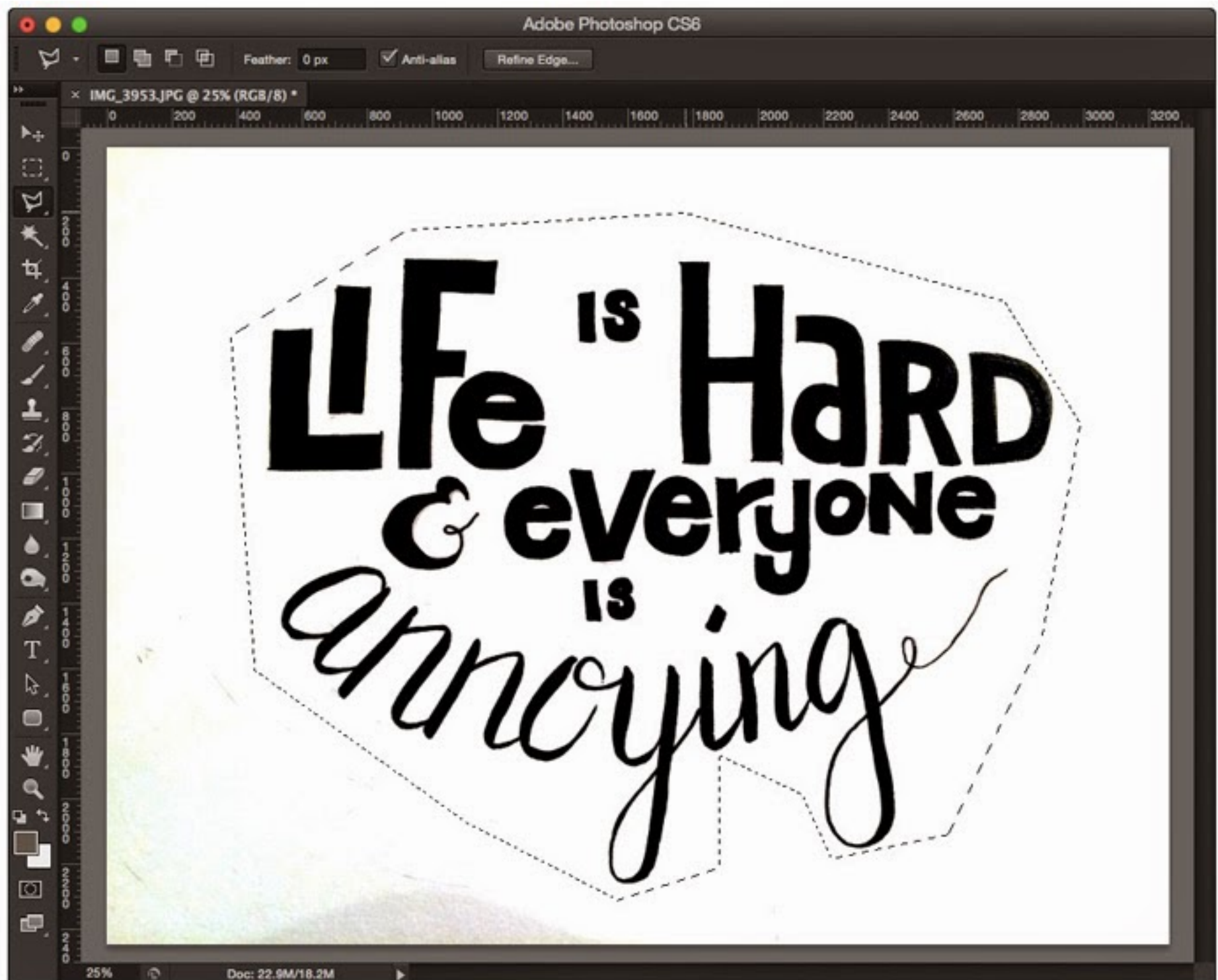
From there, you can adjust the left and right sliders until your artwork looks clean and high contrast.



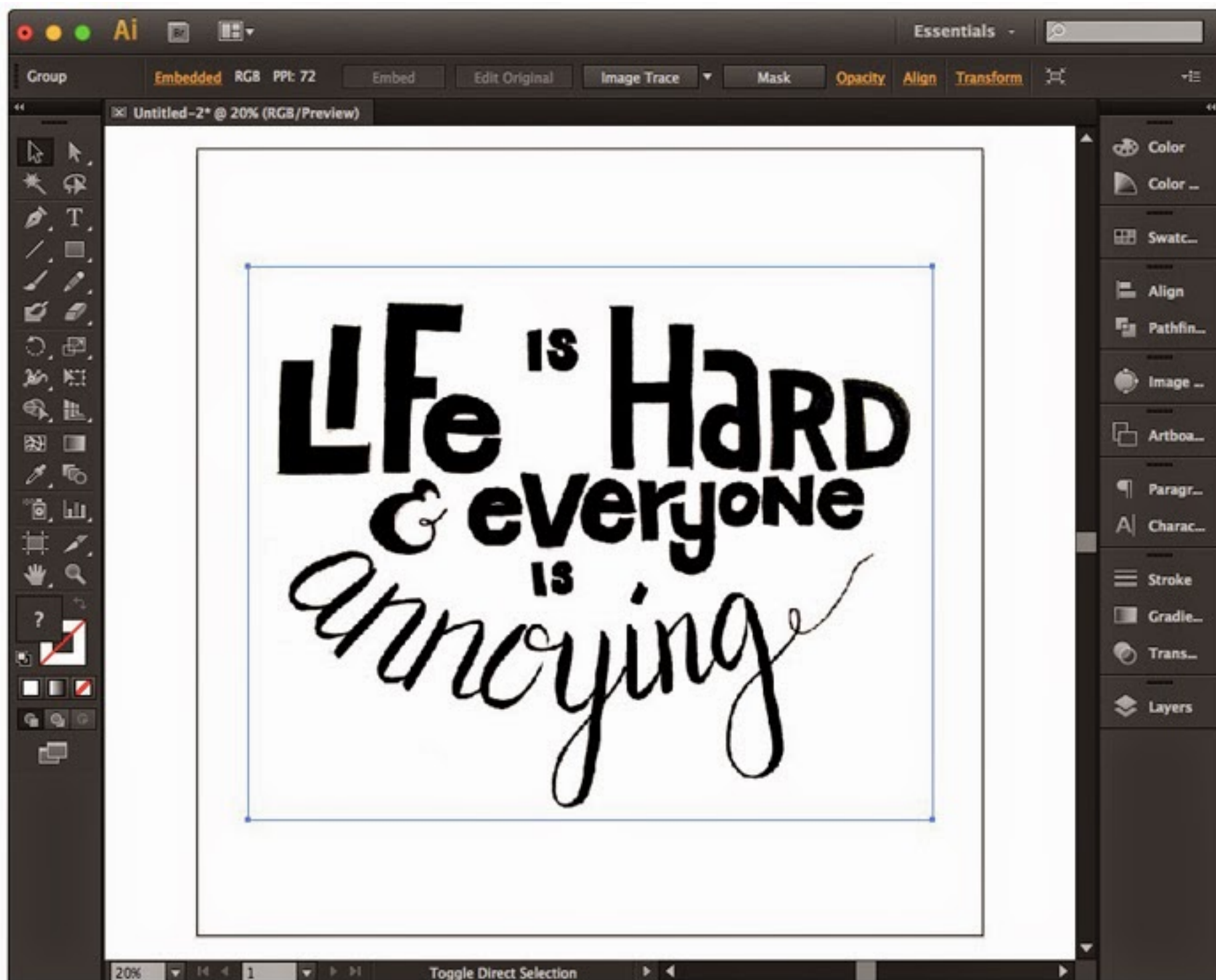
Even after you've adjusted the levels in Photoshop, you may still have weird shadows especially around the edges of your page because of vignetting.

Step 3: Drop your Adjusted Artwork into Illustrator

Using the lasso tool (L) or the marquee tool (M), select the clean part of your artwork that you want to bring into Illustrator.



Copy (CMD+C) that selection in Photoshop, then open a new file in Illustrator, and paste it into that file. I made my Illustrator file 3000x3000px, but you can make it any size you want. Sizing in Illustrator doesn't matter as much at this point because the end product will be a vector.

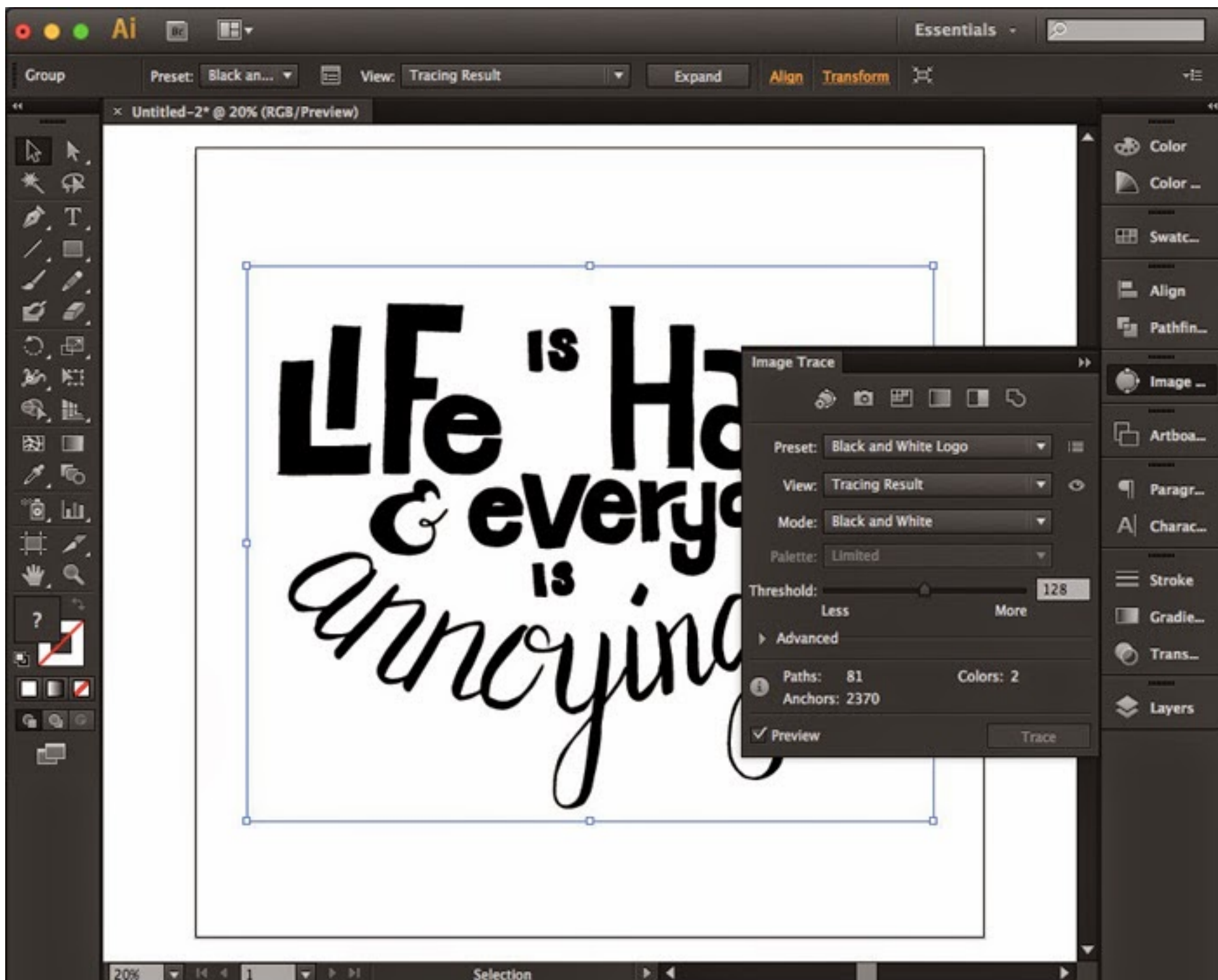


Paper to Digital: Digitize Your Hand Lettering Using Illustrator

Step 4: Convert Your Artwork into Vector using Image Trace

Next, bring up your Image Trace panel in Illustrator (Window → Image Trace).

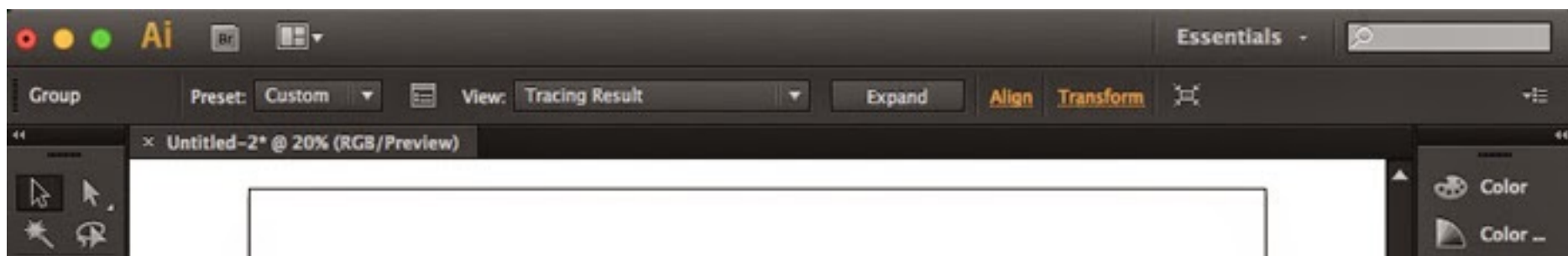
With the element selected, choose one of the Image Trace presets from the Preset dropdown. I recommend starting with Black and White Logo for these types of lettering projects.

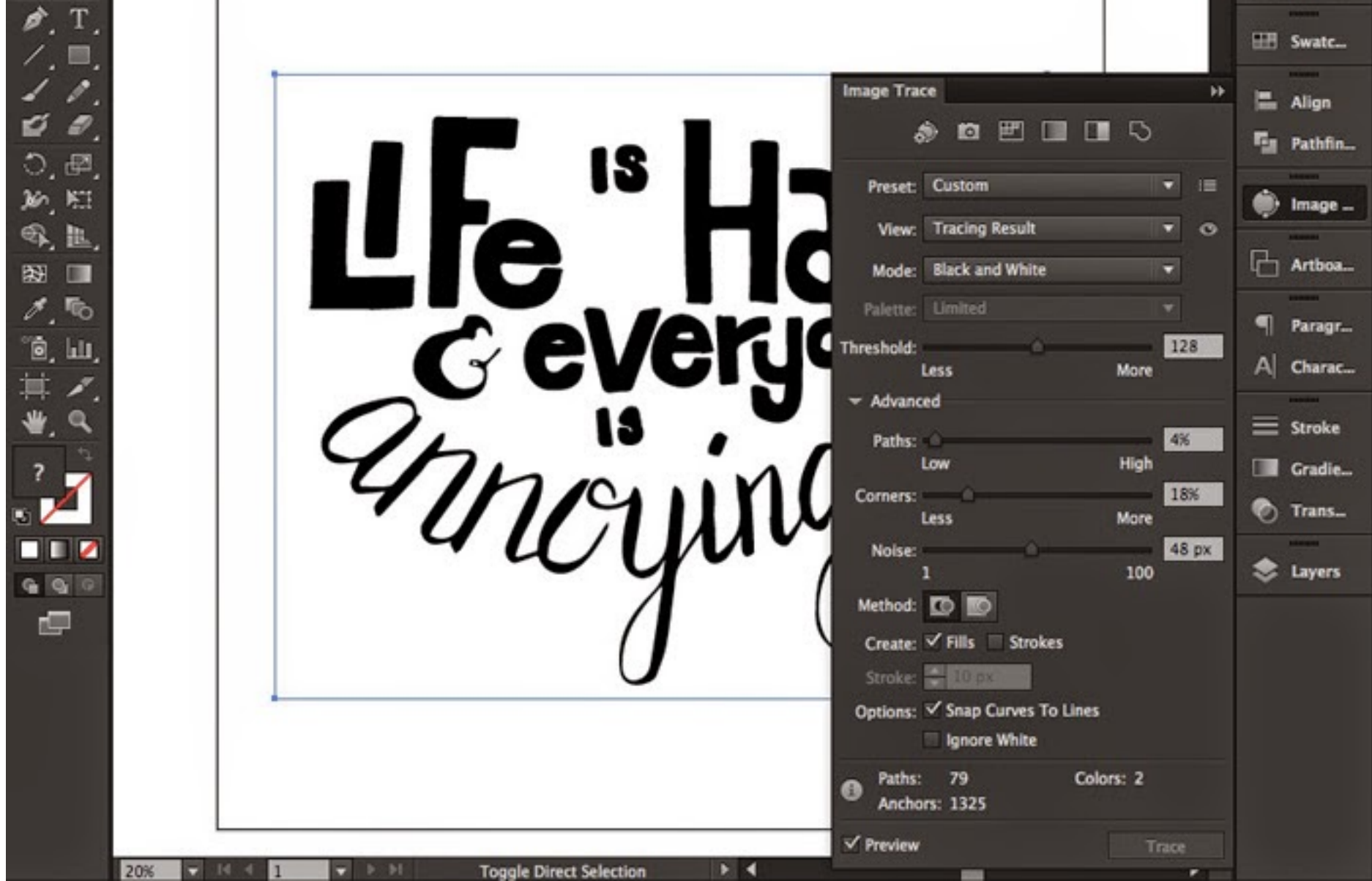


Paper to Digital: Digitize Your Hand Lettering Using Illustrator

After you've chosen a preset you will see your artwork change in the background. We're not done yet; here we can adjust the settings further. Click on the arrow next to Advanced so you can fine tune the Image Trace settings.

Play around with the sliders for Threshold, Paths, Corners and Noise. I usually like to have less corners so the letters look smoother, but you're going to have to see what works best for your drawing.

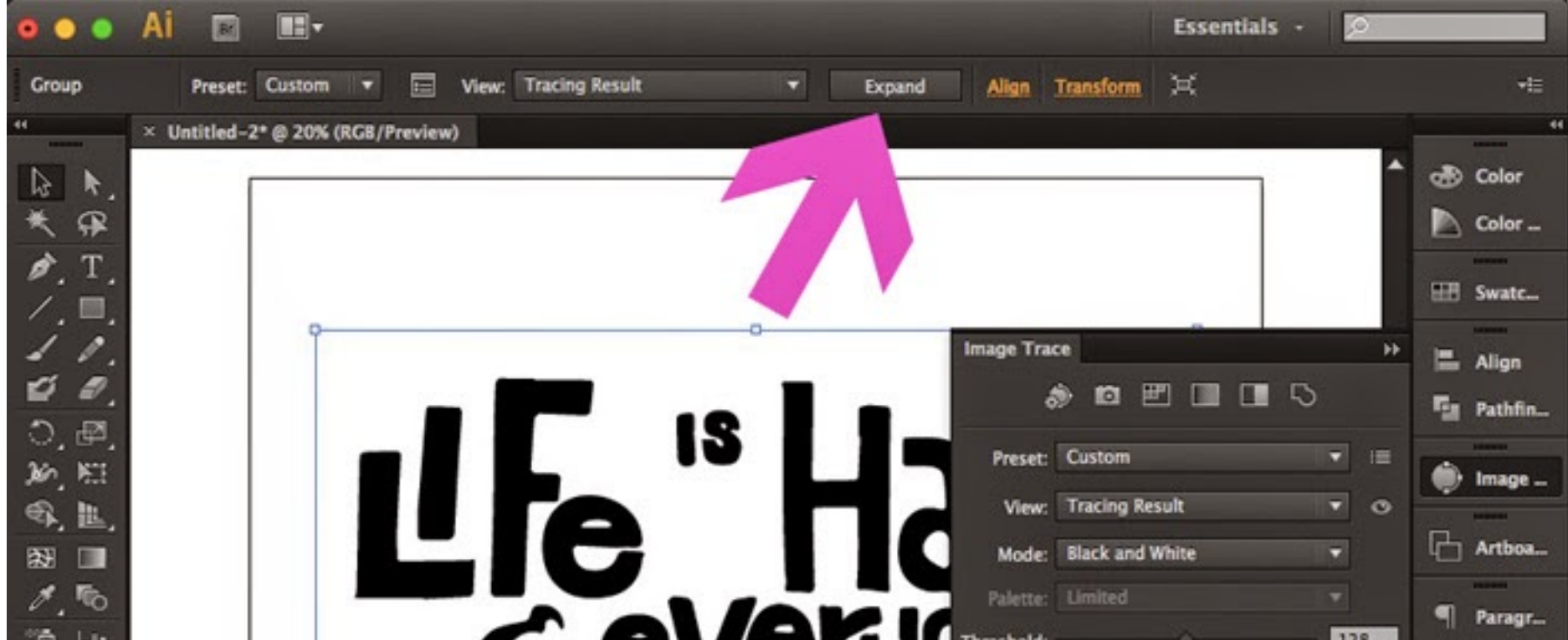


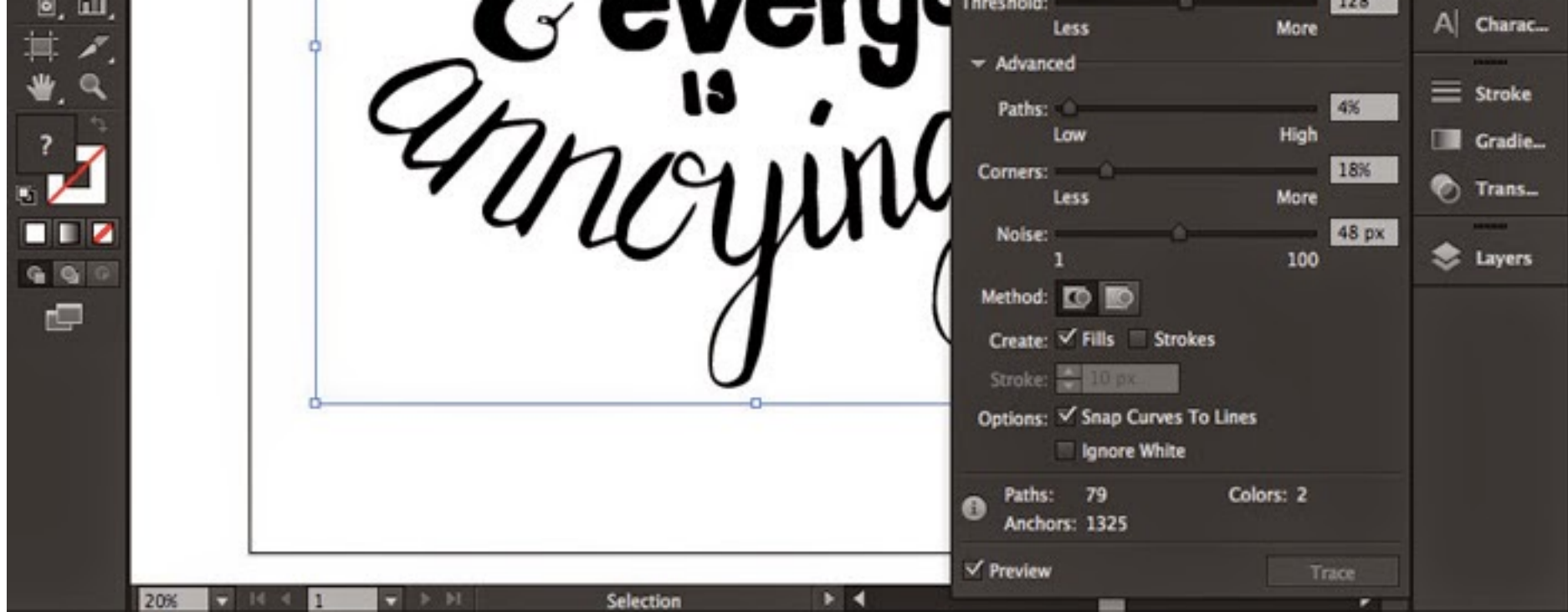


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Step 5: Expand and Ungroup Your Letters and Make Final Tweaks

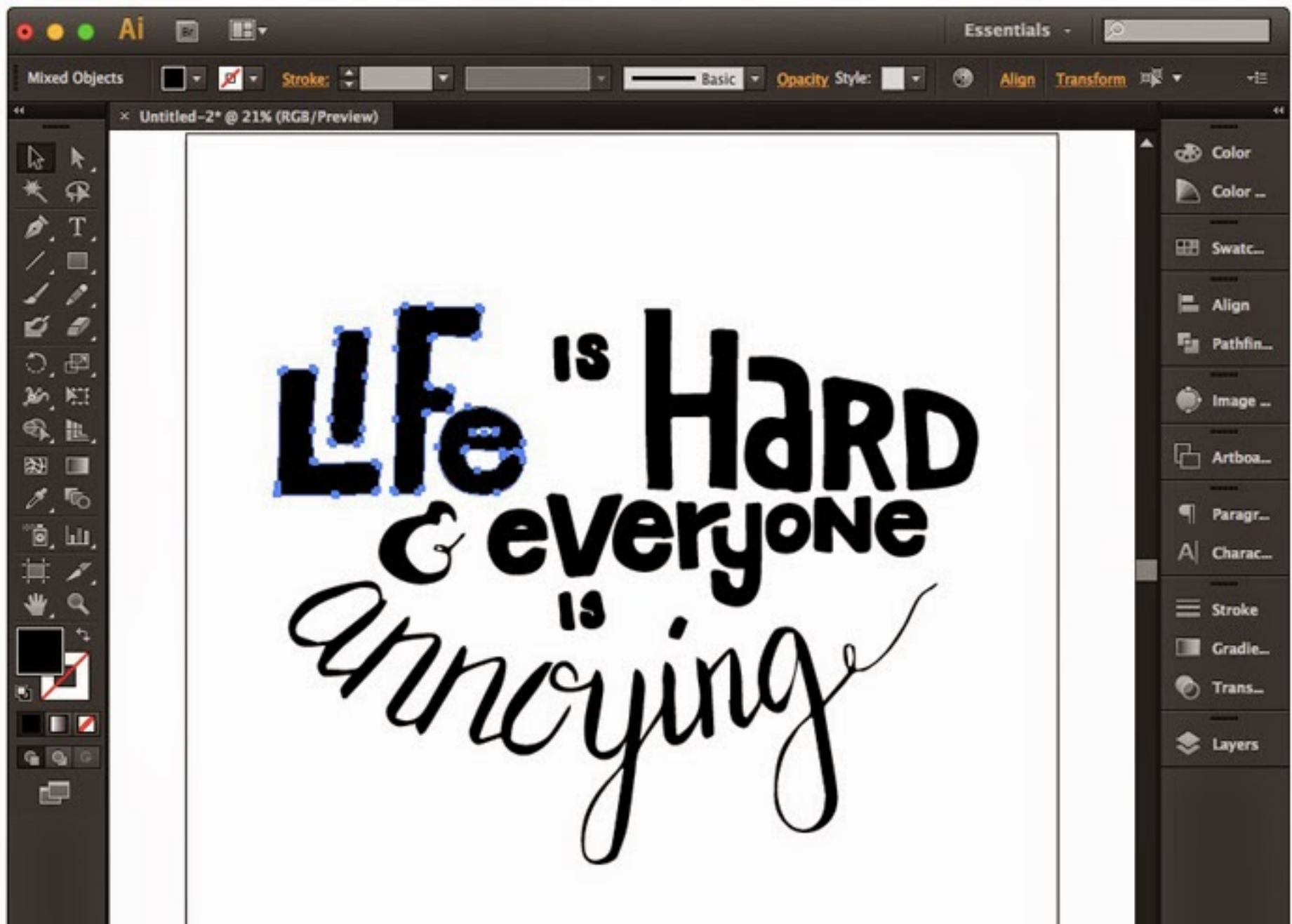
Once the main parts of your drawing look good, click the Expand button at the top.





Paper to Digital: Digitize Your Hand Lettering Using Illustrator

Then, ungroup the selection twice and you will have individual elements that you can move around the page and adjust as needed.

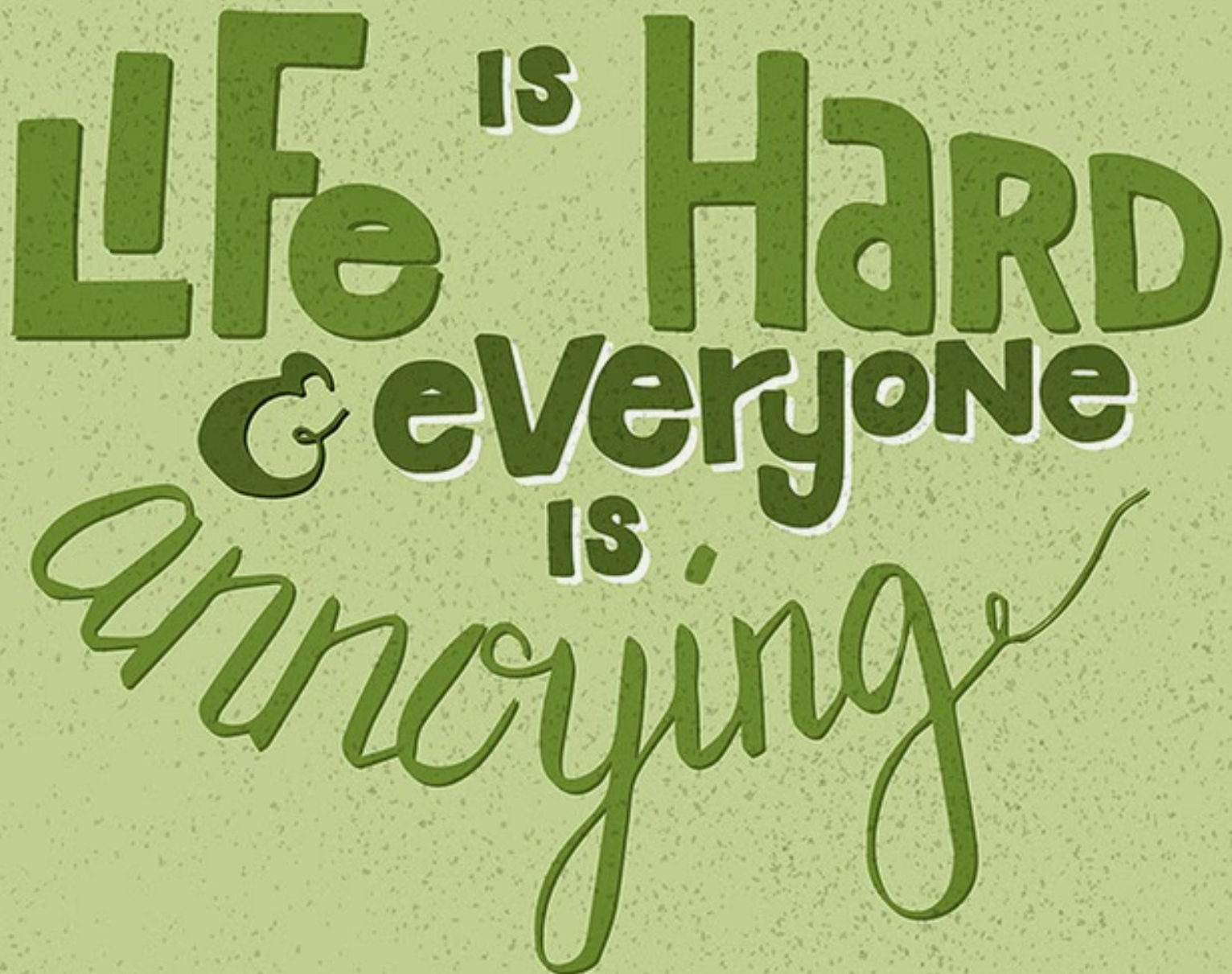


Paper to Digital: Digitize Your Hand Lettering Using Illustrator

If you're noticing that some words are coming out better than others, you may need to do a little doctoring by bringing your words in separately from Photoshop. For example, the "IS" and ampersand in my project are starting to become muddled because the size is so different from the rest of the project.

Delete the words or parts that don't work for you, and re-paste them from your Photoshop drawing into your drawing in Illustrator and fine-tune the settings for those individual words or pieces.

Further adjust your artwork by using the pen tool and cleaning up your artwork. Once you're done, you can change the colors and have some fun with texture and effects.



Life IS Hard
& everyone
IS annoying

The Video Tutorial

If you want to see an overview of the process, watch the tutorial below. Please [subscribe!](#)



0:03 Today I'm going to show you how to vectorize your hand lettering from paper to digital using the image trace in Illustrator

0:10 I'm going to use my Tombow Dual Brush Pen to write some letters.

0:37 I've gone ahead and texted myself this photo. I'm going to take it from Messages and drag it into Photoshop.

0:42 From here we need to adjust the levels of the picture so the blackest part of the text is black and then the background is really white.

0:49 If you hit Command+L you're going to bring up the levels palette. The quickest way to do this is to hit the white eye dropper and click somewhere until the white gets whiter. And then click the black eye dropper and do the same thing for the black part of your text.

1:04 Hit the lasso tool (L) and select the most important part of the picture. You can see towards the outside because this is from a photo there is some darkness going on that you don't want to bring into your drawing in Illustrator.

1:24 Hit Command+C to copy. Open Illustrator.

1:34 Hit Command+V to paste.

1:40 Because the artboard is actually smaller than the file, what I'm going to do is hit Command+Shift+H to hide the artboard.

1:49 Open your Image Trace Palette. If it's not already open, go to Window, Image Trace.

2:00 You want to start with a preset that's going to give you black and white because that's what you're working with. Go ahead and select Black and White Logo. That's a really great place to start.

2:17 You want to make sure that your Advanced section is expanded so you can see all of your options.

2:42 What the Paths does: the lower the number of paths, the smoother your drawing is going to be. Same with Corners. I generally like to not have a ton of corners, but sometimes you lose some detail if you get rid of too many corners.

3:03 Now that everything is done, I'm going to hit the Expand button. This is going to convert all of these into different paths. Then I need to ungroup this twice, do this by hitting Command+Shift+G twice.

3:18 So then take your Selection Tool (V) and then select the outer part of your drawing and hit delete. Do the same for all of these pieces within your drawing that you don't want to be colorized.

3:34 What I'm going to do now is go in and smooth some of these out. Some things look kind of funky; they digitized weird. Zoom in and select the path that you want to edit.

3:53 Go to the smooth tool, which I've changed the shortcut to be Shift+S. You can do that in Edit, Keyboard Shortcuts. I use the smooth tool so often that I feel like it's something that's good to have on your shortcuts easily.

4:12 Now that I have the smooth tool selected, I'm going to go ahead and trace around this edge. It doesn't have to be perfect; I'm just doing this with my trackpad on my laptop. Whenever you need to switch from path to path, you need to make sure to hit the (V) tool and then hit Shift+S again for the Smooth Tool.

4:53 Generally the less points along a path the better, because then the smoother your work is going to be. But because this is digitized hand lettering, you also want to keep some of its character. So, it doesn't have to be perfect.

5:14 If you ever need to really need to go in here and adjust an anchor or you want to get rid of an anchor point, you can hit the (P) tool and hover over an anchor, and when the minus comes up you can subtract it that way. You can also go in with the Direct Selection Tool (A) and click on an anchor, drag the handles out, whatever you need to do.

5:44 Hit Command+0 to view all your artwork. You can plop this on top of photos, you can use it as your blog logo, et cetera, whatever you need to do.

5:55 If you like this video, please subscribe and share with your friends and let me know if there are any other Illustrator or Photoshop tutorials that you'd like to see in the future. Thanks!

Hope this tutorial was helpful. I'd love to see your paper-to-digital transformations, whether it's with lettering or illustration.

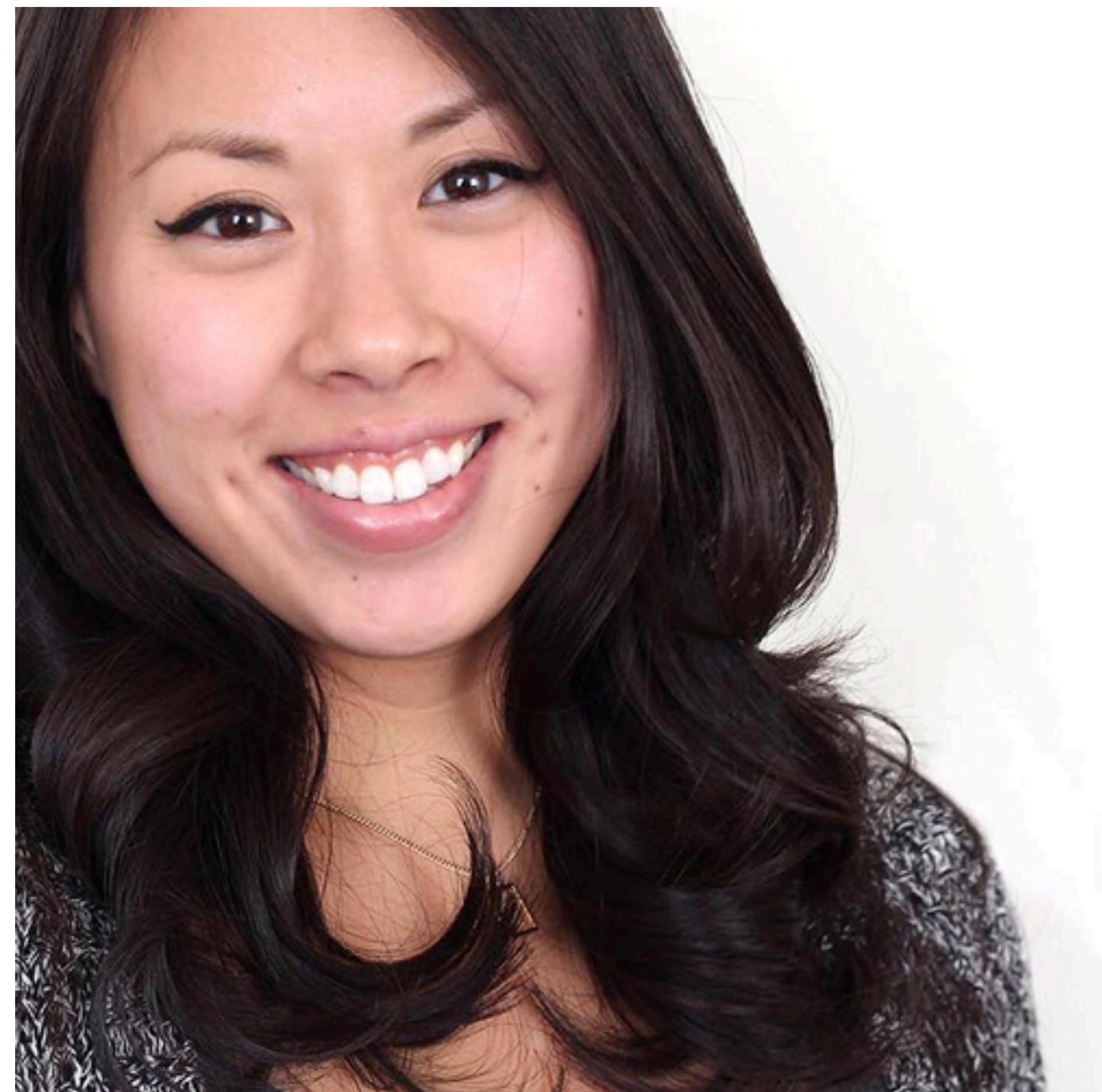
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Designer and Illustrator



I'm [Jenn Coyle](#), the blogger behind Hello Brio Studio. I'm a Philadelphia-based [designer](#) and [illustrator](#). My specialty is custom blog design. [Get in touch](#).

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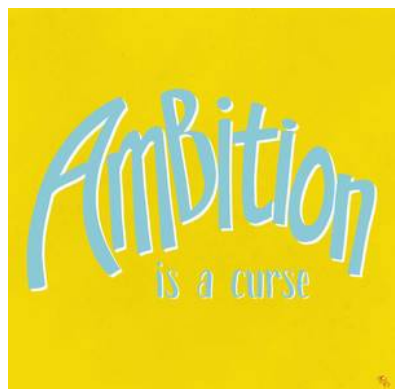
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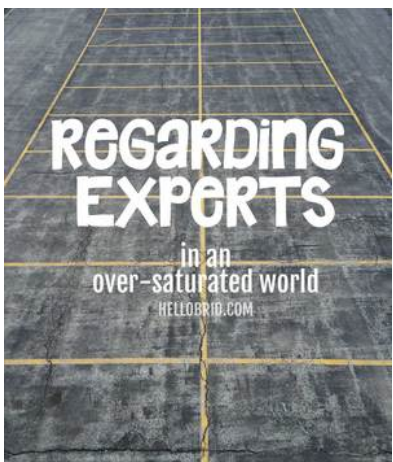
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Brio (noun): vigor or vivacity of style.



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