Blurred Lighting Vignette

This technique is very popular with portrait and wedding photographers. It creates a dramatic effect by giving the appearance that a soft light is focused on the subject, while dimming the surrounding area (which helps draw the eye to the subject).

Step One:
Open the photo that you want to vignette. Get the Elliptical Marquee tool from the Toolbox and draw an oval-shaped selection where you'd like the soft light to fall on your subject. Go to the Layers palette and add a new layer by clicking on the Create New Layer icon.

Step Two:
Hold the Option key (PC: Alt key) and click once on the Layer Mask icon at the bottom of the Layers palette. This creates a Layer Mask from the oval, and holding the Option/Alt key automatically fills your oval mask with black. Next, in the Layers palette, click once directly on the regular Layer thumbnail. Press "d" to set your Foreground color to black, then press Option-Delete (PC: Alt-Backspace) to fill the layer with black. Then, lower the Opacity to 65% in the Layers palette and your photo should look like the one shown here—a clear oval over your subject with a dark tint surrounding the oval area.
Step Three:
In the Layers palette, click once directly on the Layer Mask thumbnail for your layer (the thumbnail with the black oval in it). Go under the Filter menu, under Blur, and choose Gaussian Blur. When the Gaussian Blur dialog appears, drag the slider all the way to the left, then start dragging it to the right to soften the edges of the oval until it looks like a soft light in your photo.

Step Four:
When you click OK to apply the Gaussian Blur, the effect is complete, and now you have a soft lighting vignette falling on your subject and fading as it moves farther away.

NOTE: If this photo will be printed on a press (in an ad, brochure, and so on), some banding could appear within the vignette when it appears in print. Luckily, you can prevent that banding by going under the Filter menu, under Noise, and choosing Add Noise. When the Add Noise dialog appears, for Amount choose 3%, for Distribution choose Gaussian, and make sure you turn on the Monochromatic check box at the bottom of the dialog. Click OK and a tiny amount of noise will be applied. The noise may be slightly visible onscreen, but disappears when printed at high resolution.
Focus Vignette Effect

This is another technique for focusing attention. This time, instead of using light (as we did in the first tutorial in this chapter), we’re focusing attention by blurring non-critical areas, and leaving the focal point sharp.

Step One:
Open the photo that you want to apply the focus vignette effect. Press Command J (PC: Control J) twice to make two duplicates of the Background layer in your Layers palette (as shown below).

Step Two:
Hide the top layer (Layer 1 copy) by clicking on the Eye icon next to it in the far-left column of the Layers palette. Then, click on the middle layer to make it active.

Step Three:
Go under the Filter menu, under Blur, and choose Gaussian Blur. When the dialog appears, increase the Radius to make it “good and blurry.” (That’s a technical term used by highly technical people, like myself.)
Step Four:
Go to the Layers palette and click on the top layer (Layer 1 copy) to make it active. Get the Elliptical Marquee tool from the Toolbox and draw an oval around the area you want to remain in focus.

Step Five:
To soften the edges of your selection, go under the Select menu and choose Feather. For Feather Radius, enter 50 pixels (or higher if you want a smoother transition) and click OK. Remember, a 5-megapixel photo requires more blur than a 3-megapixel photo to get the same effect. The higher the resolution of the photo, the higher you have to adjust your settings to get the same effect.

Step Six:
Click on the Layer Mask icon (second icon from the left at the bottom of the Layers palette) to activate the effect (much in the same way Parmesan cheese activates pasta).