

MODULE 3

# Blend Tool & Shape Builder

Two powerhouse tools for creating and editing complex shapes

# Tools at a Glance

Every tool and concept introduced in this activity

## Blend Tool

W

Generates intermediate steps between two objects — shapes, colors, or positions.

## Shape Builder

↑M

Merge or subtract overlapping shapes with a simple click and drag.



### Specified Steps

Blend option that sets an exact number of intermediate objects.



### Expand

Converts virtual blend effects into real, editable shapes.



### Outline Mode

Shows only paths/anchors — reveals which shapes truly exist.



### Subtract Mode

Shape Builder with Alt/Option held — deletes instead of merges.

# W Blend Tool

Generates a series of intermediate objects between two shapes

REAL

VIRTUAL  
BLENDED  
STEPS

REAL

4

Steps  
specified

The Blend tool works between two anchor objects — you draw only the FIRST and LAST; Illustrator generates everything in between.

# Blend Options — Specified Steps

Double-click the Blend tool on the toolbar to open options before blending

## Blend Options

Spacing:

Steps:

Orientation:

## Smooth Color

Automatically calculates the number of steps needed to create a smooth color transition between objects.

## Specified Steps

You control the exact number of in-between objects. Enter 4 to get 4 additional shapes between your two anchors.



## Specified Distance

Sets the spacing distance between each blended step in measured units rather than a count.

### ★ Used in this activity

Object → Blend → Make | Or use keyboard shortcut W then click both objects

# Virtual vs. Real Shapes

Why blended objects can't be used with Pathfinder directly

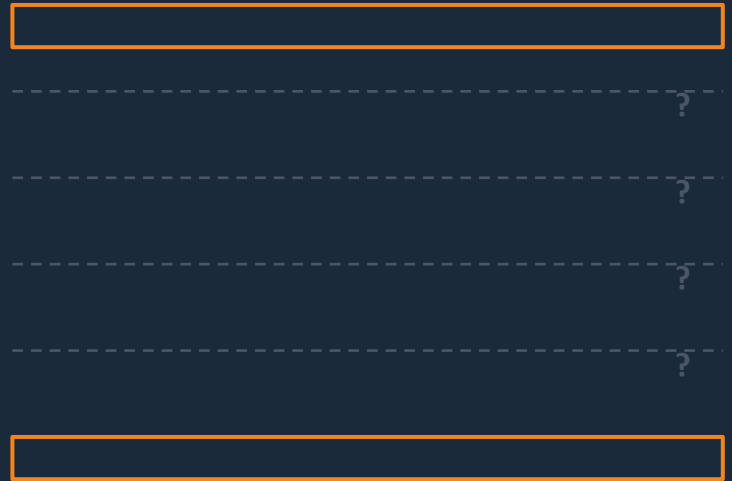
PREVIEW MODE · ⌘/Ctrl+Y to toggle



All 6 shelves appear  
to exist visually

⌘Y

OUTLINE MODE · ⌘/Ctrl+Y to toggle



Only 2 real shapes exist!  
The 4 blended shelves  
are invisible/virtual

# Outline Mode

View → Outline · ⌘/Ctrl + Y · Shows only paths and anchor points



## Diagnose Virtual Shapes

Reveals which shapes truly exist as editable paths vs. which are just visual effects like blends.



## See Hidden Objects

Objects hidden behind others become visible as outlines, making it easy to select them.



## Check Alignment

Without fills and strokes distracting you, you can precisely check that paths line up correctly.



## Understand Structure

See exactly how complex artwork is constructed — every point and path of every shape.

Toggle freely between Preview (⌘Y) and Outline mode anytime — your artwork is never changed by the view.

# Expand

Object → Expand · Converts virtual effects into real, editable shapes

BEFORE EXPAND · Blend Object

Blend

Type label (top-left)



Cannot be trimmed  
or edited as real paths



Expand

AFTER EXPAND · Group of Shapes

Group (6 paths)

Type label (top-left)



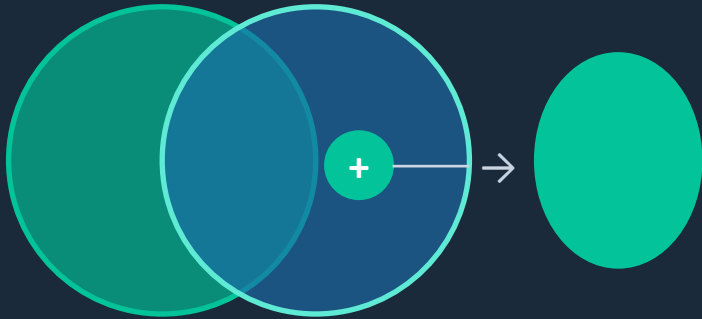
All 6 paths are real  
and fully editable!



# Shape Builder Tool

The intuitive, visual alternative to the Pathfinder panel

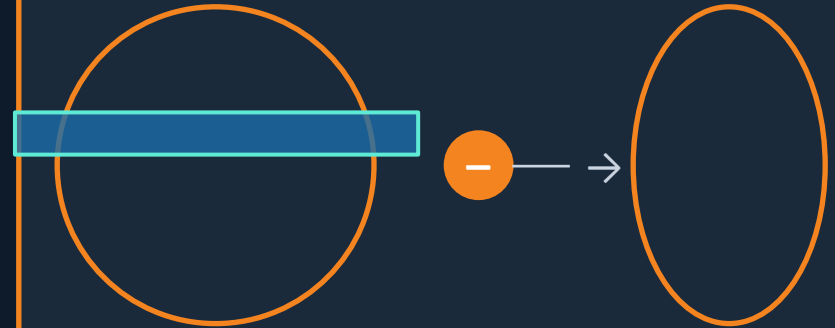
**MERGE MODE** · Default ( + cursor )



Click or drag through shapes  
to merge them into one

Use when you want to UNITE areas  
(like Pathfinder > Unite)

**SUBTRACT MODE** · Hold ALT/Option ( - cursor )



Hold ALT/Option then click  
or drag through shapes to delete

★ Used to trim shelf overhangs  
in this activity

# Shape Builder vs. Pathfinder

Both achieve similar results — different approaches

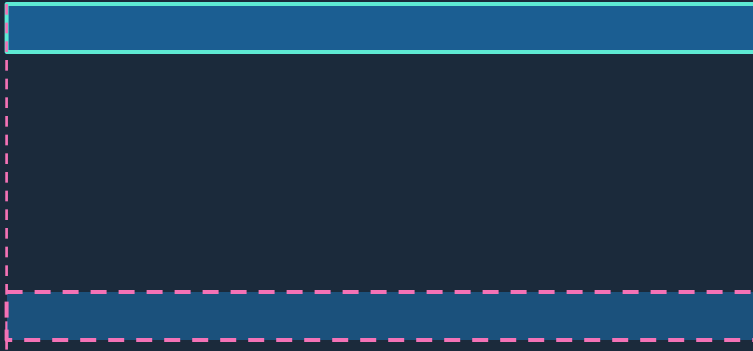
Aspect	⬆️ Shape Builder	Pathfinder Panel
How you use it	Click & drag directly on the canvas — very visual and intuitive	Select objects, then click a button in the panel — more abstract
Merge shapes	Click/drag through areas with default + mode	Select shapes, click Unite
Subtract shapes	Hold Alt/Option to get – mode, then click/drag	Select shapes, click Minus Front / Minus Back
Precision	Works region by region — great for complex overlapping shapes	Operates on entire selected objects at once
Learning curve	Very intuitive — see exactly what you're about to do	Requires understanding which shapes are selected and their order

★ Shape Builder was used in this activity as a simpler alternative to Pathfinder for trimming shelf overhangs.

# Smart Guides & Copy-Drag

Supporting features used during this activity

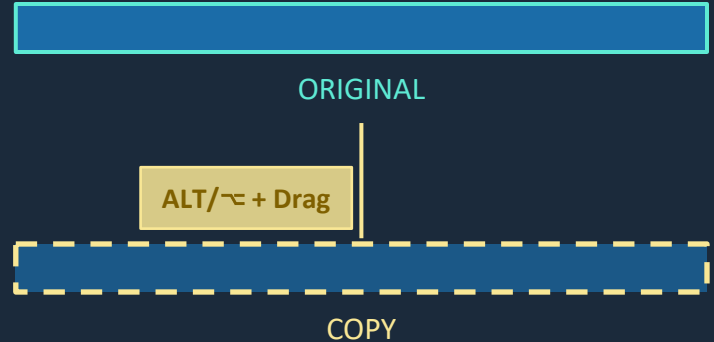
**SMART GUIDES** · View → Smart Guides



align: left

Purple guide lines appear automatically when objects align with each other

**COPY-DRAG** · ALT/Option + Drag



Duplicate any selected object by holding ALT/Option while dragging it

# The Activity Workflow

How Blend, Expand, and Shape Builder work together

1

## Draw Two Shelves

Use Rectangle Tool (M) to draw the top shelf, then ALT+drag to copy it as the bottom shelf.

2

## Blend (W)

Double-click the Blend tool to set Specified Steps = 4. Click top shelf, then bottom shelf — 4 virtual shelves appear.

3

## Expand

Select the blend object. Go to Object → Expand. Now all 6 shelves are real, editable paths.

4

## Shape Builder (⇧M)

Select all shelves + the clock body. Hold ALT/Option with Shape Builder active and drag through the overhanging bits to delete them.

# Module 3 Summary



## Blend Tool

Generates in-between shapes with Specified Steps.



## Outline Mode

Reveals which shapes are real vs. virtual effects.



## Subtract Mode

Hold ALT to delete regions with Shape Builder.



## Shape Builder

Merge or delete regions with a click and drag.



## Expand

Turns virtual blends into real, editable paths.



## ALT + Copy-Drag

Duplicate an object by holding Alt while dragging.