

Getting Started

Getting off to a good start is important in many areas of life, and it is no different with your digital photography workflow. Taking the right approach at the early stages of your workflow has a significant impact on your results. In this first section, I'll discuss some of the fundamental considerations in establishing and following a workflow for optimizing your digital photos, and help you ensure the first steps you take in that workflow are leading you down the right path. I'm sure you're eager to get to the advanced techniques covered later, but I encourage you to spend some time in this section so you can build a solid foundation for your image-optimization workflow.



- Chapter 1 **Workflow Foundations**
- Chapter 2 **Download and Sort**
- Chapter 3 **RAW Conversion**



Workflow Foundations

Whenever I think about optimizing a photographic image, I tend to think about “process.” That always gets me reminiscing about working in a wet darkroom (ah, the smells!), producing black-and-white prints under the glow of red lights, and watching an image magically appear on the exposed paper as it soaks in the developer solution. Of course, making a print in a wet darkroom is a procedural process. You perform a series of steps in the correct order.

When you’re working with digital images, the process and options are considerably different, but the concept of a workflow still applies. Establishing an appropriate workflow provides an efficient method of working on your images to help ensure the highest quality possible.

1

Chapter Contents

The Importance of Workflow
Establishing a Workflow
Revising Your Workflow

The Importance of Workflow

The term *workflow* has become a buzzword in the world of digital imaging, especially with the advent of an entire category of workflow software that includes Adobe Photoshop Lightroom and Apple's Aperture. It's no wonder the notion of workflow for digital photographs led to an entirely new category of software. While many photographers embraced digital photography as a way to exercise increased control over the process of producing a photographic image, it brought with it a steep learning curve, a variety of new tools, and a certain amount of confusion about exactly how the process should be approached.

A workflow in digital photography implies an end-to-end approach to dealing with your images, from downloading them to your computer, to organizing them, optimizing them to look their best, and sharing them in various ways. In this book I focus the most attention on the workflow for optimizing your images in Adobe Photoshop, as that is an area photographers focus a lot of energy (to make their images look their best) and tend to get confused (in large part because there are so many different options available in Photoshop, and so many conflicting recommendations for how to perform various tasks).

I'm a huge advocate for taking a deliberate approach to optimizing your digital photographs. That means not taking a haphazard approach to the process, but it also means not having a rigid set of rules that can never be broken. It means having a plan for your digital-imaging workflow that will ensure an efficient process for you and the best quality possible in the images you produce. Understanding the benefits of a consistent and optimized workflow will help you appreciate the importance of establishing that workflow in the first place.

Quality

Quality is always critical in a digital photograph. That doesn't necessarily mean the image must be perfectly sharp from edge to edge, or that there can't be any noise, or that it must obey the rule of thirds. It simply means the quality is the best it can be based on what you're trying to accomplish with the image (Figure 1.1).

As much as I love using Photoshop to truly maximize the potential of a photographic image, I'm not a big fan of the "I'll fix it in Photoshop" approach to digital photography. I truly believe you need to do all you can at every stage of the workflow to maximize the quality of the image (realizing *quality* is a subjective term). That quality starts with the original capture. So although this book focuses on what you do to the image after the capture, it is important to realize that the actual photography is a critical factor in the ultimate image quality you'll achieve. To achieve the best results at the end of your workflow, you need to start with the best images at the beginning of your workflow.

As you take the steps to optimize your image, a proper workflow helps ensure the best results. Having a plan for your workflow means you're thinking about which approach you'll take, the methods you'll use, and the order in which you'll perform

the various adjustments applied to your images. These are key factors that affect the quality of the final image, and having a plan focused on optimal quality will give you much better results than adjusting your images in a haphazard fashion.



Figure 1.1 “Quality” doesn’t necessarily mean an image that is tack-sharp from edge to edge, or that exhibits other characteristics we think of when talking about a photographic image. It simply means producing an image with the best results possible based on your intent.

The bottom line is that you care about the quality of your images more than anyone else does. You have already invested significant time, effort, and money to ensure you can achieve the best results in your digital photography. Taking the time to develop an appropriate workflow for your digital images will enable you to maintain that quality through to the final image.

Note: Quality can be a subjective factor in many images, especially when unique photographic methods or special effects are used. Although the definition of optimal quality can vary by photographer or even by photographic image, your workflow should focus on maintaining the quality and aesthetics of your original image as you captured it, while producing an improvement in the final result.



As you are defining (or fine-tuning) the workflow you use to optimize your images, consider the effect of the particular methods you’re using, as well as the order in which you perform tasks, to see if there are things you can do to improve image quality. Throughout this book, I’ll be sharing methods for achieving exactly those high-quality results with your digital workflow.

Efficiency

Although image quality tends to be a chief concern for most photographers (as it should be), efficiency is also important. And it's worth noting that the two do not need to be mutually exclusive. You can work efficiently and still achieve maximum image quality. In fact, oftentimes by increasing the efficiency of your workflow you'll improve the quality of your results as well.

As much as most photographers love working with their images—seeing them transformed from good captures to remarkable images—generally they don't want to sit in front of the computer all day. They'd much rather be out taking new pictures. By developing a general workflow, you can work much more efficiently. You won't have to stop and think about what the next step is. Although some images will certainly require extra attention, and at times you will need to try out various techniques before achieving the desired result, an established workflow you are comfortable with will make the work of perfecting your images go relatively quickly.

When giving presentations on digital imaging (see www.timgrey.com for a schedule of upcoming appearances), I may take half an hour to fully discuss the details of one particular adjustment, whereas making the adjustment as part of your normal workflow may require mere seconds or a few minutes at most. The time spent understanding how the adjustment works is a worthwhile investment. When you're familiar with the tools, you're able to use them much more efficiently. It may take some time for you to fully grasp all the details, but by taking the time to truly understand how the tools work, you'll be much more efficient without compromising the quality of your images.

Consistency

Another benefit of a consistent workflow is—no surprise here—consistency. This relates to the two previous topics: by maintaining a consistent workflow, you'll ensure consistent quality in your images and a familiarity that will improve your efficiency. When you find a workflow that works for one image, that workflow (with obvious variations as needed for specific images) will work well for all of your images.



Note: Keep in mind that an established workflow doesn't define absolute rules for the adjustments you must make to all of your images, or even the specific order in which you must perform those adjustments. Rather, it provides a roadmap that guides you through the best way to approach your images for optimization.

In effect, if it makes sense to establish a workflow for optimizing your images (and I certainly think it makes a lot of sense), it also makes sense to be consistent in your use of that workflow. In other words, make a plan and stick to it to achieve the maximum benefits.

Establishing a Workflow

Because you're reading this book, I'm assuming you already appreciate the value of establishing a workflow for optimizing your digital images. By extension, I also assume you aren't completely comfortable with the process you're currently using. As you work your way through this book, that will change.

As you begin creating a workflow that works for you, I strongly recommend making duplicate copies of a couple of favorite images that could use some work, and going through the process of experimenting with the adjustments that will form the foundation of your workflow. Because they're just copies of your images, you don't have to worry about whether you produce a good final result, and you can focus on practicing the steps involved and figuring out what works best for you.

Note: Although this chapter is about establishing a workflow for your images, you won't find details of a specific workflow here. That's because this entire book is about the workflow process, and by going through the book in its entirety you'll learn what steps you need to include in your own workflow, and in what order you'll likely apply them.



Workflow Philosophy

You may not consider the concept of a workflow in Photoshop to be the most philosophical subject, but it is helpful to have a philosophy that drives your workflow.

At a fundamental level, my workflow philosophy revolves around maximizing quality first and foremost, while trying to maintain the greatest efficiency and flexibility at the same time. For me, this approach unleashes the maximum potential of the image and best leverages the power of Photoshop.

At a more tactical level, my philosophy about an image-optimization workflow focuses on solving the biggest problem with the image first. Now, when I say "problem," I don't literally mean that, because I also feel it is important to start with the best images possible. What I mean is that you should make the most significant adjustment first. For most photographers, that tends to mean making tonal adjustments before color adjustments, for example, but that is only a guideline and won't be followed rigidly. As you evaluate and work toward optimizing an image, start with what you think is the most significant change to be applied, and work your way down to the "fine-tuning" adjustments. This also involves starting with the global adjustments (those that affect the entire image) and then narrowing your focus to adjustments that affect only specific areas of the image.

This approach also applies at the level of an individual adjustment. For example, the order in which you adjust each of the sliders for adjustments that contain multiple sliders (which is pretty much all of them) is worth some consideration. When deciding which slider to adjust first, I don't simply go from top to bottom in the dialog box. Instead I start with the slider I feel represents the most significant or important

change to the image. For example, on an image with a magenta color cast, I'd start with the Green/Magenta slider even though the Red/Cyan slider is at the top.

This philosophy can help guide you to a workflow that will work best for most of your images, and will also help you make decisions that are specific to a given image, rather than following a rigid workflow and not making any decisions at all.

Determine Priorities

Your priorities in optimizing your images probably reflect the topics covered in the beginning of this chapter. In particular, you probably want to ensure maximum quality in your images while maintaining efficiency with your workflow. However, you may also have other priorities for your images, which you'll want to consider when fine-tuning your workflow.

The first step in establishing a digital workflow is to think about what is important to you and how you prefer to work. Some of this relates to overall strategies. For example, I strongly recommend using adjustment layers or separate image layers for all adjustments. This approach will be emphasized throughout the book, with a layer-based method for every adjustment presented. Another aspect to consider is the general flow of your adjustments. Do you prefer to clean up dust and other blemishes before you get started, or would you rather move right into tonal adjustments? This book will present recommendations on the order in which you should make your adjustments, and under which circumstances you should change that order.

Of course, your priorities will depend in large part on the type of work you're doing and the deadline under which you're operating. For example, photojournalists often have speed as their utmost concern. For them, a workflow that focuses on methods to speed up the process of preparing images is optimal. For a nature photographer producing large prints, quality is the greatest concern, even if that means taking considerably longer to process an image. For a given photographer, the optimal workflow may even vary based on the particular project. The key is to define a workflow that meets your typical production needs, but to remain flexible so you can revise your workflow based on changing needs.

What you may find, however, is that when you use the best methods to assure optimal image quality, and you start to learn more about how to use the best tools for that purpose, you may find you're also able to work quickly. In other words, with an efficient workflow you understand, you can focus on speed and quality at the same time, without really making any sacrifices.

Focus on Results

Although workflow is all about a process, the real purpose of that process is to create the final result (Figure 1.2). Photographers typically capture images because they want to produce beautiful prints or other output to share with as many viewers as possible. We want that final output to be impressive, both because of the content of the image and because of the quality of the final display. As such, it is important that you keep

thinking about the final result when you're optimizing your images, as well as when you're figuring out your workflow in the first place.



Figure 1.2 For most photographers, the ultimate result of their digital workflow is a high-quality print they are proud to display for all to see.

You want to produce the best images possible, and a proper workflow will ensure you are able to maintain that quality throughout the process. However, also consider your intent for the final appearance of your images. How you want your images to look at the end of the process can determine the steps you take to adjust the images during that process. For example, if you are preparing an image for a brochure and need it to be a real attention-grabber, you might boost the saturation and kick up the contrast. The same image used for a restaurant menu might need to be

toned down for a more subtle appearance. A general workflow will provide the flexibility to adjust the image either way, but the actual process may be different for each.

As you think about the results you are trying to achieve and the typical order of priorities in producing the best results, you'll get a sense of how you might organize the process of optimizing your images. Give some thought to the order in which you should make your adjustments, and the factors that are particularly important to you when it comes to your images. As you think about these topics, you'll start to get a feel for a workflow that will make sense for you and your images.



Note: I'd be the last person to suggest you need to write your own manual on how to apply a workflow to your images (especially because this book can guide you through the workflow process). However, it might make sense to write out the basic steps you feel are important as you develop your own workflow. Also, be sure to see this book's appendix for a guide you can use as you develop your own workflow.

Maintain Flexibility

Another important consideration for your workflow is flexibility. You want to be sure your workflow is making your image-optimization process more efficient and that it allows you to change your mind about what you want the image to look like.

A Flexible Attitude

One aspect of maintaining flexibility in your workflow is a state of mind. It is important that you don't get caught in the trap of always doing the same things to every image. Each image is unique and deserves to be optimized based on what you judge to be the best result for that particular image. I've known photographers who apply the same adjustments with the same settings in the same order to every single image. This robotic approach to image editing won't demand too much of your time, but it also won't ensure optimal image quality. Some images may be improved by the particular adjustments, while others may be harmed.

Even if you find that certain settings for some adjustments seem to work best for every image, keep in mind that the workflow you establish is a basic guideline for the general order in which you'll perform your adjustments. Don't think of your workflow as a rigid set of rules that dictate what steps should be taken and in what order.

Even after you've established a workflow that helps you achieve exceptional results with your images, don't be afraid to change things around for a particular image. Some images will have unique problems that need to be addressed early in the workflow to maintain high quality. In other situations you'll simply want to depart from your typical workflow to produce a creative variation (Figure 1.3). Whatever

the situation, there are many good reasons to depart from your typical workflow to achieve certain goals. Treat your workflow as a guide for producing the best results with your typical images, but maintain the flexibility to change your process when you feel it will benefit the final result.



Figure 1.3 Even if you're happy with the way an image has turned out, you may later decide you'd like to stretch the creative limits of that image. Maintaining flexibility with your workflow helps ensure you can always act on your creative ideas.

Layer-Based Workflow

Another aspect of maintaining flexibility is ensuring you'll be able to change your mind and revise the adjustments you've made to an image without reducing its quality or causing an excessive loss of detail. Using layers to optimize your images will ensure you always maintain this flexibility.

I strongly advocate the use of layers for all adjustments to your images (Figure 1.4). The use of layers ensures that the original information in your image is always preserved, provides greater flexibility, and may improve the quality. Throughout this book you'll find techniques for applying many adjustments, all performed with adjustment layers whenever possible. When an adjustment layer doesn't provide the tools needed to achieve a particular change, separate image layers with particular properties will be put to use. As a last resort, when the particular technique doesn't lend itself to using an adjustment layer or empty image layer for the adjustment, you can create a duplicate of the background image layer for purposes of applying the change. The Background layer itself should never be adjusted in a way that alters pixel values, which pretty much means you will never do anything to your Background layer. Everything you do to change the appearance of your image will be on a layer separate from the Background image layer.

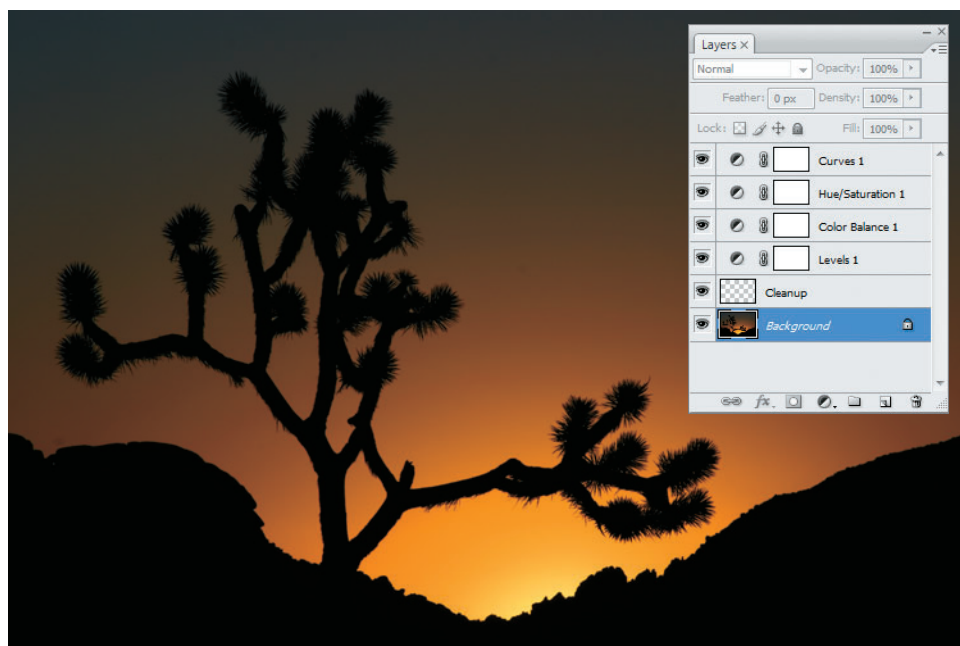


Figure 1.4 By using layers in your workflow, you'll maintain the flexibility to revise the adjustments you've made at any time without risking a loss of detail or quality in the image.

By following my recommendation to use a layer-based workflow, you'll ensure that the original image data contained in the Background layer is maintained. The result is that you can always return to the image and remove particular adjustments, or fine-tune that adjustment if you've changed your mind about the effect you're looking for. You may have experienced a situation where you've optimized an image, and

then opened it at a later date only to wonder what you were thinking when you made the original adjustments. By working with layers you can ensure that such situations don't represent a need to compromise the overall quality of the image, but rather represent opportunities to make the image even better than it was the first time you worked on it.

Note: I'll discuss more details of the benefits of adjustment layers in your workflow in Chapter 5, "Basic Tone and Color." Also in that chapter you'll learn how Photoshop has organized adjustment layers into a new Adjustments palette; see the section "Adjustment Layers and Photoshop CS4."



Revising Your Workflow

I think of a digital-imaging workflow as a living entity—not because I have some weird fascination with workflow, but because I realize that your typical workflow will change over time. You need to be comfortable revising your workflow to take advantage of new techniques you learn.

Nothing Is Permanent

A variety of factors may lead you to revise the way you work on your images. For one thing, as you learn new image-editing techniques you may want to incorporate them into your workflow. As you read more books, take workshops, or just talk to others who are also involved in digital photography, you'll discover new methods that provide efficient ways to achieve similar results or ways to produce completely new variations of your images.

Because it is simply a guideline for adjustments, a general workflow provides the flexibility to incorporate new methods into the process of optimizing your images. However, in many cases you may develop a specific workflow that involves performing specific actions (with variable settings) in a specific order. To ensure you are always able to achieve the best results, be willing to revise your workflow to incorporate new skills as you learn them.

Another factor that can impact your workflow is changes in software. With each new version of Photoshop or with the release (or discovery) of new plug-ins and filters, you'll find ways to add efficiency and creativity to your normal workflow.

The key is to be willing to revise your workflow when appropriate. If you learn a way to make your workflow more efficient or to provide even better results, by all means change your workflow to include such techniques.

Evolving Requirements

As you continue working with your images, you'll likely find that your own requirements will evolve. There are two general categories for these changing requirements.

The first category represents actual changes to the results you need to produce. For example, if you've been producing only ink-jet prints but now need to be able to prepare your images for offset press output, you may need to revise your workflow

to be sure you're producing the best results for that type of output. If you create a website to share your images, you may also need to alter your workflow to include steps for preparing smaller versions of the images as well as thumbnail representations. Whatever the reasons, you'll likely find the requirements placed on your images change over time, and you'll want to be sure your workflow is always ready to meet those demands.

The second category has to do with the likelihood that your standards will get higher with time. If you've been working with digital imaging for any length of time, you can probably relate to this from your own experience. When the first photo ink-jet printers became available, most of us were thrilled with the quality they could provide. However, if you compare that early output to what today's photo ink-jet printers are able to achieve, those older models will seem totally inadequate (Figure 1.5). What used to be considered excellent quality is now rated as garbage.



Figure 1.5 Today's photo ink-jet printers produce considerably better quality than those of just a few years ago.

Similarly, you'll likely find that your own standards increase over time. As you become more skilled in the optimization of your images, you may open older images and wonder how you ever let yourself print them because you know you can do so much better today. Your developing skills in image optimization will call for revisions to your overall workflow.

The workflow you use to optimize your images will continue to evolve. The most important thing is to implement a workflow so it can evolve. Evaluate your images, consider the adjustments that are necessary to achieve the results you desire, and think about a logical way to apply those adjustments that will provide an efficient way to produce consistently high-quality results.

By taking the time to develop such a workflow, you'll ensure that the process is working for you, rather than creating a situation where you are working hard but not producing the consistent quality you desire. With a proper workflow—as you'll find throughout this book—you'll be able to unleash the great potential of the pixels in your images.