Chapter 1

Making Your Work Flow

Just a few years ago, when photographers were primarily shooting film, I rarely heard any of them mention the word "workflow." That's because post-production consisted of taking film to the lab and then picking it up when processing and proofing were completed. When they needed enlargements, they took their selected negatives or slides back to the lab for printing. Unless they were developing their own film and doing all printing in the darkroom, the film photographer's workflow was mostly over once the shutter clicked. Even for photographers who processed and printed their own film, the options were so limited that it wasn't necessary to spend lots of time thinking about them.

Now that digital photographers are taking control over the entire imaging process, the word *workflow* is a common word in their vocabulary. That's because products like Lightroom and Photoshop have opened the door to unlimited options in post-production. In this new photographic paradigm a shutter-click signals the beginning of a whole new creative process — rather than the end of one. The trick to unlocking the power of that process is to manage the countless possible options when editing digital files by designing and using a well-defined workflow.

So what do I mean when I say *workflow*? The underlying concept of a workflow is a tested system that yields consistent and reliable results in the shortest amount of time. One of the best examples of a complete workflow is a Starbucks coffee shop. Starbucks isn't successful because it serves the best-tasting coffee drinks. It's successful because the coffee it sells always tastes the same whether you're drinking a Caramel Macchiato in Seattle or San Antonio. That's because each coffee shop uses the same system to prepare the drinks it serves — as well as everything else done at the store. This system not only guarantees consistent quality, it also ensures that all Starbucks

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employees operate at peak efficiency because they don't have to invent their own system. This workflow is the key to the success of Starbucks because once it was developed it was duplicated and adapted over and over, in radically different locations across the globe.

Even though you're not making lattes, you can learn something from Starbucks. If you take the time to systemize everything you do to your images, you'll know that each step is being performed efficiently and in the correct order. You'll know that each factor that affects the quality of your images is being managed in the best way, so you won't have to reinvent the wheel every time you edit an image. Additionally, if your system is flexible, you'll be able to adapt it to all sorts of imaging scenarios for the different kinds of photographic needs you have. However, before you can design that system, you must consider the variables that you need to manage in a typical digital photographer's post-production workflow.

Exploring the Digital Photographer's Workflow

There are almost as many digital post-production workflows as there are photographers. In general, these workflows begin at the moment of capture and end with final output of a retouched and refined file. However, if you look at most of those workflows, you soon notice that they share a common, two-part foundation. I call these two parts the *production phase* and the *creative phase*. Let's take a close look at each of these phases so that you can get an overview of the job ahead.

The production phase of the workflow

This first part of your workflow deals with managing large numbers of images. I call this part of the workflow the *production phase* because the focus is on speed and efficiency. It's similar to a film photographer who processes her film, prints some proofs, and uses them to choose the winners and losers from the shoot. Refining this first part of the workflow is especially important for digital photographers because of the large number of images we tend to capture. When I got married in 1980, our photographer covered the entire wedding with 120 exposures. Today, many wedding photographers shoot as many as 2000–3000 images at a wedding. With these high numbers it's possible to get buried in your workflow unless you have a well-designed system. Figure 1.1 illustrates the main steps in the production phase of the workflow.

FIGURE 1.1

When dealing with large groups of images there are certain fundamental steps that must be considered. After these steps are systemized they form the foundation for the production phase of the workflow.

The Production Workflow

1. Upload image files to computer

2. Rename image files

3. Apply basic metadata and keywords

4. Sort for winners and losers

5. Add more keywords

6. Perform basic editing

7. Present and output favorites

8. Archive all files

Let's take a quick look at each of these steps:

1. **Upload image files to the computer.** This is where it all begins. Files are uploaded and imported into some kind of *digital asset management* (DAM) software. DAM software allows you to catalog images by creating a *database* (a structured collection of information), so that it's fast and easy to find the photo file you need when you need it.

2. **Rename image files.** This step is always a good idea so that your image files have unique and meaningful names.

3. **Apply basic metadata and keywords.** Basic metadata information such as the copyright holder's name and general keywords that describe the photos are added. This step, as well as the renaming step, takes place during the upload/import process. (I discuss metadata and keywords in detail in Chapters 5 and 6.)

4. **Sort for winners and losers.** During this process the good, the bad, and the just plain ugly are identified, labeled, and deleted if necessary. During this process important files begin to emerge. (These are the files that will eventually be moved to the creative phase of the workflow later.)

5. **Add more keywords.** More specific keywords are added to individual images and groups of images. The more specific this information is, the more powerful the search and filtering functions of the DAM software will be when it searches its database.

6. **Perform basic editing.** Qualities like tonality and color are modified, and functions like cropping are performed on the images. An important aspect of this step is to have the ability to apply the same adjustments to groups of similar images all at once.

7. **Present and output favorites.** This step allows you to share your favorite images with the rest of the world. There are several options here, depending on the form of the presentation. The usual options include slide shows, Web sites, e-mail, and prints.

8. **Archive all files.** After all of the work is done it's important to preserve it by backing up and archiving the image files as well as the DAM database.

NOTE **Keep in mind that the final images from this phase are not yet highly refined, but they are ready for closer inspection. Think of them as the proofs a professional photographer would show to a client. All of the rejects have been removed and general edits have been performed so that these proofs are good enough to use as a sale tool.**

It is useful here to visualize the production phase of the workflow as a funneling process. One of its main functions is to help you quickly identify important images. When you pour all of your photos into that funnel, only the best ones emerge from the other end. It's those few, special images that the second phase of the workflow, the creative phase, is designed to address.

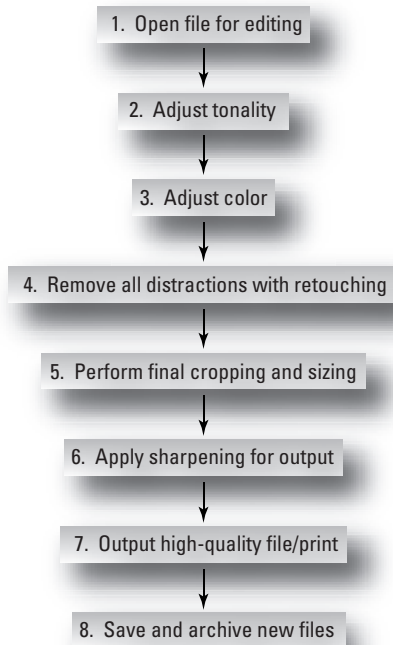## The creative phase of the workflow

I call this portion of the workflow the *creative phase* because it focuses on creativity and quality rather than speed. Efficiency is important here, and efforts should be made to improve it. However, efficiency always takes a back seat to creating the best possible file for uses such as publication in a magazine or printing large wall prints for display.

This part of the workflow is like the film photographer who chooses a special negative from her proofs and then spends hours making a print in her darkroom. This is where the magic happens, as every aspect of the image is fine-tuned and perfected. Figure 1.2 shows the typical steps in the creative workflow.

FIGURE 1.2

These steps for the creative phase of the workflow begin after the steps in the production phase are completed. They are performed on a special, single image rather than a group of images.

The Creative Workflow

1. Open file for editing

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2. Adjust tonality

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3. Adjust color

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4. Remove all distractions with retouching

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5. Perform final cropping and sizing

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6. Apply sharpening for output

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7. Output high-quality file/print

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8. Save and archive new files

Let's break these steps down and take a closer look at them:

1. **Open file for editing.** This is where the creative part of the workflow begins. Files are opened with the editing software or directly from the DAM software.

2. **Adjust tonality.** If everything is done correctly during the editing process in the production phase of the workflow, then overall tonal correction is minimal here. Sometimes, though, specific areas of the image need to be darkened or lightened individually.

3. **Adjust color.** This is the same as the tonal adjustment step. Overall adjustment should be minimal. Special attention is given to specific areas of the image where color needs to be modified locally without affecting other colors in the image.

4. **Remove all distractions with retouching.** This is where most of the action occurs during the creative phase of the workflow. Retouching tools like Photoshop's Healing Brush and Clone Stamp are used to tone down or completely remove anything in the image that's distracting. Additional tools and techniques are used to ensure that the final image is designed to guide the viewer's eye through it in the way the image's maker intended.

5. **Perform final cropping and sizing.** After all the work is done, the image is prepared for its final use.

6. **Apply sharpening for output.** This step may seem basic, but it's one of the most crucial steps in the creative portion of the workflow. That's because final sharpening must be customized for the specific output size and use.

7. **Output high-quality file/print.** Now it's time for the payoff. Everything that's been done to the image since uploading it onto the computer comes together.

8. **Save and archive new files.** All new files created during this process are saved to specific locations and archived. Additionally, they're added to the DAM database with any additional keywords that may be necessary.

Where the production phase of the workflow is mostly concerned with speed and efficiency, the creative phase deals with high quality and creativity. Naturally, you want to have quality when working quickly in the production phase of the workflow, and you want to work as quickly as you can during the creative phase. But it helps to think about this division of the workflow so that you know when you should be moving quickly and when you should be spending extra time on an image. It also helps to know which tools and techniques you should be using at a particular time.

NOTE   If you think about this division of the workflow, you soon realize that each of these workflow phases is actually a workflow in and of itself. Think of them as sub-workflows. Because of that I'm going to refer to them from now on as the Production Workflow and the Creative Workflow.

Building a Nondestructive Workflow

Speed and efficiency are always important in a digital workflow, especially when dealing with large numbers of images. However, another workflow issue that is just as important is flexibility. A flexible workflow allows you to keep your options open as you edit important files so that you can undo any editing at any time. To accomplish this you have to work with your files in a way that's *nondestructive* to the pixels in the image. That means that any changes made during the editing process do not have permanent effects on the underlying pixels unless it's absolutely necessary.

When pixels are altered in a destructive workflow the quality of the file is affected. For example, when tonal and color adjustments are made to a digital file, information is lost. If repetitive tonal or color adjustments are carried out, the data loss is cumulative. That means that making four tonal adjustments causes data loss four times. This loss of information can be subtle or it can be extreme, but it can't be undone.

Nondestructive techniques are crucial if you're new to the digital editing process. That's because you'll be learning lots as you go through the learning curve over time. In six months you'll have new tricks that you might want to use on a special image. However, if the file has been edited destructively, you may not be able to use your new skills on it.

The workflow for the film photographer was mostly nondestructive. When she made prints from a negative, none of the qualities of the negative was altered. She could print a black-and-white 5 x 7 and a color 16 x 20, but the negative was still the same. The prints were merely derivative interpretations of the negative. There was nothing about the printing process that could alter the negative. Even if there had been, no one would have used it because the negative was considered the essence of the image and it was protected at all costs.

When many photographers first began to shoot digitally they didn't consider the destructive nature of digital editing. They even edited original files without considering the ramifications of making permanent changes to them. It wasn't until they went back to those images later on that they realized they had, in essence, destroyed important images.

This nondestructive editing philosophy is one of the most important aspects to consider when creating a digital workflow. Without it, you're like a trapeze artist who's working without a net. I stress the importance of a nondestructive workflow throughout this book — especially when you start working with Photoshop in Part III. That's because, as you'll see in the next chapter, by its very nature Photoshop is destructive to the pixels in an image file.

Summary

A workflow is a system that's used to codify each of the steps that are performed on digital image files. The main function of a digital workflow is to ensure that steps are being carried out in the correct order, in the most efficient way.

Digital photographers tend to work with a two-part workflow. The first part, the production phase, is focused on working with large groups of images. The idea is to use this production phase to identify important images so that they can be moved into the second part of the workflow, the creative phase. The creative phase of the workflow is where the magic happens. This is where speed and efficiency are not as important as quality and creativity. The creative phase is reserved for special images that are destined for uses that require the highest quality.

Because each of these two phases is a mini-workflow it's best to think of them as separate workflows. That's why I call them the Production Workflow and the Creative Workflow.

The most important thing about both these workflows, no matter what we call them, is that they must be designed to be nondestructive to the images. My goal throughout this book is to show you how to work nondestructively with your files throughout your total workflow so that you avoid any surprises when you revisit those images in the future.