

Adobe Lightroom: First Real Use

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It's official. I'm in love with Lightroom. On July 3rd, 2007, we began our family vacation to Rocky Mountain National Park with an evening flight to Denver, Colorado. Our first full day was July 4th, and we returned on July 8th. During that time I collected just over 4 gigabytes of RAW images, just under 400 pictures. I was not only able to sort through them but I built a slide show in record time, much faster than I'd ever done before, with color corrections and some dust spotting to boot.

The Objective

What I'm going to try to do here is to give you a step-by-step procedure. Hopefully this will be enough for you to follow and adapt to your own needs. Of course, everyone's workflow is going to be different, that's why applications like Lightroom and Aperture have risen and found a place in serious photographers' toolboxes. So don't take these steps as gospel. Try to see how I've used Lightroom and whether you can't benefit from my initial experiences. And remember, this is my first real use of the application, so what I've done this first time may be quite different when I learn more and use it the second, third, or tenth time. I can almost guarantee it.

Step 1: Transfer images from memory cards to your computer

As soon as I got home (okay, not really, the next day), I used my USB card reader to transfer my images from my CF cards to my computer hard drive. Right now, that's my MacBook Pro, but it could have been any computer. However, being that this is my laptop, the procedure could change (and I'm investigating this part still) when it comes to using a laptop in the field and a desktop at home, since I'd have to figure out how to deal with Lightroom in the field as well as copying the same files into the home database. In the future I'll have another article to explain the workflow for this situation of dual databases.

Regardless of whether there's a single or dual database situation, the step remains the same: get your images off your cards. I chose to take all the images and dump them into a new folder. Here you can opt to create subdirectories for each day of shooting, or otherwise subdivide the images. Alternatively, you may have a "dump" folder where you always download images to, and use Lightroom's "watch folder" feature. So far, I haven't used this feature, because I want to make sure all my other procedures are workable first.

You can also choose to rename the images at this stage. I opted to wait until the end to rename (see further below). You'll understand my reasoning if you read on.

The important thing to note here, is don't import from your CF cards. Copy from CF to the hard drive, and then import.

Also, during the import process is when I decided to make sure my IPTC data (like copyright year, my name) was correct, and to add some very general keywords to the all images. For instance, I added:

- family vacation
- Rocky Mountain National Park

- RMNP
- Colorado
- Estes Park

I know that each image, down the road will need other keywords which aren't here (like flower, or stream, or waterfall), but that is going to be later. Right now that purpose was that I wanted to process the images quickly, and create a slide show so I can show my friends and family a good set of images soon after we got back. Step 2: Import the images into the Lightroom database

The next step is quite simple. You tell LR where to find the images, and how to import them. While the procedure is simple enough, this may take a relatively long time depending on the number of images you have. If you have lots of images, I might counsel you to go back to Step 1 and redefine the directory and subdirectory structure so you don't have to import everything all at once.

Again, alternatively, Lightroom allows you to pick and choose the images you'd like to import from within a directory if you choose to view thumbnails at the import stage.

Once you begin the import process, move onto other chores, take a break, or do something to otherwise occupy yourself,

since it will take a significant amount of time. My 300+ images in RAW format (each anywhere from 6 to 9 megapixels) took roughly 7 or 8 minutes to import fully. You will see a progress bar at the top left of the LR workspace.

The great thing about importing the images is that you can choose to NOT have Lightroom create full resolution previews during the import process, and instead create working previews only. This allows you to import faster, and view thumbnails quickly and get to work almost immediately, while the import continues. The time you save here pays dividends for the next step, but in reality, your cumulative time does not shrink at all because each time you wish to see a detailed view of an image, a full resolution view is created on the fly and takes just as long as if you wanted full resolution preview for each image during import.

Step 3: Get rid of the absolute rejects

We've all been there. We just don't admit it to the public. We take some rotten shots along with the glorious ones. This is your chance to get rid of them all.

I'm not talking here about the "iffy" ones. It's not the questionable composition, or the choice of shot that you are concerned with at this stage.

You're looking for the images that are absolutely horrible, technically. The completely underexposed, overexposed, out of focus ones. Or those where the wind caught your lens shade like a sail and make the entire outfit vibrate like a tuning fork so that camera shake rendered the shot useless. Of course there are the times of happy accidents where the blurry shot looks very artistic and you want to keep them. Or the instances where you purposely over- or underexposed as a series of images destined for HDR (High Dynamic Range) processing. But I'm talking about the terrible ones that you know you don't want to keep. Get rid of them quick before someone sees them. Here's how:

Before we continue, let me digress a bit: the philosophy you follow may be the flip side, which is to try to keep the good ones. But in my mind, it is much easier to know which are the bad ones, than to determine right away which are the good ones. In other words, I know where the cutoff for "bad" begins; it's harder for me to determine the lower end of "good."

In Library mode, make sure you are in the Grid view, where all the images are lined up like slides on a light table.

Make a few passes. Poor Exposure

First, the very easy pass, is to get rid of the ones that are over- or underexposed. You can determine this easily by viewing the images in the Grid view. You can't determine the out of focus shots as well, so we'll do that in the second round.

Why Grid view? Because Lightroom is probably still importing your images, and if you go into the enlarged, detail view to do the weeding, you will slow down the import process.

I found that after a few, I was in a rhythm: using the right arrow, and the "x" key, I quickly marked each poor image with an "x" (the shortcut for "reject," or the icon of the flag with the "x" in it), and kept hitting the right arrow to get to the next image. Next, x, Next, Next, Next, x, Next x, etc.

In the event you make a mistake, or are too quick on the trigger, use "o" to unset the flag of an image you made a mistake on (which chooses "not picked" or "original"). I did this a number of times. In any case I wouldn't hit "p" to reverse your judgment, which denotes "pick" or the icon of the solid-filled flag. However, if you were doing the opposite, picking your good images rather than determining your bad ones, you would reverse this process and instead be hitting the right arrow, in combination with "p."

Pick, Delete, and unflag are vastly different. You need to make sure you use the right ones at the right time. These are meant to help you with your surgery, so get into a groove with using these.

After you've gone through the entire pile, and are sure you haven't marked any good ones by mistake, delete the first round of awful pictures. Go to the Photo menu, and hit "Delete Rejected Photos." LR will ask you whether you want to delete them from the hard drive or just remove them from the database. The way it asks you is rather unclear, but just know that if you hit "Delete" as the answer, you will delete them forever. If you hit "Remove" you will only remove them from the database in Lightroom, but the actual files will remain intact on the hard drive and you must manually delete them through the file system if you wish to get rid of them after that.

So go ahead. Hit Delete. Out of focus

Then go to the second cleaning phase. Now we're going to delete all the out of focus ones. For this part you'll need to see the images big. I like to sometimes hide the panels around the pictures to get the most real estate, but you don't have to.

Double click the first picture in the Grid view, and you will see the others disappear while the one you double clicked becomes enlarged on the screen. Follow the same procedure as before: right arrow, x, right arrow, x. As you get through most of them, you might experience a bit of slow down if LR still isn't finished importing. In either case, you will experience some slowness no matter what, as LR builds a full res preview for each one. Once the full res previews are built the first time, they won't have to be built again so going backwards at some point (left arrow) won't be painful.

Once all the out of focus images are "x" marked, delete those (Photo menu >> Delete Rejected Photos). Step 4: Color correction

Now that we've deleted the rejects, we have a cleaner plate and can do some real work. For this set of steps we need to go to the Develop stage (select Develop from the top right menu pane).

If you've been in digital imaging even a little while, you know that what you see when you shot the image isn't necessarily what the camera records. You may have checked your histogram, and you may have gotten the exposure spot on, but if you're shooting RAW, most of the images that you view after you get home look ... well, not so great.

That's because if you've been used to having the camera create JPG files for you, you're being misled. Well, sort of. Of course, most cameras these days turn out great JPGs, but as serious photographers know, the best images are created by starting with RAW. The camera takes the RAW images and makes average, and best-guess processing decisions to create its JPG files. You need to elicit the best processing out of the RAW file yourself if you want the best image possible.

The first thing that most people do is color correction. While, technically, it's not color correction, I include highlight and shadow placement as part of my color correction procedure, because frankly it's very easy to do (especially in Lightroom) and it's a necessary first step to make sure your colors are what you want them to be. If you don't place your tone curve optimally (again, this is largely subjective based on each person's preferences), then your color correction will take much longer.

You should be looking at the enlarged view of the first image in your image set. Adjust the tone curve

Go to the right panel, and find "Tone Curve." It's rather easy to find because there's a nice X-Y graph right under it. If you don't see a graph, then you need to expand that panel by clicking the triangle next to "Tone Curve." If you've ever played in Photoshop and used the Curves menu or Curves adjustment layer, you'll be familiar with this. However, in Lightroom, the operation of the Curve has changed slightly. In Photoshop you put points on the curve itself and manipulate those points to fine tune the tone curve. In Lightroom, you use the four sliders (Highlights, Lights, Darks, Shadows) to optimize your image. Each of these four can be adjusted separately, but are interconnected.

You are going for, on average, a nice, smooth S-curve. That is, the shape of a well adjusted tone should end up looking like a nicely angled "S." What that usually results in is a higher contrast image. However, this is not a hard and fast rule. Depending on the image, creating the S-curve may throw some highlights out of whack, or plunge otherwise gray areas into deep shadow. Use your judgment. You may find that a nice foggy scene loses all sense of place and mood when you fit it with an S-curve and give the scene contrast that was never meant to be in the image.

You can alter the definition of what constitutes Highlights, Lights, Darks and Shadows by moving the vertical grid lines in the Curves graph. Each quad represents one of the four areas that the sliders will affect, with Highlights being on the far right, and Shadows on the far left, just as in Photoshop.

For some images, I find that even after the tone curve is adjusted, I need a little more "oomph" in the contrast. For that I look below the tone curve, and the four sliders: the Point Curve options can be changed from "Medium Contrast" to "High Contrast" if you wish for some images.

Once the contrast within the scene has been optimized (you can always readjust later), move on to Saturation and Luminosity.

TO BE CONTINUED ... For now, I'll stop here. Please come back soon to read the next part of this article, complete with screenshots.