

Adopting a Photoshop Lightroom workflow

If you are a photographer who wants to take a laptop on location to review your work-in-progress, here are the four essential steps that you need to take to ensure you stay organized when using Adobe Photoshop Lightroom.



This workflow is optimized for a photographer who owns:

- A laptop computer.
- An external large-capacity hard drive or studio/home-office desktop computer with a large hard-drive capacity.
- A smaller pocket drive that can be powered via the USB or Firewire port off the laptop computer. Some photographers may prefer to burn DVDs using their laptop instead of using a USB/Firewire pocket drive.

The four steps

The four steps in the workflow are as follows:

1. Create a master Lightroom catalog.
2. Import images on location into a working catalog using a laptop computer.
3. Export the working catalog to your USB/Firewire pocket drive or burn the catalog to a DVD.
4. Import the catalog from the location shoot into the master catalog and transfer the images to the main hard drive.

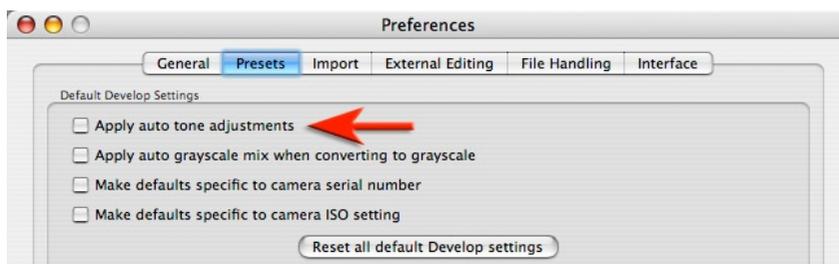
Step 1 - Master catalog (at home)

Set up a master Lightroom 'catalog' on your desktop computer in your studio or home office (the image files can be stored on this computer or an external drive).

Note > Prior to creating a Lightroom catalog for the first time it is recommended, but not essential, that you place all your existing folders of images into one master folder on your hard drive (the 'Pictures' or 'My Pictures' folder is the logical choice on your main hard drive. Alternatively, create a master folder on your external hard drive). Consider creating subfolders in this master folder to further organize your images, e.g. Portraits, Landscapes, Wildlife, etc. or Commercial, Non-commercial, etc. You can continue to make subfolders and move shoots to different folders in Lightroom after you have created the initial catalog, but some thought about how you will organize your images prior to creating the initial catalog is recommended.

Preferences

Before importing all of the images in this master pictures folder into your Lightroom catalog, go to the Lightroom Preferences and optimize the way you want Lightroom to handle your images.



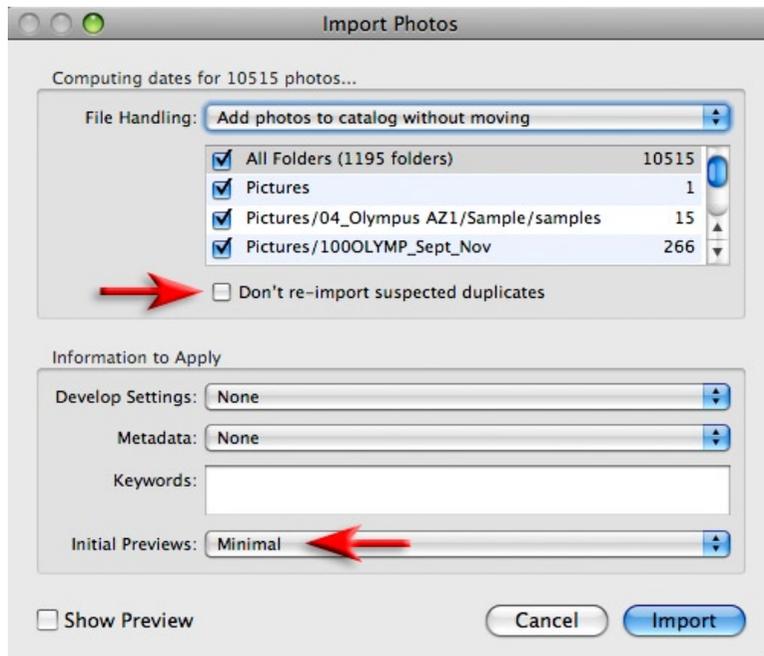
a) Uncheck the 'Apply auto tone adjustments' option in the 'Presets' panel of the Preferences dialog box so that all of the imported images are imported in their original state, i.e. not subjected to any auto adjustments.



b) Select 'Replace illegal file name characters with: Dashes (-)' from the File Handling panel of the Preferences dialog box. This will ensure that any files that you try to upload to an online server (such as a web gallery) will not be blocked due to the file names having spaces or unsupported characters in their file name.

Import Options

Go to 'File > Import Photos from Disk'. When the Import dialog box opens select the 'Add photos to catalog without moving' in the 'File Handling' options. This will build a catalog but leave the photos where they are, i.e. Lightroom does not need to duplicate or move files in order to make a catalog. Before you click on the Import button inside the Import Photos dialog box you will need to consider the following options:



a) Don't re-import suspected duplicates - If the folders of images you are importing for the first time contain the same image, but in different folders, you may want to consider carefully whether to check the 'Don't re-import suspected duplicates' option. Many hard drives owned by photographers, prior to installing a database, are littered with duplicate files. If you select the 'Don't re-import suspected duplicates' option you will only import one of these files - the problem is that it may not be in the folder you expect it to be found when you next go looking for it in Lightroom. My recommendation is to import all of the duplicates at this stage and reduce the duplicates over a period of time, rather than face a huge headache now by importing folders that are not complete. As your catalog builds over time and you start managing all of your images via Lightroom this problem of duplicate files will eventually cease to be a problem.

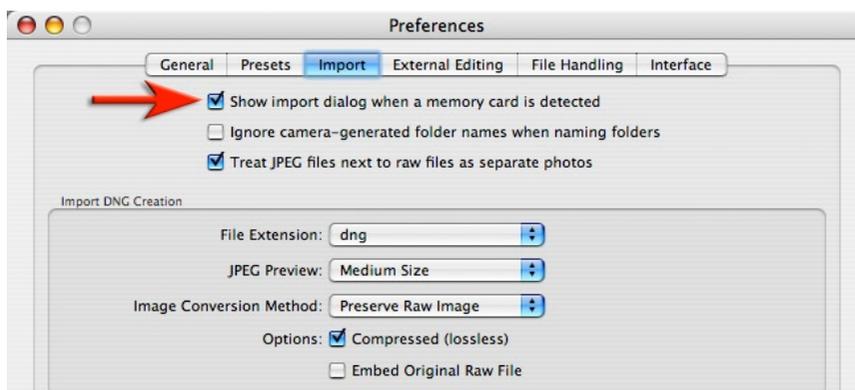
b) Initial Previews - I also recommend that you select 'Minimal' from the 'Initial Previews' menu if you are about to import thousands of photos. Selecting this option will decrease the time it takes for Lightroom to create the catalog. If you were to select 'Standard' you will be creating full-screen previews for old photos that may be viewed very rarely. It is better that Lightroom builds the previews for your archived work as and when you need them (it takes just a second or two when you click on an image for Lightroom to build a full-screen preview after you have already imported the images into the catalog).

Step 2 - Creating a working catalog (on location)

After a shoot you should create a new Lightroom catalog (File > New Catalog) on your laptop computer so that you can review your images while you are still on location.

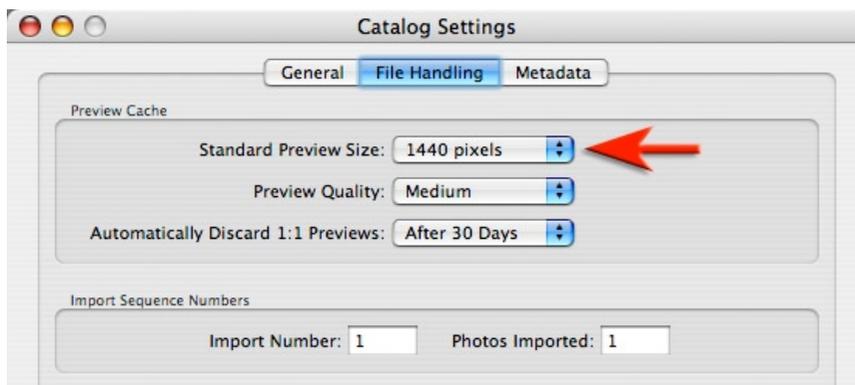
Preferences and Catalog Settings

Prior to creating a new Lightroom catalog that is optimized for importing images from a camera memory card, go to the Lightroom 'Preferences' and 'Catalog Settings' (File > Catalog Settings) and optimize the way you want Lightroom to handle your photos. In addition to my recommendations for setting up your main catalog on your home computer, as outlined in the first step, I would recommend that you:

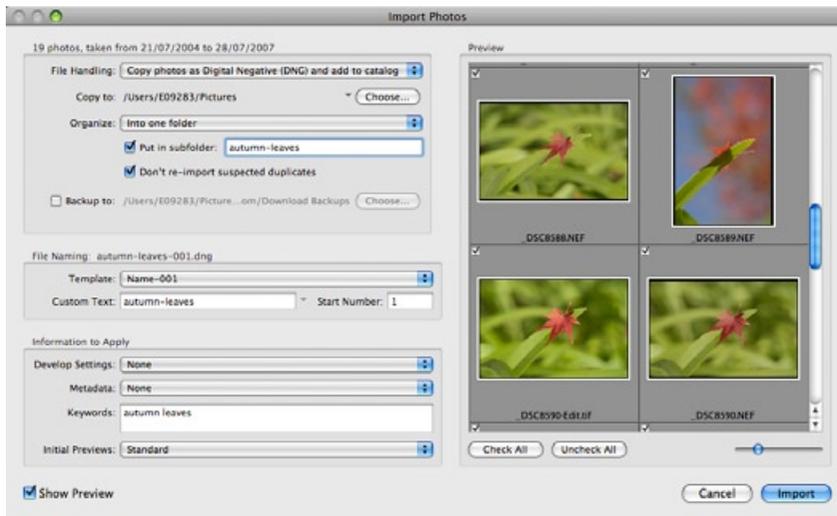


a) Select the 'Show Import dialog when a memory card is detected' option from the 'Import' panel of the Preferences dialog box.

Note > I would also recommend selecting the 'Treat JPEG files next to raw files as separate photos'. I find it too confusing to work with one preview for two image files (even if they are the same image).



b) Set the 'Standard Preview Size' so that it is optimized for the resolution of your laptop monitor.



Import Photos

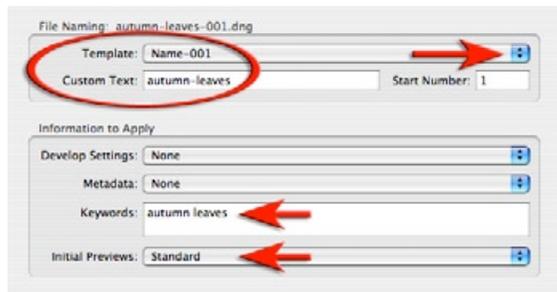
When you connect the camera memory card to your laptop computer and the 'Import Photos' dialog box opens I recommend the following import settings:



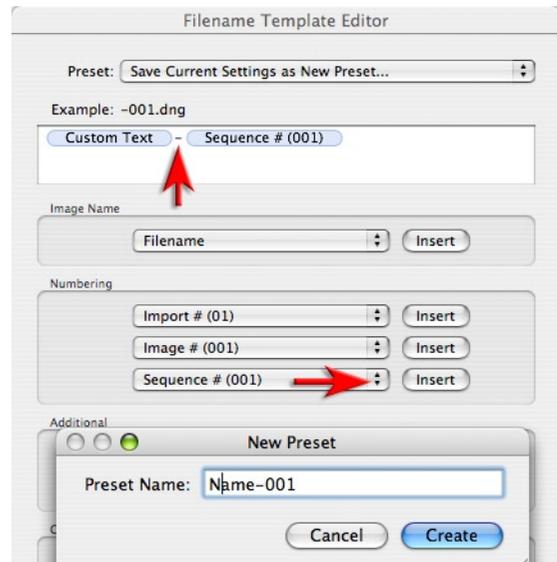
Detailed view taken from the top left-hand corner of the Import Photos dialog box

- From the 'File Handling' menu choose the 'Copy photos as Digital Negative (DNG) and add to catalog' option (the DNG file format is a safe archival format for Raw files and is a more convenient vehicle for carrying XMP metadata as it can be saved to the file itself rather than a sidecar file).
- In the 'Copy to' section click on the 'Choose' button and browse to the 'Pictures' or 'My Pictures' folder on your laptop.
- From the Organize menu choose the 'Into one folder' option if all of the images on the camera card are captured at the same location (or of the same subject matter) or by date if the images were captured over more than one day and the subject matter is different (this will organize your images on the card into different folders in Lightroom).
- Select the 'Don't re-import suspected duplicates' option (if you forget to re-format the memory card and take more photos this option will ensure the photos that were imported last time will not be re-imported a second time).

e) Choose the 'Custom Name - Sequence' option from the 'Template' menu of the dialog box (alternatively click on 'Edit' in the 'Templates' menu and create a custom template that includes the custom name followed by a dash and then a numbering option that has a couple of zeros in front of the start number, e.g. 001). In the 'Custom Text' box enter a short name that describes the subject matter, e.g. location, client or model name, etc.



f) In the 'Keywords' text field write two or three words that describe all of the images on the card. Keywords that describe a unique image from the shoot can be entered later after the images have been imported into the catalog. The Keywords will ensure that you can search for your own images by typing in descriptive words of the files you are looking for - even if the images are on a hard drive that isn't connected to your computer (this is the beauty of running a database instead of a super-browser such as Adobe Bridge).



g) From the 'Initial Previews' menu choose 'Standard'. This will create full-screen previews of every image that is imported so that you can quickly cycle through all the images in your shoot. I recommended that you use the 'Minimal' option when you created your first catalog (back in step 1), as I thought that it would be unlikely that you would want to preview every old image in your archives. When 'Standard' is selected the import will take slightly longer but cycling through images after the import has finished will be very fast, especially if your computer is equipped with a modern processor and plenty of RAM (2 gigabytes or more). Selecting '1:1' in the 'Initial Preview' menu will slow the import down considerably and will create a very memory-intensive catalog. The 1:1 view is only of value if you need to check sharpness and levels of noise of every image in the shoot.

Note > If your laptop computer is also your home computer, i.e. you are using the same computer at home and on location, import the images from your shoot directly into your main Lightroom Catalog. It is also recommended, for safety reasons, that the image files for your master catalog are stored on a hard drive that is not taken on location (a hard drive on a typical laptop computer does not have a generous capacity for storing large amounts of image files and you need to avoid keeping your entire image library on a device that is easily stolen, lost or dropped). The images that are imported and stored on your laptop's hard drive on location will be deleted after transferring the images to your secure hard drive back home.

Metadata templates

Metadata starts with the information that was recorded by your camera into the image file, such as aperture, shutter speed and ISO settings. You can add to this metadata to help protect your copyright, provide a client with additional information about the image and to help you keep track of your images when you either forget where you stored your images or (worse still) forget when and where the images were taken. Adobe allows us to add captions, user-friendly titles and information about us - the photographer. A certain portion of this added information is likely to be the same for each and every image we produce. This information can be quickly stamped into the files by appending the metadata using a pre-prepared 'Metadata Template'. Adobe allows you to create multiple templates so it is possible to record more than one photographer's details or to create different versions for different clients.



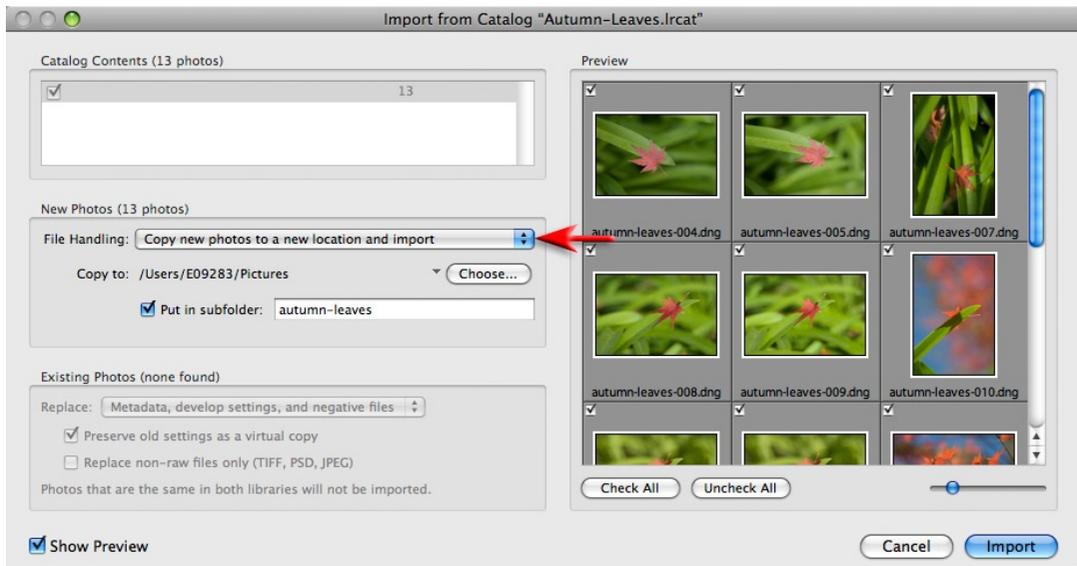
Step 3 - Exporting the working catalog (on location)

Export the catalog you created on your laptop to a pocket drive or export the catalog to the desktop and then burn a DVD* as a backup of your files prior to re-formatting the camera memory cards (File > Export as Catalog). You will now have two copies of your images - one set of images on your computer and another on your pocket drive or DVD.

Note > In the 'Export as Catalog' dialog box make sure the 'Export negative files' option is selected. This Lightroom catalog that you export will now contain the image files from your shoot and also the work that you have carried out on the files in Lightroom while you were on location. The term 'negative' is used by Adobe because although we process different images from the master files we never actually change the file itself. This is similar to the traditional analog workflow of taking multiple prints from a master film negative

If the laptop you are using on location is also your main home computer you can back the images up from Lightroom without exporting the entire catalog. Click on the main 'Export' button (rather than the 'Export as Catalog' command) and then create a preset that exports the original files to your pocket drive. Alternatively right-click on the folder in the Library module and select 'Show in Finder/Explorer' and drag this folder of images to a location on your pocket drive.

***Important: A catalog can be imported from a DVD but not opened directly from the DVD itself. Lightroom cannot write changes made to images if the catalog resides on a read-only disk.**



Step 4 - Combining catalogs and archiving images (at home)

On your return to the studio, import the Lightroom catalog you saved to your pocket drive to the main Lightroom catalog on your desktop computer (File > Import from Catalog). From the File Handling menu choose the 'Copy new photos to a new location and import' option. The images can be copied to the computer's hard drive or redirected to the main external drive where you keep your master library of images as the photos are being imported. You will now have three copies of your photos (laptop, pocket drive or DVD and hard drive or external drive connected to your computer). It is important to remember that the catalog is just the database (the metadata, thumbnails and previews). The actual images are copied to a new location of your choosing that Lightroom will refer to when necessary - they are not embedded in the catalog itself.

Note > To free up the smaller hard-drive capacity of your laptop and pocket drive you will need to delete the images and catalogs from both of these devices. This, however, will leave you with only a single copy of your master images. I recommend that you back up to a second external drive or create a library of DVDs of each location shoot prior to deleting the catalogs from the laptop and pocket drive.

Sharing your work using a Lightroom catalog > A Lightroom catalog does not have to be imported before you can view the images. You can just open this catalog directly from an external drive and have immediate access to full-screen previews and the before and after versions of any develop settings used by the photographer.

Conclusion

This workflow offers a practical workflow for location photographers and can be modified to meet your own needs if required. The important thing is that Adobe has now extended its focus beyond the post-production editing tools to embrace the complete workflow of a photographer. The digital workflow has now been embraced and our digital assets well and truly managed - a DAM good idea.