Digital Photography Workflow

From Capture to Archive

Corbell
Photographic Workshops

Presented by: Rob Hull, M.Photog.Cr, CPP
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What is Digital Photography Workflow

Any digital image has a lifespan that begins the moment the shutter is pressed and the camera begins to capture the image. From that moment, the image begins a life that may have it passed around to different computers, manipulated and copied. If it is of sufficient quality, it may be used in some output device or printed and then saved in some archive.

Throughout this process, the image is subject to actions that can either enhance or degrade the original image. Good photographers will follow a pattern of steps in this process that are designed to maximize the quality of the image. So let's look at this lifecycle and see what steps you may want to include.

Definition

In simple terms, digital photography workflow can be defined as follows;

> ***Orchestrated*** *and repeatable pattern of activities and processes to capture and maintain a digital photographic image.*

The definition does not define any quality standard. Quality is a subjective element that is defined by each individual user.

The first, and one of the most important, word in our definition is "orchestrated". The reason is that there is NO single correct workflow for photography. Different workflows may share many of the same elements, but when defining a workflow, it must fit the needs of the individual photographer. Like a score of music, each photographer arranges and includes the necessary elements to produce a desired outcome.

Objective

The objective of the digital workflow varies depending upon the needs of the individual photographer. Again, in simple terms, the objective of the digital photography workflow is as follows;

> *To maintain maximum potential image quality, to meet the output standards, throughout the lifecycle of a digital image.*

Building Blocks in The Digital Workflow

When designing a digital workflow there are certain elements that should be considered for inclusion. Some of the key elements include;

Security	Security really covers all aspects of the life of your digital image. More important, it also covers a wide variety of treats. Security elements need to address personal error – mistakes made by the photographer, physical equipment failure, viruses, fire, and theft.
Organization	Many photographers capture thousands of images every year – some capture thousands in just a single day. Keeping these images organized is important. You need to be able to find specific images whenever the need arises.
Image Quality	There are a lot of elements that are included when you talk about image quality. But it's important to understand that you need to have a standard for image quality that is commensurate with the intended use of the images.
Resolution	A variable in defining image quality, resolution is an important factor in digital workflow. But don't get too hung up on comparing megapixels in cameras. It's only one element in a complex puzzle.
Color	Capturing and maintaining good color is critical for many types of photography. Even if you plan on converting to black and white, good color information can be very helpful.
Data Structure	Data Structure is a fancy way to talk about the file type. But, it includes a little more than just File Type. Data Structure also includes metadata, compression variables, file naming and more.
Post Processing	This is a huge bucket that includes any software that may be used to manage or edit the image.

Workflow Segments

The digital photography workflow can be divided into specific segments. They include;

- ❖ Planning
- ❖ Capture
- ❖ Import
- ❖ Processing
- ❖ Output

The activities and processes that are included in each of these segments vary based each photographer's unique needs. Overall, they are based on the balance between Quality requirements and the Quantity of images captured. Like many aspects of photography, you need to decide how much time and effort can be invested in each image created.

Workflow Suggestions

The following suggestions are for the average photographer, assuming that you want the maximum image quality available with your camera and shooting a moderate number of images.

PLANNING

- ❖ Plan for an appropriate level of security. Security planning includes contingencies for personal error or omission, physical equipment failure, viruses, fire, and theft.
    - o For important assignments, this may include planning on having a second shooter.
    - o Plan and test all equipment you will be using
    - o Make a checklist of things you must do.
    - o Have and implement a backup plan.
    - o Shoot to two storage cards for important work
- ❖ Format storage cards in your camera.
- ❖ Setup your camera to NOT shoot if no card is in the camera

CAPTURE

- ❖ Capture the best quality you can.
  - o Shoot the highest resolution RAW file
  - o If available, set color to Adobe RGB
- ❖ Create a custom White Balance if appropriate

IMPORT

- ❖ Use a product like Adobe Lightroom to help you manage your image library.
- ❖ Rename files to something meaningful
  - o Consider using Custom Text with original File Number
- ❖ Keep your original file type
- ❖ Backup your images when you import them
- ❖ Don't let your computer erase the storage card.
- ❖ Add global metadata such as keywords and descriptions. Add GPS info if available.

PROCESSING

- ❖ Use non-destructive processing as much as possible
- ❖ Organize your images
  - o Add specific metadata
  - o Tag the heroes, delete the trash.
- ❖ Use TIFF or PSD files as your work files
- ❖ Don't do any compositional crops to your image. If you crop at all, only remove items that should not be in the image
- ❖ Don't sharpen your image
- ❖ Don't convert color space
- ❖ Don't write over your original image

OUTPUT

- ❖ If needed, create a file suitable for output.
  - o For example, most labs want JPG files – ask your lab what they want
- ❖ If needed, sharpen for the output media
- ❖ If needed, crop for output
  - o Most labs let you upload the full image and then you crop when you order different size images.
- ❖ If creating an output file, use an appropriate resolution