

TAMING
your
**PHOTO
LIBRARY**
with Adobe Lightroom

ROB SYLVAN



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Rob Sylvan

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Introduction

Thanks for your interest in this book. You should know right away that this is not a book about how to use the Develop module to make your photos look better, as there are many good books and videos that do that already. You might even want to check out my video *Adobe Photoshop Lightroom CC (2015 release)/Lightroom 6 Learn by Video*, which is 10 hours of content about all aspects of Lightroom.

So, what is this book? In a sense, it's an answer to the many, many questions I've been asked since I started helping people learn about Lightroom and solve Lightroom-related problems, back in 2007, when Lightroom 1.0 came out. I've learned a lot from that experience, and my goal for this book is to pass along some of the key knowledge I've acquired to you, the reader, so that you may benefit from the collective experience of us all.

In that time, I've seen the same questions asked, the same problems encountered, and the same misunderstandings slow people down over and over again. I've designed this book to help you build a solid foundation for understanding the way Lightroom works, which I believe is the key to working smarter and faster and avoiding the pitfalls that so many encounter. I've also focused on teaching you about the most important (and often least intuitive) tools, techniques, functions, and tips you need to know to stay in control of your Lightroom library over time.

You don't need to read this book in its entirety or in any particular order, but I do recommend starting with Chapter 1 to get off on the right foot. From there, use the book as a reference and resource to help you with the areas that are most concerning to you.

On a final note, I wrote Chapter 8, on common workflows, as a way for you to see how many of the aspects of the other chapters work in a real-world context. The workflow steps I describe are not the only way to perform a given task (as there are usually many roads to the same destination) but rather the steps that I felt would best help you understand how something can be done and from there, as you gain experience, you can customize to best fit your needs and style. I wish you all the best as you learn how to get the most out of Lightroom and stay in the driver's seat throughout your journey.





1

GETTING IN A LIGHTROOM FRAME OF MIND

Lightroom is built upon a database. Inside this database, most commonly referred to as the *catalog*, is all the data about your photos. This includes all the metadata created by the camera at the time the photo is taken (shutter speed, f-stop, ISO, and more), as well as all the data you add in Lightroom (such as keywords, IPTC data, and ratings) and all the adjustments you make in the Develop module. Understanding the relationship between this catalog of data and your photos is the key to unlocking and mastering the power of Lightroom to manage and organize your photos.

Wrapping Your Head Around Lightroom

One of Lightroom's greatest strengths is that it is actually very easy to start using. The flipside of this strength is Lightroom's greatest weakness: Lightroom is very easy to start using before you understand how it works, before you understand the relationship between the Lightroom catalog and your photos. I say this because I've seen it happen all too often. Week after week, I teach people about the Lightroom fundamentals while at the same time helping them unravel the file management mess that has resulted from that lack of understanding. This mess most commonly grows from people not knowing where all of their photos are located, not knowing where the Lightroom catalog is located, finding question marks on folders in Lightroom's Folders panel, and knowing that photos are still on their hard drives despite Lightroom insisting that those same photos are missing or offline. If you're reading this book, either you've been there or you really want to avoid ending up there.

Let's take a step back and gain a big-picture view of the Lightroom model to give you a firmer foundation for moving forward with less frustration and much more confidence.

The Catalog

In fact, let's take a step even farther back to the days of library card catalogs, those hulking masses of wooden drawers and cards that were once the height of information storage and organization (**Figure 1.1**). Although most libraries have replaced them with databases housed in sleek banks of computers, card catalogs still have a lot to offer when it comes to understanding Lightroom's catalog.

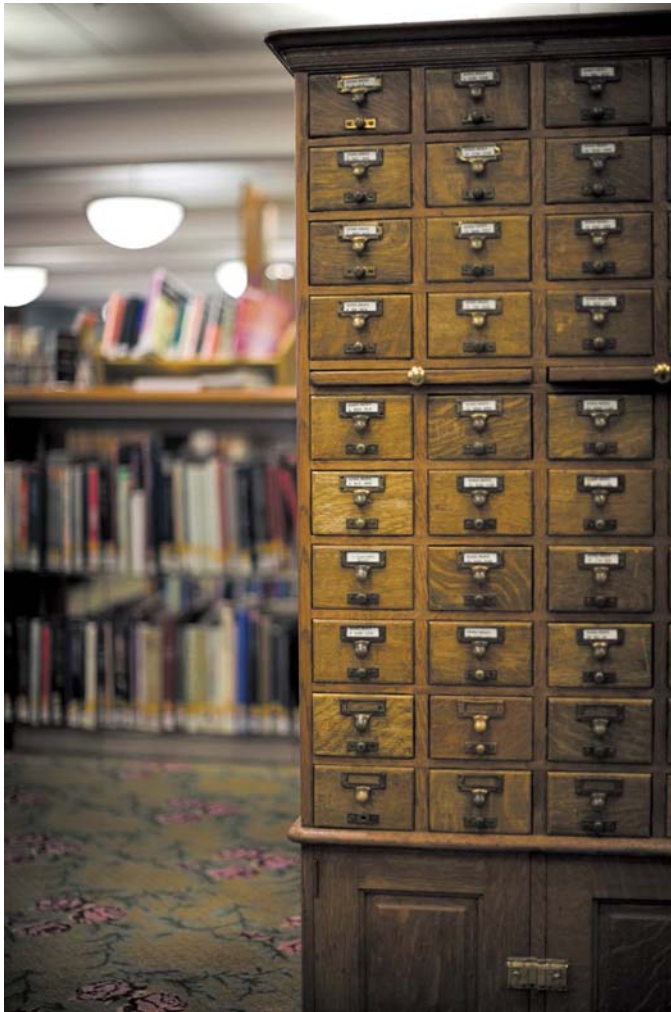


Figure 1.1 A good old-fashioned library card catalog can teach you a lot about Lightroom.

Traditional card catalogs contained rows of wooden drawers arranged in alphabetical order by author, and each drawer was filled with paper cards (also in alphabetical order) that contained an author's name, names of the books he or she had written, the dates of their publication, page counts, and so on, as well as where in the library you needed to go to actually get your hands on the book. You can think of the information each card held as the *metadata* for each book. Even small children understood that the real things—the actual books—were stored on shelves all around the library. Lightroom uses a very similar model, although it is not as easy to see and consumes a lot less space.

When you hear someone refer to your Lightroom catalog, conjure up an image of that library card catalog full of drawers and cards. Stored within the Lightroom catalog is a database record for every individual photo you have chosen to include in, or *imported* into, your Lightroom catalog. These records are like those paper cards for each book in the library; each contains all the available information about each photo taken from the photo's own metadata, plus anything you may have added via Lightroom's Import window (such as keywords or your copyright info). As you work with your photos, Lightroom continually writes to that catalog record all the new metadata you add, Develop settings you adjust, virtual copies you create, and so on. There is no Save menu inside Lightroom, because everything you do is saved automatically in the catalog as you make the changes. The record also contains the exact location of where that photo is stored on your hard drive, just as the card tells you where to find the actual book on the library shelves.

The Lightroom catalog, like its library ancestor, is just a container of records about all the photos you have imported. All your actual photos are stored in the various folders you create on your hard drive; think of your folders as the bookshelves in the library. When you want to do something with a photo—such as work with it in the Develop module, print it on your desktop printer, or save a copy to deliver to someone (in Lightroom lingo, that would be *exporting* it)—Lightroom pulls up the record for that photo, gives you access to all the information contained in the record, reaches across the virtual library to grab the image data off the virtual shelf, and processes it based on the instructions you provide in whatever module you are working.

Now, a big difference between Lightroom and a library card catalog is that you can't read a book by looking inside the card catalog, but you can see all your photos when you open a Lightroom catalog. This is where I think most of the confusion about Lightroom stems from. When you see thumbnails of your photos in the Library module, you are seeing *previews* that Lightroom has created and stored in a special cache file alongside the catalog file. This can give the impression that your photos are somehow

stored inside the catalog, but it is critical that you understand that your actual photos still reside only in the folders you create and designate on your computer's hard drives. For now, imagine that someone taped a tiny picture of a book's cover to its paper card; the book is still on the shelf, but now a thumbnail preview is attached to its record. Later in this chapter, we'll take a much closer look at all the files Lightroom uses to display what you are seeing.

Your Photos

So if photos are stored in folders on your hard drive and Lightroom only keeps track of those locations in the catalog, how did the photos get to those folders originally? The answer is simple: You saved your photos into those folders before you started using Lightroom, or they were directed to those folders by you after you started using Lightroom. The key point is that you were in the driver's seat (whether you were fully aware of it or not) when the photos were placed in those folders.

Earlier I said that Lightroom is easy to start using and that this is where some people get off on the wrong foot. In their excitement to get started, people frequently install Lightroom, launch the program, and pop a memory card in the card reader. When they immediately encounter the Lightroom Import screen (**Figure 1.2**), they simply click the Import button at the bottom without looking too closely at what they are telling Lightroom to do.

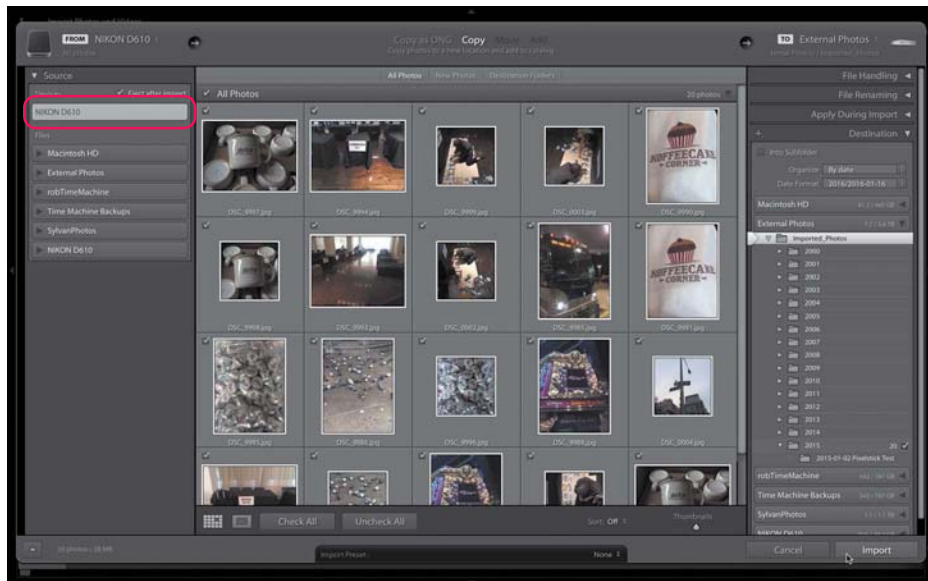


Figure 1.2 The Import screen settings control where your photos are stored.

Eager to get to the sexy processing part of the program, people often glaze over the mundane housekeeping chores at the start. Unfortunately, the mundane housekeeping is critical to your long-term success as a Lightroom user. When importing photos and instructing Lightroom to copy or move them to a new location, pay close attention to the settings in the Import screen's Destination panel. The settings you choose here determine where your photos go. Lightroom only does what it is told to do, so make sure you know what you are telling it each time.

The rest of this chapter is devoted to diving deeper into what makes Lightroom tick and into those housekeeping chores. I know I said they were mundane, and, yes, the discussion can get technical and even boring. Resist the urge to skip ahead; that's what gets people into trouble. Sticking with it to really understand how these pieces work together will save you hours of wasted time and frustration down the road. Once you come to terms with where these important files are stored, how they work together when you launch Lightroom, and your own very important role in making the important decisions that affect everything, you will be a much happier Lightroom user.

What to Do Before You Start Using Lightroom

Lightroom is not a magic wand that you can wave to solve all your organizational problems. It is just a tool that, when used the right way, can make those critical organizational and maintenance tasks more efficient over time. Lightroom doesn't work in a vacuum, though, and there are things you can do outside Lightroom to get started off right and keep things running smoothly.

Get Your System Ready

Nothing has a bigger impact on Lightroom performance than your own system. Here are two things you can do for free.

Free Up Space on Your Startup Drive

Your computer needs a certain amount of free space to run smoothly. A good guideline is to keep at least 20 percent of your startup drive free and clear of data at all times (granted, the larger your startup drive the more flexibility you have). Your operating system and applications need the elbowroom to operate. Running out of space can

NOTE When moving photos to another drive, do so from inside Lightroom to maintain the connection between the catalog and your photos. We'll cover how to do this in Chapter 3, so hold off on that for now.

seriously affect performance. Set aside some time to uninstall unused applications, delete unused files, empty your Recycle Bin or Trash, and move data to another internal drive or to an external drive. It's no more fun than emptying your real trash can, but it's just as worthwhile and necessary.

Run Your System's Disk Maintenance Functions

TIP Adobe offers an excellent resource for learning about hardware choices that will help Lightroom run optimally. For more information, see optimizelr.robsylvan.com.

Which disk maintenance functions you need to run depends on your operating system. Windows offers two utilities that can help keep your system running in optimal condition: Error-Checking and Disk Defragmentation. To find these, double-click My Computer, right-click the C drive, choose Properties, and go to the Tools tab. Run the Error-Checking utility first, reboot, and then come back and defragment your disk, if necessary. (If the utility shows that your drive is not fragmented, you can skip this step.) These operations can take some time to complete, so you might consider running them overnight.

On a Mac, you have Disk Utility, which resides in the Utilities subfolder of the Applications folder. After you launch Disk Utility, select your disk, click the First Aid tab, and then click the Repair Disk Permissions button. It's a good idea to run Disk Utility before and after you install any application, as a regular part of your workflow.

Get Your Photos Ready

WARNING Don't move your photos outside Lightroom if you have already imported them into the program. If you move imported photos outside Lightroom, you break the connection between the photos and the catalog and create a new problem for yourself. Don't do that.

If you have not yet imported a single photo into Lightroom, this section is for you. Even before you launch the program, you can do a few things with your photos that will help you (and Lightroom) later.

Pre-Lightroom

If you're brand new to Lightroom, you may find it more efficient to organize your photos into a logical folder structure *before* you run those photos through the import process. It is not that you can't create and organize folders in Lightroom later—you sure can (and you will). But your system browser is probably more comfortable and faster for you to use. Instead of trying to learn Lightroom's controls at the same time, you can focus solely on consolidating all photo folders into one location, renaming folders in ways that make more sense, deleting all the duplicate images, and really wrapping your arms around your existing photo collection.

Consider the Future

I do not believe that there is one right way to organize your photos. There are as many different ways to approach photo organization as there are different ways to approach photography. Just as with photography, however, sticking to a couple of core concepts will help you. Specifically, the organizational scheme you choose must:

- ▶ Make sense to your brain
- ▶ Be able to scale into the future

For my brain, keeping the folder structure based on a combination of dates and descriptive words keeps things simple—plus, this approach scales nicely into the future. For example, on each hard drive I use to store photos, I create a parent folder at the top level and name it Imported Photos. Within that folder is a date-based folder structure organized by year. Within each year folder are subfolders named with the date of, and a descriptive phrase for, each shoot. The descriptions give me a clue about the shoot's subject or location (**Figure 1.3**).

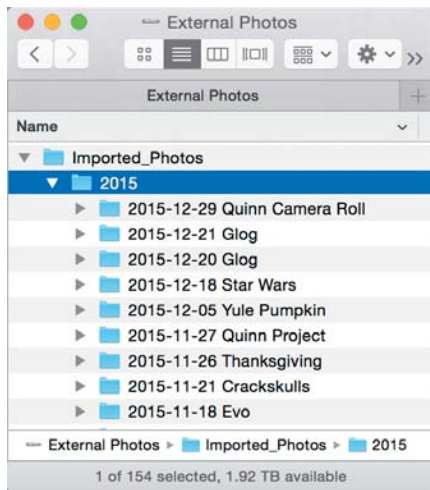


Figure 1.3 A date-based folder structure like this one scales easily into the future.

Keeping all photo folders in a single top-level parent folder makes it much easier to move them to a new drive, in the not-too-distant future, when you start to fill up your current drive—or if you have to restore from a backup after a disaster. This is not to say that you have to keep them all in a single folder, but just trust me that you will thank me for this later.

In my years of using Lightroom, there have been times when my photos were stored across multiple drives (internal and external) and other times when I needed only one. As I write, I have my entire photo library stored on a single 4 TB external drive. Lightroom doesn't care how many drives you use. It just has to make sense to you and fit your needs.

Lightroom itself defaults to a date-based folder structure that uses the capture time embedded in each photo, so it is easy to automate the creation of that folder structure into the future as part of the Import process. If you prefer, however, you can disable that date-based option and manually create folders based on event, location, subject, or whatever makes sense to your shooting style. (We'll cover all the Import options later on.)

Whatever organizational approach you choose (try the single parent folder; you'll thank me later), take time now to think it through and formulate a plan. When it comes time to meet the Import dialog box, you'll know what you want to do, and your existing photo library will be ready to be imported.

Key Lightroom Files

The catalog is where all the information about your photos is stored, but there are other files that Lightroom uses to display what you see when you launch the program. In addition to the catalog, these files include the following:

- ▶ Application (Lightroom itself)
- ▶ Preview caches
- ▶ Preferences file
- ▶ Presets, templates, and (optionally) plug-ins

The Lightroom Application

I recommend installing the Lightroom program in its default location (Program Files/Adobe on a Windows system, and the Applications folder on a Mac), which if you just clicked all the Next buttons during installation is precisely where it is located. Installing Lightroom anywhere else can lead to problems, so stick to the defaults as the installer walks you through the process. If you are concerned about space on your startup drive, there are other things you can do to reduce Lightroom's footprint; I cover them later.

NOTE Lightroom is nearly identical on Windows and Mac, but there are differences in a few menus, keyboard shortcuts, and file locations because of differences in the operating systems. I will call these out as we come to them and even show screen captures from both operating systems when necessary.

Catalog and Preview Caches

When you open Lightroom, you are doing two things:

- ▶ Launching the program
- ▶ Opening a Lightroom catalog

This is very different from how many other programs operate. For example, you can open Photoshop without opening an image, but it is impossible to open Lightroom without also opening a catalog. Your Lightroom catalog can be located on any drive on your computer, but by default it will be found in My Documents/Pictures/Lightroom on Windows systems and in Pictures/Lightroom on a Mac.

Inside this Lightroom folder you will find your Lightroom catalog, which has the *.lrcat* file extension. As soon as you start importing photos, the catalog will be joined by its companion preview cache, which has the *.lrdata* file extension (**Figure 1.4**). The *.lrcat* file holds all the data about your photos as well as all the work you do inside Lightroom. The *.lrdata* file holds all the previews of your imported photos.

NOTE Lightroom cannot open a catalog over a network, so technically you can put a Lightroom catalog only on an internal or local external drive.

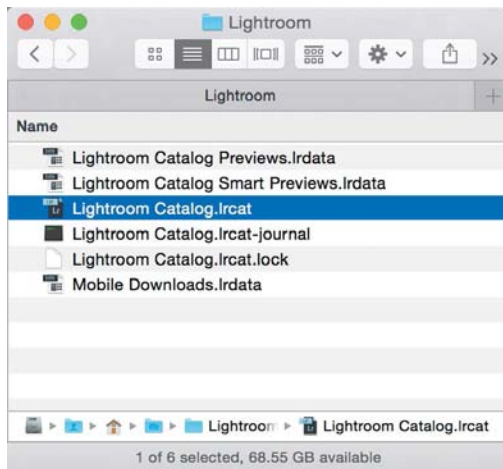


Figure 1.4 The Lightroom folder contains the catalog and its associated cache files.

As you can see in Figure 1.4, there are actually a few different types of cache files, including the following:

- ▶ **Lightroom Catalog Previews.lrdata:** This stores the previews you see in the Library, Slideshow, Print, Web, and Map modules. There are multiple versions of these previews in different sizes (from Filmstrip size up to full 1:1 previews), which can make this preview cache quite large over time.