

‘Lightroom v. Photoshop’ is a phrase that falsely suggests that there are two distinct digital processing workflows; you must choose one and move on. This is not true. These are simply starting points in perfecting your images using the tools in Adobe’s Photography Plan. Which you choose makes *no difference* in what you can accomplish.

The image editing tools of Adobe Camera Raw (ACR) and Lightroom (LR) are functionally identical: same tools, same panels, same profiles, same presets, same editing engine. LR and ACR have identical options to save/export images in JPEG, TIFF, PNG, Digital Negative (DNG) or Photoshop Document (PSD) formats. You will feel at home in both. LR and ACR have different ‘tool sets’ beyond RAW editing and this results in a slightly different workflow for each.

A typical digital workflow has four steps: 1) Move images from the camera or memory card to a computer, 2) Browse the images to rate image quality, delete poor images and add keywords, 3) Use a full-featured color image editor and 4) Save and/or print images in a variety of formats.

Lightroom’s modules are laid out in workflow order. Steps 1 and 2 are managed in the Library module, Step 3 in the Develop module and step 4 in the Print module. Lightroom also has Print, Book, Map, Slideshow and Web modules.

The Photoshop workflow starts with Bridge for steps 1 and 2, then uses Adobe Camera Raw (ACR) for step 3, image editing. This workflow needs PS for printing, slideshows and web features, but has nothing corresponding to LR’s Map or Book modules. (Lightroom’s Book module is a version of Blurb’s free BookWright software.)

LR and ACR manage image metadata<sup>1</sup> in distinctly different ways: LR stores metadata in a ‘catalog’ (an SQLite database), BR/ACR store the same metadata in XMP or ACR sidecar files for RAW files, and inside the image file for JPG, TIF and DNG files. But this may come as a surprise: if you are working on an image in LR, Ctrl+S will create a sidecar file for that image, with the proper settings for ACR! If you import an image edited in ACR, LR will find the XMP data and add it to the current catalog! A RAW file that has been perfected in one, can easily be used in the other without a need to re-edit! Different starting points, different metadata handling, same image results. (Another advantage of LR is the speed that the SQLite database brings to smart collections, which are really slow in Bridge!)

In the “Lightroom vs. Photoshop” debate, better is simply the one you like best, or use the most. If Maps or Smart Collections are important to you, then definitely use Lightroom. One photographer I follow works primarily in LR but prints from PS. Another works in PS but prints from LR.

Importantly, PS provides features not in LR or ACR: Depth-of-Field stacks, non-destructive adjustment layers, text and shape layers, advanced 3d party masking tools, Neural Filters, Content Aware Fill and Move, and Smart Objects. For a multi-frame panorama, LR and ACR only offer 3 projection options; PS offers 6, including a non-warping ‘Reposition’ and a David Hockney ‘Collage’. LR understands PS files. LR can open an image in PS using the ‘Edit in Photoshop’ command and have access to all the advanced features. You can easily work images across all the applications as you need their unique capabilities.

Historically (2002), Adobe’s programmers started to listen to working, high-volume photographers who wanted a way to triage and edit digital images that avoided the complexities of PS. They wanted a software with features not in PS, e.g. a multi-image browser, and would be fast and enjoyable. LR was released in 2007. Photographers new to editing digital photos found LR to be a low-cost alternative that was, in fact, fun to use! But there was little compatibility with the ACR workflow. Presets were platform specific and not interchangeable. This is no longer true!

Rachel Talibart recently mentioned that she moved from PS to LR: “... as I am not interested in distorting reality there is little need for me to go into PS.”<sup>2</sup> Well, LR also has many ways to distort an image, just not the reputation. Distortion in an image is introduced by the photographer, not the software.

LR and ACR/PS are simply different workflows in perfecting your images. Which you choose makes *no difference* in what you can accomplish.

---

<sup>1</sup> EXIF metadata is about camera, lens and sensor information, and is embedded in the JPG or RAW file.

XMP metadata is about color space, slider and panel information as added by BR/ACR or LR’s Library/Develop modules.

<sup>2</sup> Elements Magazine, Issue 22, December 2022.