

Viewing and saving files

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These notes were written to accompany tuition at Amersham Photographic Society, focusing on just the key facts needed to master each aspect of digital image manipulation with Photoshop Elements.

1. Opening and viewing files

File>Open is the most common route to opening an existing image from hard disk or CD; you can open several files at once. To open several adjacent files, click on the first and then *Shift+Click* on the last. To open non-adjacent files, *Control+Click* on each one. View the image full-screen by selecting *View>Fit on Screen*, clicking the *Fit Screen* button or double-clicking the *Hand* tool. By opening the *Navigator (Window>Navigator)* the further magnification of the image can be easily controlled and you can pan around without getting lost. If you have a scroll wheel on your mouse you can also use this to zoom in and out. This feature may need to be switched on at *Edit>Preferences>General>Zoom with Scroll Wheel*.

There are keyboard shortcuts in Photoshop for almost everything and a few are really worth memorising. *Control+Spacebar* followed by a click or drag of the mouse will zoom in, and *Alt+Spacebar* will zoom out. When zoomed in, holding the spacebar down allows you to move around the image by dragging the mouse. These will still work when other dialogue boxes are open, unlike other methods.

Finally, *View>Actual Pixels* or double-clicking the *Zoom* tool will display the image at 100% magnification, which means that each pixel in the image is shown by a single pixel on the display. This is very important for checking your image for dust, scratches and flaws before printing. Occasionally it is a good habit to view your evolving image without the clutter of palettes and menus. Under the *Window* menu there are various options for switching off the Tools, Palettes, Bins and other clutter on the screen but later versions of Elements don't provide a simple shortcut to de-clutter the screen. The *File>Save As* command offers many different formats in which image files can be saved. Here is a brief guide to the most useful ones.

2. File compression

Image files are very large and take up a lot of space on your hard disk. It is common practice to compress image files to reduce their size. The two mechanisms by which you can do this are *lossy* or *lossless*. Lossy compression degrades the image whereas lossless compression does not harm the image at all. The benefit of lossy compression is that much smaller file sizes can be achieved and for this reason it is widely used. Compression is achieved simply by saving the image with an appropriate file format. However, a compressed image cannot be viewed or manipulated in any way. Opening the file in a program such as Photoshop to view it involves expanding it back to its full size. If it is subsequently re-saved as a compressed file it will have been compressed twice and will be significantly degraded. Bear this in mind when deciding upon a strategy for saving files which should not be repeatedly compressed with lossy formats. Simply viewing a JPG and closing it without saving does no damage.

3. Common file formats

3.1. Photoshop (.psd): this should be the default format for images being manipulated in Photoshop. PSD files are large but within them, layers, channels, paths, colour profiles, notes and other useful information will be automatically included. Although this is a proprietary format, Photoshop is so widely used that it is accepted by most software. N.b. be careful not to select similar-looking formats by mistake (like Photoshop EPS or Photoshop PDF) from the drop-down menu. Photoshop offers you the format that you used last time as a default. Consequently if you make a wrong choice, you may continue to use that format many times until you notice the mistake.

3.2. JPEG (.JPG): JPEG stands for the Joint Photographic Experts Group, who defined this standard for compressing image files. JPEG files are up to 20 times smaller than .PSD files and are commonly used to transmit photos over the Internet or save storage space on a hard disk. It is good netiquette to reduce the file size and use .JPG whenever you e-mail an image to keep transmission times to a minimum. JPEG files cannot include layers or other Photoshop-specific information. When saving an image as a .JPG you are offered a choice of the degree of compression. Minimum compression (i.e. maximum file size) is the best choice for important images that may be printed, but images which will only ever be viewed on the screen can be compressed much more heavily, e.g. Medium (5).

Digital Cameras typically produce .JPGs and may compress the image heavily in-camera. Confusingly, when viewing and manipulating .JPGs within Photoshop the window title bar says e.g. Church.JPG but they are actually in a native internal format. If you re-save them as .JPGs again you will compound the damage being done to the image quality so be careful to always save them in a lossless format – typically .PSD whilst working on them. Using *File>Save for Web* enables you to actually see any deterioration in the image that will be caused by .JPG compression. The original image is displayed alongside a compressed version of the image for comparison. Although I stress the damage done by JPEG compression, it's a fact of life and no reason to avoid this useful .JPG format – just be aware of it and the possibility of cumulative damage.

3.3. Tagged Image Format (.TIF): This format is a good choice for universal compatibility across different machines and software packages. It produces a large file, although additional LZW compression may be offered, which is lossless.

4. Resizing and resampling

Whilst editing an image you can specify both its physical (e.g. printed) dimensions and pixel dimensions by going to *Image>Resize>Image Size*. Within this palette, *Document Size* determines physical size and *Pixel Dimensions* shows the current size of the file in pixels. The physical size can be changed here freely for printing purposes. The pixel dimensions can also be changed by ticking the *Resample Image* box, but beware – **this permanently changes your file** and should only be done on a copy. Reducing the pixel size may be desirable, e.g. for -mailing. It is rarely necessary to upsize (or 'interpolate') photographic images because the software cannot add more detail so it 'guesses' the extra pixels and the image will just look softer. See the notes on *Image Resolution, Size and Quality* for more on this confusing subject.

5. File saving strategy

One strategy might be to use *File>Save As* to create a succession of .PSD files whilst an image is evolving (e.g. Church1.PSD, Church2.PSD, etc.). This gives you the option of going back to earlier versions in the event of a mistake or an evolutionary dead-end. When the image is finished, remove unwanted layers and archive the most complete .PSD version onto CD, DVD or external hard disk in case you want to re-work it, but also keep a flattened version on your hard disk for viewing and printing purposes. You could also use *Image>Resize>Image Size>Resample Image* to create a smaller flat file, (say) 800 × 600 pixels, and then .JPG it down to (say) 100 KB or less for screen display purposes and e-mailing. Remember that next time you re-visit *Image Size* **turn off the Resample Image button** or you will damage your file, when simply intending to re-size it for printing purposes.

6. Raw files

Many cameras can save images as 'Raw' files instead of (or as well as) JPG files. These bypass much of the in-camera processing and leave you to make decisions such as exposure and colour temperature at a later time. I would encourage beginners to avoid shooting Raw files at first, and concentrate on mastering the basics with JPGs. This is because processing Raw adds complexity and imposes major restrictions on your workflow. A correctly exposed JPG file is capable of producing a stunning print of the finest quality.