What do I need – Lightroom or Photoshop

This is a question I have been asked dozens of times in emails and at demonstrations, but it's one of those questions that can't be answered in a sentence or two. Just recently a newsletter reader told me that he has both Lightroom and Photoshop CC, but is continually torn between the two and asked if I could include something about this in our newsletter. I thought it was a good idea, but as I got a little way into this subject I realised that to do it justice it would outgrow the newsletter, so here it is as a stand alone PDF.

Photoshop -V- Lightroom
or
Lightroom -V- Photoshop

You have to be careful when voicing opinions on peoples chosen software. Often, you can insult their partner and get away with it, but not their software. I suspect that many photographers are in the same situation as our friend who suggested the topic. We all worry sometimes that if we use Lightroom are we missing something vital in Photoshop and vice versa

There is one argument that says, if you have to ask the question is Photoshop better than Lightroom, then you're not ready for Photoshop yet. From most Lightroom users point of view Photoshop offers little if anything over Lightroom because they are unlikely to make use of what Photoshop has that Lightroom doesn't. In that case the answer is simple, use Light room because it's probably better for you.

Too many people are willing to make judgements and comments, comparing different software packages when they don't have the experience necessary to do so. Most advice given about software isn't advice at all, its just one person saying to another, this is what I use, so you should use it too. There isn't enough hours in the day to work with all these software packages to the level required to make the judgement we sometimes expect.


look at the recent developments of Adobe's Creative Cloud. Soon after launch, Adobe added Lightroom to the Photoshop CC package completely free of charge. Why would Adobe give away Lightroom so readily? Simply because there is nothing in Lightroom that is not already available in Photoshop. So in fact they are giving little away that the Photoshop user doesn't already have.

Experienced Photoshop users don't gain much, if anything by Lightroom being thrown into the package. Unfamiliarity with both systems leads some people to believe that Lightroom is superior to Photoshop, but how can that be.

Lightroom was born from Photoshop, which is the more powerful of the two. If you don't need or use that power and you're producing images you are pleased with in Lightroom, then Lightroom is best for you.

Ah, but there is the Cataloguing system in Lightroom that makes it better. Yes, there is, but I have managed for 20 years without any problems finding my images, original or completed. It's said that if you import your images onto Lightroom and give them all tags and you will find anything you want easily!

I don't think so. You might for a while, but your tags will vary over time and so will your stamina. If your a wedding or a portrait photographer I think it would be more useful, but for most amateurs? Well, I would need some convincing that it will offer much if anything to the quality of your images and that's the important part isn't it?
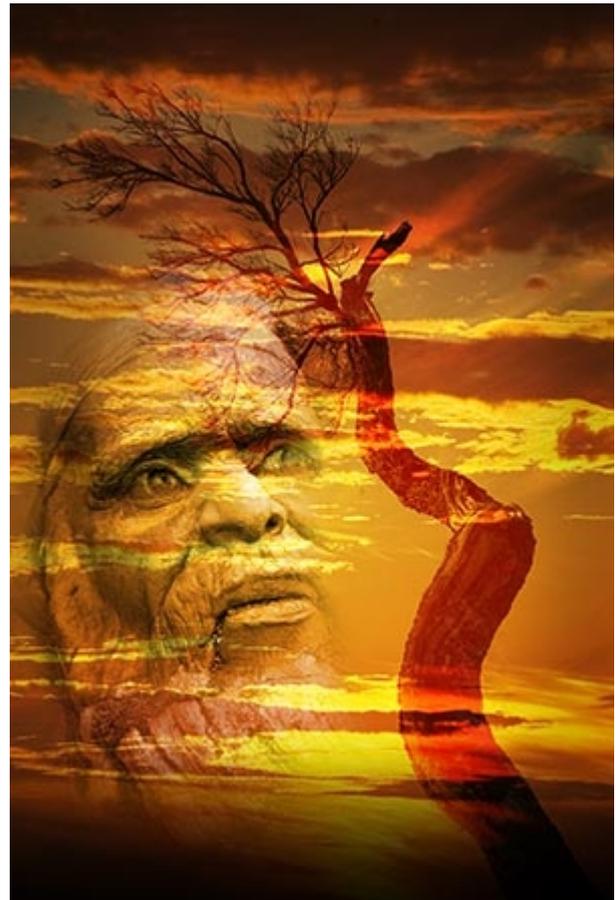

You're either a person who keeps order in your life or your not. Lightroom's catalogue system will not help those who are not organised people already. The very structured approach that you would need to keep a Lightroom catalogue up to date over a number of years, means you can get by without it if you wish. Its a choice thing.

The Lightroom Develop Module is virtually identical to Camera Raw, so if you have shot a great image where you were able to capture 80% of that image at the taking stage, it's not hard to add the remaining 20% with a few tweaks in Lightroom. That is what it's designed to do.

The problem for me and others I suspect is that I want to shoot images in conditions that may be far less than perfect. I also want the ratio between images I shoot and those I can complete to be very high. In some lighting conditions that takes a little more work.

That old advice about going back to a scene when the light is better is nonsense unless you live round the corner from whatever your shooting. I am going to the UK later this year and will spend a week in the Lakes. Do I pop back from Australia a few weeks later if the light isn't perfect?
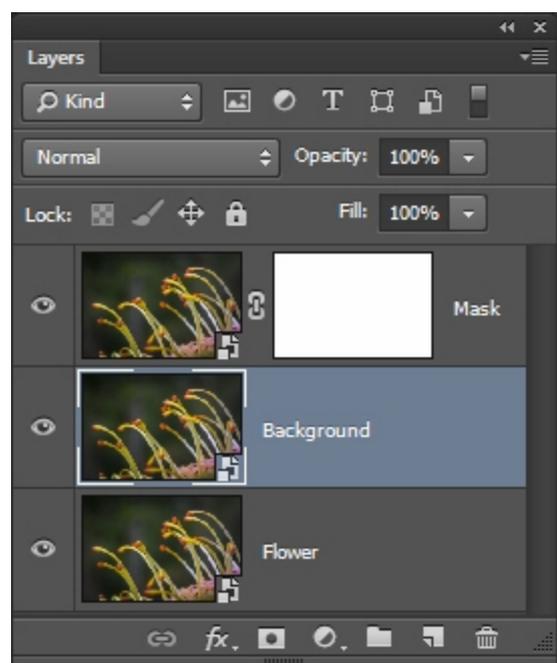
Quite often I want to take my manipulations further than Lightroom will allow. I want to use multiple versions of one raw image and sometimes more than one image shot with different exposures. Using Smart objects and auto align, I can do that easily and see a balance between the two or three images I am using.

Smart objects allow me to tweak the balance between 2 or 3 layers as many times as I want with no loss of quality. It's not easy to understand what I mean here unless you see the process in action.

Working on two images I can stretch those sliders much further. Maybe going one way for the background and another for the foreground. I want to use layer masks to create the exposure balance that my cameras sensor cannot capture at the taking stage and I can't do that to the level I want in Lightroom.

I want to use selections to remove or cover up unwanted objects in the picture, which in many cases have turned my images from a bin job into a winner. Then, if I need a complex selection I want Channels to allow me to do that.

Can I transfer a raw setting from one image to many in Camera Raw? Yes, it's no different to Lightroom. Do I ever do that with my style of photography? Almost never. Because I have found images taken at the same location and in the same light can still need an individual approach. If I was a wedding photographer or a studio photographer things may be a little different, but I am not and most of you aren't either.

Is Photoshop better for you? It's impossible to say unless I know the answer to a number of questions first. Such as, what level of photographic knowledge have you developed? What are your photographic interests? Where have you set your own image acceptability level? How much time are you prepared to spend learning digital techniques? How enthusiastic a photographer are you? One argument says that if you have to ask that question about Photoshop, you're not ready for it and there is quite a lot of truth in that.

We are all different people with different needs, but our image acceptability level is an interesting subject. After a number of years in photography, look back at your earliest images, those you were very pleased with at the time you created them. See what I mean? They now don't look quite so good do they. You have moved on, leaned more, become more skilled. Whether you have done this consciously or not, you have raised your image acceptability level. What was good for you 5 years ago is now not so good. You have raised your bar.

So, Lightroom may meet John Smith's needs perfectly in 2013, but as his image acceptability levels rise along with exposure and image editing skills, it may not be acceptable in 2015. See the problem when someone asks you what software they should get and why this article isn't a simple yes or no.

I am familiar with the photographic standard in camera clubs in the UK and now in Australia and I would say that Lightroom will meet the majority of members needs, but personally I want more. My photography is an art and I don't specialise. I am an all round photographer who will photograph anything that has impact and appeal to me. I want to be able to use Photoshop to put together huge collage for the wall of the home, but then I may be creating special images in Photoshop's layers for Audio Visual and that would be impossible in Lightroom.

I want to open raw images that most photographers would consider no hoper's, then take those images to a level that would seriously challenge the upper places in any club competition in the UK or Australia. I need Photoshop to do that.

I want the ability to shoot images when the contrast is way too high for my camera to capture, yet using Photoshop that is exactly what I do, often. I am not a lover of HDR, but I do a similar thing in a manual way with Smart Objects, 16 bit processing, layers, layers masks and selections, but without that false (**can be spotted from 100yds**) HDR look. I can't do that to the level I want with Lightroom.

What must be remembered is that I have been a user of the following Photoshop versions for around 20 years. Photoshop 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, CS, CS2, CS3, CS4, CS5, CS6 and now CC. So, in some respects I am not the best person to ask if Lightroom is better than Photoshop, because I will

choose Photoshop every day of the week and twice on Sundays. Why? Because for me and my style of photography Lightroom offers me nothing I don't already have with Photoshop, but that's easier for me to say because I have already spent the hours necessary climbing the Photoshop learning curve.

One of the big pluses of Lightroom and this has come from many Lightroom users, is that it will lower the learning curve a little in comparison to Photoshop. Now that is very appealing to many and understandably so. If a software package meets your needs, don't worry that you might be missing something elsewhere. Use what gives you a result and allow your natural development to take you to the next level when your ready.

The trouble is, we are told so often how powerful Photoshop is we still tend to worry that we are missing something by not using it. Is there a better quality image available if I use Photoshop? Not if you don't have the skills to create that quality.

If you're struggling a little with Photoshop, but start to get a result with Lightroom, then stay with Lightroom. You can always move onto Photoshop later, and remember, the Develop Module and Camera Raw are virtually identical so any learning you do in Lightroom, is never going to be wasted. In my experience, the one person who rarely achieves anything is the one who can acquire all sorts of image editing software and has many different programs installed on their computer.

Jack of all trades master of none come to mind and _everyone_ I have known who fits into this category _hardly ever_ produces any images worth viewing. They never stay with the software long enough to lean anything. Whatever you do, choose one option and stay with it for a while.

So is Photoshop better than Lightroom? Yes, for me, maybe No for you, so this has been a lot of words to say, I don't know. I don't know because I don't know you or your skill level well enough to give an informed answer. Chances are no-one else does either!

My best guess is that if you really are unsure whether to choose Lightroom or Photoshop then start with Lightroom. Why? Because if you belong to a Camera Club, you will be among many other users who can help point you in the right direction if you need it. It does appear that things are changing in club circles with Elements being ousted in favour of Lightroom. That is the impression I am getting from my own involvement with club photographers. When I ask for a show of hands on who is using what, the majority are using either Photoshop or Lightroom.

If your not a club photographer, there are a lot of tutorials available for Lightroom if and when you need a helping hand. Finally, as I have already said. There are so many similarities between Lightroom and Photoshop that you lose nothing starting off with Lightroom. In fact it could be said you're lowering the initial learning curve and who can argue with that?
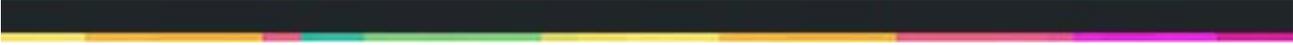
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