

Preparing Photos for Print

by Sheena Wilkie

Sheena Wilkie is the Editor-in-Chief of Canadian Camera magazine, a professional photographer and a photography instructor. Her work can be seen at <http://www.sheena.ca> and www.photogurus.ca

When film was popular, most photographers had it easy when it came to getting photos printed. With the exception of photographers who had their own darkroom, we all took our photos to a lab, asked for a specific size, and left the rest to the experts.

And up until this decade, slides were the standard way to provide photos for many competitions as well as inclusion in printed publications such as this one. If we shot negative film, we might be able to submit the prints produced from it. We didn't send unprocessed negatives; we wouldn't know what they looked like, and nobody would want to deal with processing someone else's photos.

These days, many of us have made a transition from film to digital photography, and processing photos is an activity for which photographers now have far more responsibility.

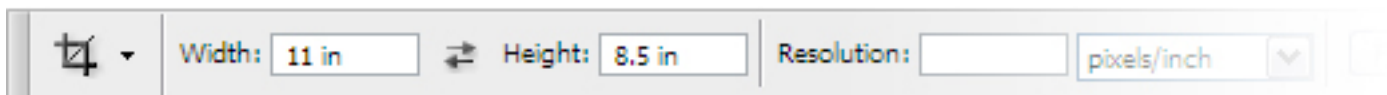
As most of us are finding out, walking into a lab (or a big box store), and handing someone a memory card will often result in prints which are passable but not great. And because raw images are today's unprocessed negatives, we really must process and output them appropriately before sending to a publisher, a skill which is not found in camera manuals. The following guidelines and steps will not cover the conversion of raw files, nor the many possible ways of manipulating a photo. We will only concern ourselves here with the output process. Of course there is no one true method of digital output; once you understand it, there is room for personal preferences. Consider this one starting point for someone who has not yet wrapped their head around the subject.

First, let's discuss the importance of pixels. The pixel dimensions (resolution) of a digital file determine how large it can be printed. To use this magazine as an example, our pages measure 8.5 by 11 inches. If we want to print one of your photos on a full page (or the cover), your file would need to be at least 2550x3300 pixels. This is the size produced by a camera with an 8.4 megapixel sensor. The smallest size we are likely to use for a photo is 1/4 page, which requires 1275x1650 pixels, or about 2.1 megapixels. Photos with fewer pixels than this can only be printed at diminutive sizes which won't do them justice.

Second, on the important subject of resizing, or resampling: Don't do it. Increasing the number of pixels by upsampling may seem like a way to meet the pixel requirements of a larger print size, but the new pixels added by upsampling do not add new detail, and the print will not be sharp. Don't downsample either. Labs and publishers will downsample as necessary for their output devices, and repeated resampling reduces the sharpness of your photo.

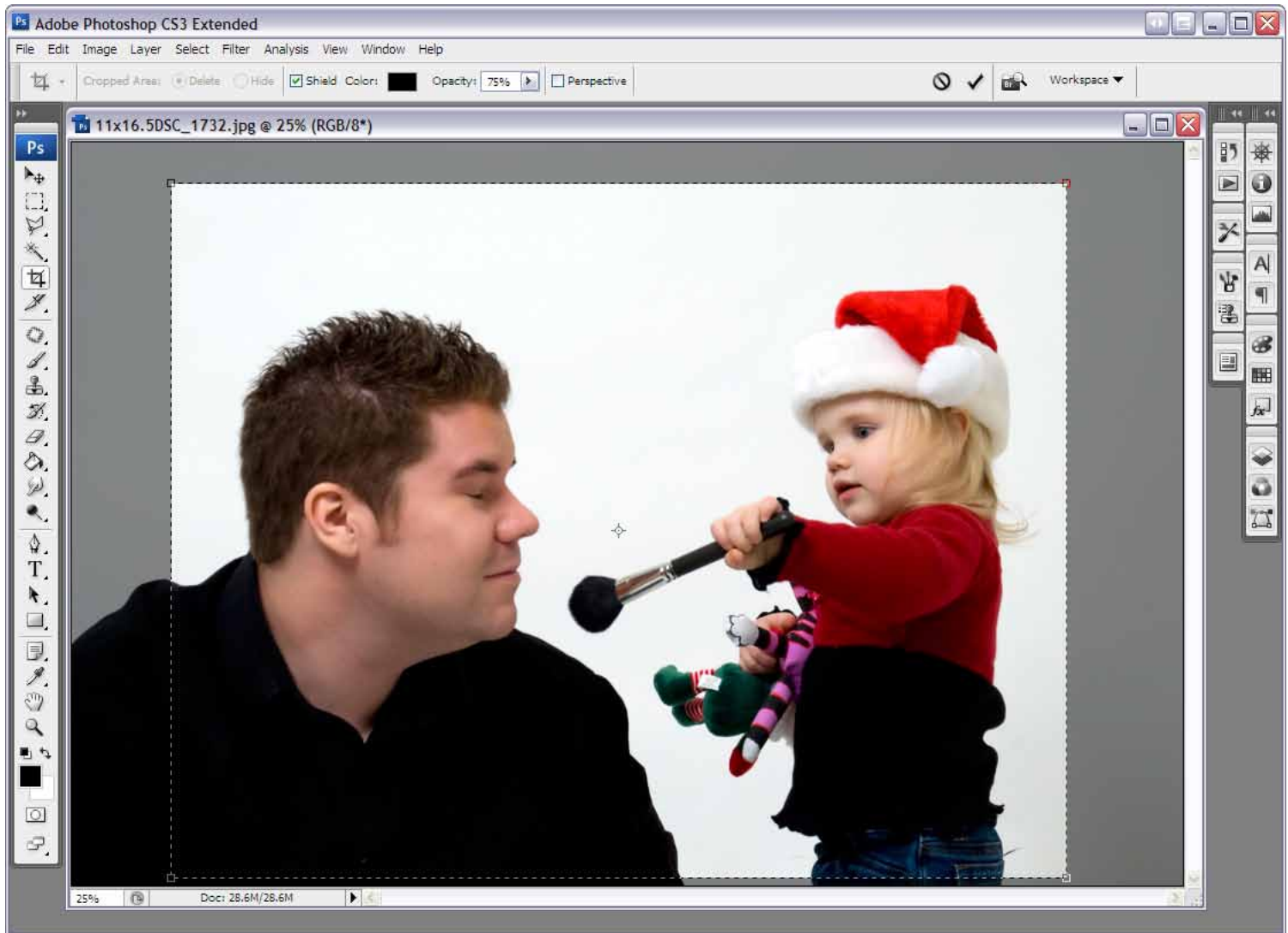
Third, what about cropping? Keep in mind that if you crop your image, you reduce the number of pixels it contains. This is important when submitting to a magazine. Since magazines may need to crop your image for layout purposes, it is generally best to send the uncropped image and give the designer the most pixels to work with. On the other hand, when preparing an image that you plan to print at a specific size, it is almost always necessary to crop, at least slightly. If you do not, the lab doing your printing will do it for you, without any consideration for your composition. To crop an image in Photoshop for 8.5x11" printing:

1. First, choose the crop tool from the toolbox.
2. Set the width to "11 in" and the height to "8.5 in" in the Options bar (reverse these for a vertical orientation).



3. Make sure to include the "in" (but without quotes).
4. Click and drag from near the top-left corner of the photo toward the lower-right and release.

5. Adjust the crop box by dragging the square points at the corners. When you're happy with the crop, press Enter.



Finally, whether you are taking your photos to a lab, or sending them to a magazine, you must save them in a particular format. In most cases, JPEG is acceptable, and it's easy to do with Photoshop.

1. Go to File>Save As. Choose JPEG as the Format. Enter an appropriate name such as yourname_subject.jpg and click Save.
2. In the dialog window that pops up, choose the highest quality setting and click OK.