

Save money by saving time when you incorporate automation into your workflow. The first steps are easy and supremely rewarding.

BY RICK RALSTON

Automating Photoshop

REDUCING
REPETITIVE
TASKS

Working with electronic image files often requires many repetitive, uncreative and unprofitable tasks, such as resizing, watermarking, backing up, renaming, and saving in different file formats. These tasks eat up your time, which takes a bite out of your profits.

What repetitive tasks are consuming your valuable time and creative energy? You can automate those tasks. The combination of Photoshop automation and Adobe Bridge functions gives you some of the same tools available in Adobe Lightroom.

Automation is a set of instructions you set up before working on an image file or a group of image files. Your computer uses these instructions to perform the repetitive tasks for you, much faster, consistently, and with virtually no mistakes. If you own Photoshop, you can begin to automate immediately.

Photoshop actions are a perfect example of automation, and the best place to start. Photoshop will record the steps you take as you perform routine tasks, sort out the individual steps, and save them as a list of instructions called an action. The action can be edited later for tweaking or adapted to new tasks. You can run an action on the next open file by simply clicking the play button. You can also run it on a whole folder of images. Actions are easy to record, edit and adapt. The same

action will run on both Windows and Mac systems, so you can share them with anyone.

Some automation requires human interaction, like making a different selection in each image or typing a custom value in a dialog box. You can add a “Stop” in an action to pause it while you do a manual task, then resume the action (**Figure 1**). Stops make actions more flexible. Even if an automation requires some human input, it’s still a time-saving tool.

You do have to invest a little time to learn how to automate, from a few minutes for actions to hours for scripting. But automation lends itself to playing and experimentation.

To perform a time test, I came up with a list of tasks to perform on each of 50 images:

open the file, run the Unsharp Mask filter, resize to 6 inches wide (all are landscapes) at 300ppi, add two lines of copyright metadata in the File Info window (plus selecting “Copyrighted” in the Copyright Status pull-down menu) and save the file as a TIFF with a custom name. Then with the file still open, resize it to 2.5 inches wide at 72ppi, save it as a JPEG with a custom name, and close the file.

I used 50 raw-format images, each about 8.5MB. Manually it took me 2 minutes to complete these tasks on one file. It would take an hour and 40 minutes to do all 50 manually. Then I spent about 2 minutes creating an action to do the tasks in Photoshop. Using the Photoshop batch feature, I ran the action on all 50 images all at once. It took 7 minutes, 52 seconds. Add the 2-minute setup time, and automating the tasks took 10 minutes. That’s a tenth of the time it would take to do it manually.

During the roughly 8 minutes while Photoshop did the work for me, I was able to do something else more engaging. Actions are the most user-friendly automation in Photoshop, but they do have limitations. They work in Photoshop only and cannot interact with other applications to build more complex workflows. And generally, they can’t make decisions on your behalf,

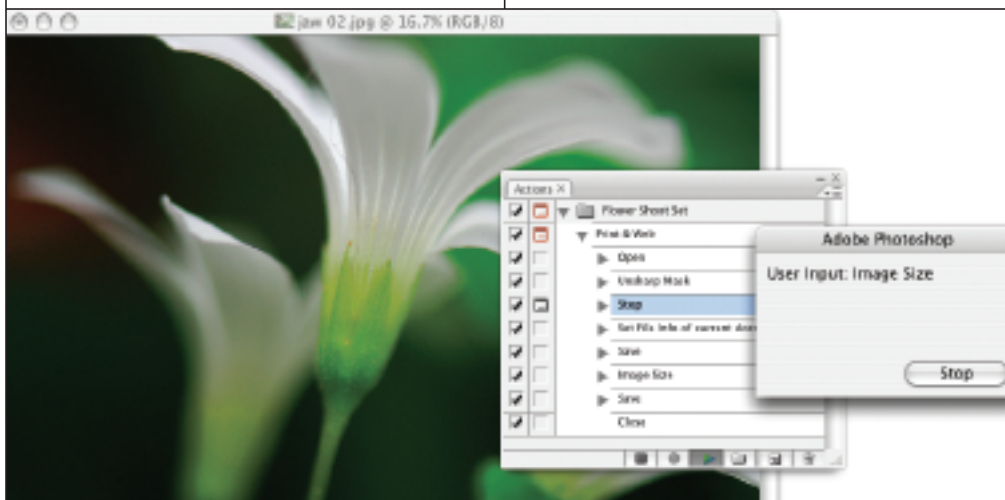


Figure 2

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such as detecting the color space of an image and deciding whether or not to change it.

Here are some other useful types of automation:

Bridge: Included with Photoshop and Adobe Creative Suite, it's great at adding metadata to multiple files, includes eight preset Photoshop automations and a Lightroom-like visual interface for accessing files (**Figure 2**).

Data-driven publishing: Combines a Photoshop template file and a database file to produce multiple variations by changing out layers and type. Easy to set up but limited in the file properties it can control.

Automator: Action-like in appearance, each step customizable via its own interface, Automator can build complex workflows through dragging and dropping, and operates across multiple applications but limited to available actions (does not come with any preset for Photoshop), and Mac-only (**Figure 3**).

Scripting: Photoshop supports three scripting languages (AppleScript [Mac-only], JavaScript [cross-platform] and VBScript [Windows-only]), offers the greatest control, can operate across multiple applications (AppleScript). Similar to programming, it has the steepest learning curve, which can be off-putting.

To get started in automating Photoshop, select Photoshop Help in the Help menu and Automating Tasks in the Contents tab. For free actions and scripts, go to the Adobe Exchange Web site for Photoshop at www.adobe.com/cfusion/exchange. Select Photoshop from the Exchanges by product list, then select Actions or Scripts from the pull-down menu in the next window. You can also download an actions tutorial from my book "The Designer's Apprentice" on the *Professional Photographer* magazine website at www.ppmag.com/web-exclusives/2007/09/the-designers-apprentice-autom-1.html. Do a Google search and you'll find free downloads

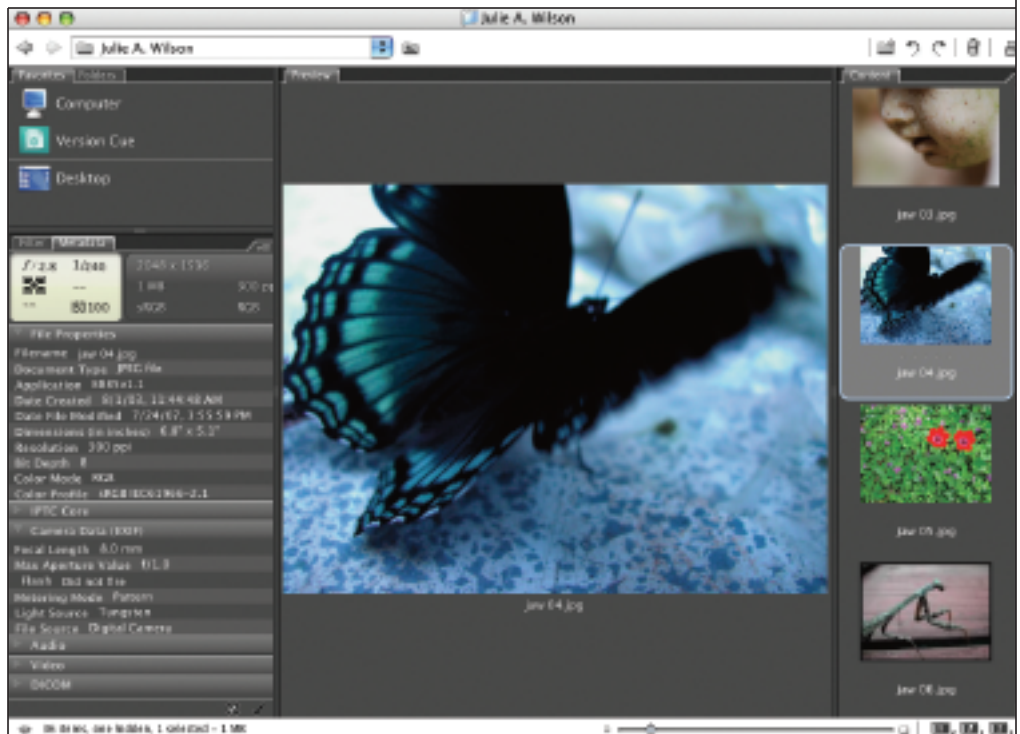


Figure 2

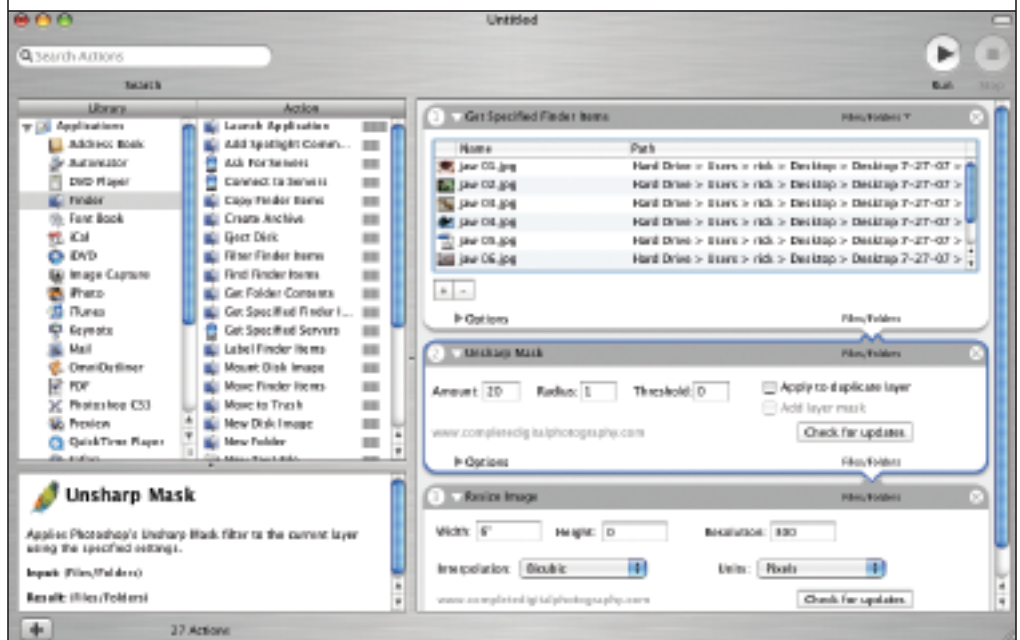


Figure 3

and projects you can adapt to your own work.

Above all else, try to have fun with automation. Play with the tutorial, try to adapt it to do something else and start building your own. You'll see soon enough how you can incorporate automation into your workflows. ■

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