



Understanding your Lightroom Catalog

Lightroom is a powerful tool that can also be powerfully frustrating. The Key to a stress free experience is understanding how Lightroom imports, stores, displays and edits your images.

When working in Lightroom, we are actually working with three independant entities:

Lightroom (the program)
The Lightroom Catalog (the .lrcat file)
Your photographs

Lightroom (the program)

Lightroom is a program like Micosoft Word or Apple's Pages. It can work with photographs that live anywhere. You can have Word documents in many different folders or even on different drives and Word can still work with them. When you open a Word document it is opening INTO Word. The document isn't stored in Word.

Your Photographs

Your images live in a FOLDER on your computer, not in Lightroom the program. Generally this folder is either your Pictures Folder or within your Pictures Folder.

The Lightroom Catalog

The Lightroom Catalog is the RECORD of all of your images and the things that have been done to your images in Lightroom such as cropping, exposure, etc. It is above all a Database.

Think about this way. Lightroom (the program) is like your community Library. A place to check out and read books. The Lightroom Catalog (the .lrcat file) is like the card catalog. You would use this to find your desired book. Your photographs are like the books on the shelves.

When you launch Lightroom (the program) it opens with your catalog. That means it is opening and using your catalog.

NOTE: Before starting Lightroom for the first time read the tutorial Order from Chaos 2- Starting your first Lightroom Catalog

Lightroom (the program) has the ability to work with many different catalogs. I could have a catalog for my family pictures, one for my client work and another for travel photography. It works, however, with only one Catalog at a time. So if my Family catalog is open in Lightroom, I do not have access to my travel pictures. It is generally agreed that working with one catalog is the easiest way for the Lightroom novice to begin working. Plenty of my colleagues, myself included, work with multiple catalogs. I only recommend multiple catalogs for the experienced user, however, as more than one catalog can get confusing very quickly.