



# **The P.O.P. Editing Workflow**

**From Process to Purpose**

This course introduces a flexible and intuitive three-stage photo editing workflow designed to free you from rigid, step-by-step processes.

The P.O.P. Workflow (Prep the Mood, Optimise Light, Polish with Purpose) is built on the idea that every creative decision should be driven by the intended outcome.

By focusing on your vision first, you can be more fluid with your techniques and apply them in a way that feels natural and serves your image's unique story.

This approach is not a rigid set of instructions but a guiding framework that allows you to be more "loose" with your techniques.

It's designed to help you edit your own photos with a higher level of confidence and a sense of having a clear direction, rather than "crossing your fingers and hoping for the best".

**Important Note:** This workflow is a framework – not a set of strict step by step instructions that must be followed at all costs.

Therefore, while this document provides example techniques that may be used at various stages, not every image will need to have every technique used on it.

Let the workflow guide you by giving you an outcome to aim for at each of the three stages, but feel free to arrive at those outcomes in any way that works.

# Stage 1: Prep the Mood

When you start a new edit, the first thing you'll do is decide on the overall mood you want for the finished image.

This is a crucial step in the P.O.P. Method because it puts the outcome first, right from the beginning.

Instead of getting bogged down in a rigid process, you have the creative freedom to define the feeling you want the photo to have.

## Step 1: Define Your Vision:

You'll decide if the final image should be dark and moody, light and airy, rich and vibrant, black and white, or something else etc.

Don't spend too long thinking about this. You just want to decide on a general look and feel for the finished edit.

This initial creative choice will help guide all the adjustments you make.

So the goal for stage 1 is to get the image into the right "ballpark" for the final look and feel before you start the real work.

## Step 2: Raw File & Exposure Adjustments

Begin your edit in Camera Raw or Lightroom. This is a good place to make broad, non-destructive adjustments to the entire image, such as exposure, white balance, and basic shadow/highlight recovery.

### Set White Balance and Tint:

Use the Temperature and Tint sliders to achieve the desired warmth or coolness for the image. This is a powerful creative choice that can remove unwanted colour casts, such as a green tint in shadows, and help set the overall tone.

### Adjust Exposure for the Mood:

Instead of aiming for a perfectly neutral exposure, adjust the overall brightness to match your vision.

A moody image might start slightly underexposed, while a bright daytime scene might feel naturally light.

Use the Exposure, Highlights, and Shadows sliders to get the base level right.

## Step 3: Crop for Composition

### **Visualise Balance:**

Forget strict rules like the Rule of Thirds. Instead, focus on creating balance between your image's focal points.

### **The "Drawing a Shape" Technique:**

Identify the main points of interest in your image. If you were to draw a line or a shape between them, is that shape centred and balanced within the frame?

This simple exercise can instantly reveal if a crop is needed.

*(If you want to actually draw on your image to help visualise compositional balance, then you can bring the image from RAW / Lightroom into Photoshop now because you can't draw on top of your image in ACR/LR)*

### **Identify areas that could become points of interest with further editing:**

Consider what elements are not currently standing out in the frame, but could stand out if you edited them to make them pop more.

## Step 4: Foundational Adjustments with Layers

Once you've made the basic adjustments above in Camera Raw or Lightroom, bring the image into Photoshop to make any further mood related adjustments.

### **Blend Multiple Exposures:**

If you captured bracketed exposures to cover the full dynamic range of a high contrast scene, blend them here at this stage.

### **Mood adjustments and enhancements:**

Lay some more groundwork for achieving the colours to match your vision next.

That might involve removing unwanted colour casts, or adding and enhancing wanted colour casts.

**To add a colour cast:** Add a Solid Colour adjustment layer with a colour sampled from a prominent element, like a pink hue from a sunset sky.

Blend it with the image with a combination of luminosity masking and reducing the layer opacity, and the colour will subtly "seed" the entire image and unify the palette.

**To enhance an existing wanted colour cast:** With the P.O.P Workflow Plugin, make a colour correction Curves adjustment, then press the "Reverse" button to reverse the correction – essentially enhancing the existing colour cast.

# Stage 2: Optimise the Light

This is the central, most creative part of the workflow.

The goal is to use light and contrast to guide the viewer's eye, create a sense of depth, and make your subject "pop".

This is where you move from broad adjustments to highly targeted, artistic choices.

## Step 1: Defining Depth with Light

### **The Rule of Atmospheric Perspective:**

A key principle to remember is that elements in the foreground are generally darker, higher in contrast, and more saturated than those in the distance due to atmospheric haze.

### **Enhancing Depth:**

To enhance depth in your images, you can use subtle adjustments to make the foreground even darker and higher contrast, while keeping the background lighter and less saturated.

This creates a three-dimensional feel and draws the eye through the scene.

## Step 2: Shaping Light with Adjustment Layers

Here's where you'll use a combination of darkening, brightening, and contrast adjustments to pull the viewers' attention towards the important compositional elements and away from elements that are distracting.

You can achieve this with a series of Levels and Curves adjustment layers masked in and out appropriately.

## Step 3: Dodging & Burning for Dimension

### **The Go-To Technique:**

This is one of the most powerful and transformative techniques in your workflow. It involves selectively brightening and darkening parts of an image to add depth and dimension.

### **Add 3D Form:**

Focus on accentuating existing highlights and shadows. This makes elements look more three-dimensional and stand out from the background.

**How to Do It:**

Add a new, empty layer and set its blend mode to Overlay. With a soft brush at a very low opacity (5-10%), use a white brush to "dodge" (lighten) and a black brush to "burn" (darken).

**Dodging and Burning with Colour:**

For a more natural look in some cases – or a more creative look in others, instead of a black or white brush you can also sample a colour from the image and dodge or burn with it.

# Stage 3: Polish with Purpose

This final stage is about meticulous refinement. It's the last 5-10% of the edit that elevates an image from good to great. Here, you focus on removing tiny distractions and preparing the image for its final output.

## Step 1: Removing Distractions

### The Spot Healing Brush Tool:

Use the Spot Healing Brush Tool on a new layer with Sample All Layers checked.

### Meticulous Cleanup:

Go beyond the obvious. Look for small, high-contrast details that distract the eye, like tiny white rocks, bright specks of light, or other blemishes.

### The "Sneeze" Test:

As a test, toggle this layer on and off. You'll often find that with the distractions removed, the image feels much cleaner.

The effect of seeing them all reappear at once is like "someone sneezed on the screen".

## Step 2: Sharpen & Export

There is a specific order these final steps should be done in.

Diverging from this sequence can create catalogue nightmares in mild cases and losing your finished edit in others.

### Master File Integrity:

Save your final, layered PSD file.

If you use Lightroom, then this edited PSD will appear next to the RAW file back in your LR catalogue.

This finished file is your "master" edit, and the following steps should always be performed on a disposable duplicate of your master to prevent accidentally saving and overwriting it after resizing.

### Duplicate and Flatten:

After saving the finished edit, duplicate your image in Photoshop (Image > Duplicate) and then close your master edit.

You can now flatten all the layers in the duplicate into a single background layer.

**Resize the image for your intended output / destination:**

Resize your image to the required pixel dimensions. If you're sharing the image online the long edge rarely needs to be more than 2000px.

If you're printing the image, multiply the print size in inches by 300 and enter those pixel dimensions in the Resize dialog box.

**Sharpening is a Final Step:**

Always apply your final sharpening after you have resized your image to its intended output size so you can correctly judge how much sharpening is needed.

**Use the "Print Size" View:**

To accurately judge the correct amount of sharpening, go to View > Print Size in Photoshop. This shows you the image's physical size on your screen, preventing you from over-sharpening for a print.

*(Ensure your monitor's PPI is correctly set in Photoshop's settings)*

**Colour Profile for Accuracy:**

This is a crucial step to ensure your image looks the same everywhere.

**For Online:**

Use File > Export > Export As and make sure to convert to sRGB.

**For Print:**

If you're using a print lab, they will often require a specific colour profile like Adobe RGB. Use Edit > Convert to Profile and select the requested profile before saving.

# The P.O.P. Editing Workflow

## Tear Sheet

### Stage 1: Prep the Mood

- Define your vision for the image
- Make basic exposure & colour adjustments to get it in the ballpark
- Crop for composition

### Stage 2: Optimize the Light

- Always consider atmospheric perspective & depth
- Shape light with Adjustment Layers & effective masking
- Dodge & burn to add extra dimension, and highlight/de-emphasise elements

### Stage 3: Polish with Purpose

- Remove distractions
- Sharpen for general image softness
- Resize, sharpen, & export for output