

# Testing Applicants for Photoshop Production Jobs

By Howard Brainen ©2004

## Background

It seems like 80% of the world knows how to use Adobe Photoshop. This powerful program has been the standard for digital imaging since its introduction in 1990. With so many people having some degree of competence with Photoshop, you are likely to get more applicants for a job opening than you can use. Your challenge is to figure out which one is best suited for your needs. This paper will help you do that.

## Step One – Art or Production

What is the job you want this person to perform? Is it an artistic job? Will they be creating new artwork for you? Or is it a production job? Production jobs include things like scanning, color correction, cropping, setting levels and curves, dust cleanup, sharpening, scaling, saving to various file formats, etc. Production jobs are repetitive and require an organized person to work efficiently.

*Important Lesson #1 – Do not hire artists to do production jobs. They will get bored in a few days and you will be hiring again.*

## Step Two – Define the Job

What exactly needs to be done? If you are managing a project, and are not a Photoshop expert, you need to first consult with one to figure out all the steps that will be involved to achieve your end result. To help you prepare, here is an example of a real life project.

### PROJECT EXAMPLE

You are outsourcing the scanning of 5,000 slides from your art history library. Your vendor will deliver 20mb TIFF files to you on CD's. These files will be raw scans; they are not cropped to the image, nor are they optimized.

#### You need a Photoshop technician to do the following:

1. Transfer files from CD's to hard drive on a Mac or PC.
2. Open each TIFF file in Photoshop CS.
3. Check filenames against accession numbers on slides.
4. Crop to the artwork.
5. Scale to 3,000 pixels on the long dimension. Set to 300ppi.
6. Adjust color, density and contrast using levels or curves<sup>1</sup>.
7. Zoom in to 100% and check for dust. Eliminate dust if found.<sup>2</sup>
8. Use Unsharp Mask to sharpen the 3,000 pixel TIFF to your standards.
9. Save the file as an uncompressed RGB TIFF, using desired filenames (if not already set) into a folder called "Main Files" on a network drive.
10. Create a 1,000 pixel long derivative at 150 ppi.
11. Save this first derivative as a level 12 JPEG into a folder called "Projection" on a network drive.
12. Create a second derivative from the original TIFF file.<sup>3</sup> This should be 400 pixels on the long dimension at 72 ppi.
13. Save the second derivative as a level 6 JPEG into a folder called "Thumbnails" on a network drive.
14. Close the main file and go onto TIFF #2.

When you consider someone will do this 5,000 times, you see why we call it detailed and repetitive work. Some people love doing this and you can find them with effective assessment tools.

### Step Three – The Test

Setup a controlled environment where applicants do the above 14 steps on your files, on your computers and in your facility. In the above example, assuming a reasonably powerful computer, at least 512mb of RAM and a fast hard drive, a good technician would complete the above work in about two minutes per file. If the scans are very clean, it might only take one minute per file or less. Some of the work can even be automated using Photoshop actions. Advanced Photoshop users always look for ways to use the automation features in the program.

Put 10 sample TIFF image files (with some dust) on a CD and use that for the test. Have all applicants work on the same ten files. This is the only way to accurately compare quality and speed.

Create a folder on the server (or on the local machine) with the applicants name and have them put the three folders they create (and the 30 related files) into their folder.

Print out a list of tasks to perform and have this ready for each applicant. Describe your project and show them the computer they will use for the test. Tell them they are creating archive files as TIFF's and smaller JPEG files for on-screen viewing. Ask if they have any questions about the computer or the project. Give them the list of tasks and answer any questions they may have.

*Important Lesson #2 – There are at least ten different ways to do any task in Photoshop. Let the applicant know you don't care how they create the 30 files, but you do care about quality and speed.*

Have the applicant start the test. Write down the time they start. Get this time from the clock on the computer they are using. It is important to use that clock since you will be comparing their start time to the time recorded by the computer as they save their new files.

Tell them to bring the task list back to you when they are done.

*Important Lesson #3 – Don't scare the applicant by using a stopwatch, but do realize that if they can't work under pressure, or if they don't feel that quality work can be done quickly, this person won't succeed on a large project with a deadline.*

You probably won't know in advance what to expect in terms of time. As we said, a highly qualified technician will probably do each image (actually a set of 3 files) in two to three minutes, meaning they would take 20 – 30 minutes to do all ten. But so much depends on your equipment and how bad the files are. You will know more once you have run a few applicants through the test.

If someone is still working after twice the "normal" amount of time (say 40 minutes), ask them how its going. If they aren't close to being done, have them stop in five more minutes.

## Step Four – Evaluating the Results

Review the test results and look for quality as well as attention to detail. You can use the chart below to score each set of test results, or create your own. You will also measure the time it takes for each applicant to complete the test.

#	Description	Score	Possible	Notes
1.	File Naming		5	Attention to detail
2.	Folder Naming		5	Attention to detail
3.	<i>Other Detail Items</i>		(-5)	Deduct for other problems
4.	Color		10	Accurate
5.	Density		5	Accurate
6.	Contrast		5	Accurate
7.	Saturation		5	Accurate (not over saturated)
8.	Sharpness		10	Careful about over sharpening
9.	Image Sizes & Resolution		10	Check settings on all 30 files
10.	Dust		10	Check at 100%
11.	Edge Crop		5	Accurate crop without rough border
12.	Derivatives		5	Do they match main TIFF file?
13.	<i>Other Image Quality Items</i>		-5	Deduct for other problems
14.	Time		25	Give 25 points to fastest applicant
	<b>TOTAL SCORE</b>		100	<b>Total possible = 100 points</b>

Items #1 and 2 measure their attention to detail and to your instructions. In most cases, they will get 5 points for each of these, or get zero. If they made one typo, you might give them a 4.

Item #3, *Other Detail Items*, is where you reduce the score for other “attention to detail” items.

Items #4 – 12 relate to image quality. You need someone who knows how to judge a good digital image for this part of the evaluation. The main file must not be too contrasty or over saturated. This is a sign of a file in which information has been lost. Color should be accurate. Also look for over sharpening. Once a file has been over sharpened, you can't get it back.<sup>4</sup> Also, since the smaller files should have been created from the “final TIFF,” there should be no difference at all in color, density, contrast or saturation between these. Reduce the score for any of these problems.

Item #13, *Other Image Quality Items*, is another score reduction area for problems found in the files.

Item #14, Time, is measured by noting the Date/Time Modified for the files they created. Find the *latest time* stamped by the computer (Windows Explorer or Mac Finder) for the files created by the applicant. From that, subtract the start time you had noted when they began. The person taking the least amount of time to do the ten files (assuming their quality is acceptable), gets 25 points. The slowest person gets zero points for Time. You can interpolate for the people in between.

You will be surprised by the huge variation in time between different people. We have had people complete the test in 15 minutes with very good results. Others took over an hour and only finished three files! All the applicants claimed to be “Photoshop experts.”

<sup>1</sup> Part of the quality checking of your vendor provided files includes knowing if the scans require excessive adjustment. Technicians need to let you know of problems like this.

<sup>2</sup> Again, this is quality checking and you need to know if techs are spending too much time cleaning up dirty scans.

<sup>3</sup> All derivatives should be created from uncompressed TIFF files. Never resave a jpeg file.

<sup>4</sup> The main TIFF file should appear to be “in focus” but there should be no sign of pixelization. The derivate jpegs can look crisper as they are designed for viewing, not printing or subsequent derivative production.