Photography Backup Workflow Cheat Sheet

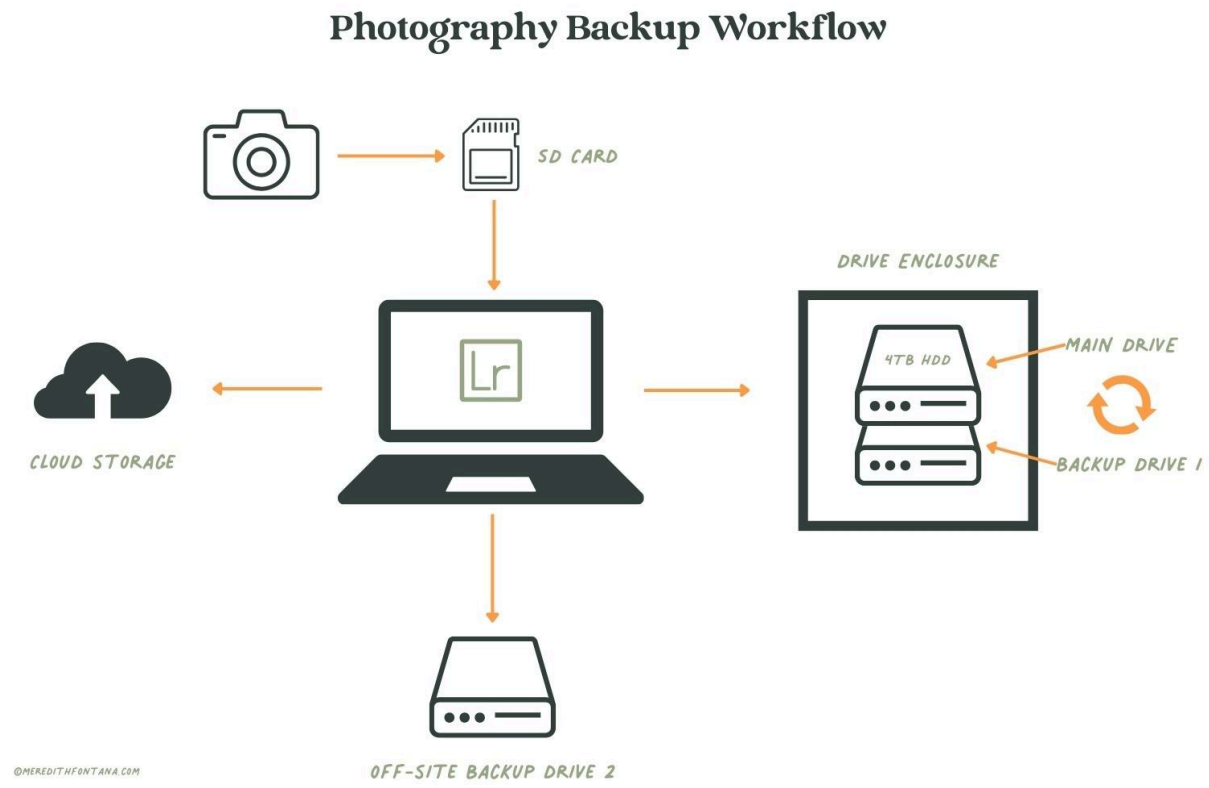
My Photography Backup Workflow

This is the exact series of steps that I take once I come home from a photoshoot and am ready to upload the photos from my camera's memory card into my photography backup system.

This system ensures that I am following the 3-2-1 rule, and it significantly reduces the likelihood that I will ever lose any of my images.

To learn more about professional backup strategies for photographers, please check out my complete guide here.

The following diagram outlines my workflow. Use it to follow along with each step below.



1. Connect hard drive enclosure to computer

First, I plug my hard drive enclosure into my computer using a USB 3.0 cable and turn it on.

My drive enclosure has 4 hard drive bays, and I always have two hard drives docked and connected inside of the enclosure.

One drive is the main drive (where all of my raw photo files are imported), and the second one is the backup drive (where duplicate copies of my photos from the main drive are stored).

The hard drives I use in my drive enclosure are HDDs. The specific type of HDDs I use are called SATA drives. The exact drives that I use are Seagate IronWolf Pro 4 Terabyte SATA drives.

I use these drives because they are relatively cheap for the large amount of data they hold, and they are compatible with both my drive enclosure and NAS systems. You can get these drives with much larger storage capacities - all the way up to 22 terabytes. I don't use NAS but if I ever get one, I could swap the drives that I use now into the NAS and continue to use them.

2. Plug memory card into computer

Next, I remove the SD memory card from my camera and insert it into my computer.

I use two memory cards inside of my camera when shooting: a CFexpress card and an SD card. The CFexpress card is the main card, and the SD card is set as a backup.

I usually leave the CFexpress card in the camera to keep a safe backup of my images until the entire photo import and backup process that I will describe next is complete.

3. Import images into Lightroom Classic

Next, I open up Lightroom and click "import" on the bottom left corner of the application.

The memory card should appear in the left-hand panel under "Select a source."

When I import my files into Lightroom, I have my import settings set up so that all of my imported raw files are copied onto a single folder on my main hard drive (see step 1).

I do this to:

1. keep all of my raw files isolated in a separate location
2. Keep files off of my computer's internal hard drive so that it doesn't bog down my computer's memory

You can set the destination folder that you want your files copied to inside of the "Destination" panel on the right-hand side of the import window. For my exact import workflow and settings, please see this cheat sheet here or watch my Lightroom Photo Organization Course where I go over how to do this step-by-step.

Tip: Isolating your files is important to prevent them from getting permanently altered or deleted.

I keep all of my raw files (literally every photo I've ever taken) isolated in a single folder on my main hard drive. These are never touched, moved, organized, renamed, or even edited. This is to ensure that I always have original copies of all of my raw files in the exact state that they were taken from my camera. Isolating my raw files in this way ensures that I always have an

original copy of my files in case one gets deleted or permanently altered during the editing process.

I also do all of my photo editing in Photoshop after exporting a copy of a photo I want to edit into a new folder that is dedicated to storing raw files that I want to edit. This prevents me from permanently altering one of my raw files on my main hard drive and ensures that I always have a backup that is isolated and untouched on my external hard drive.

Tip: Organize your photos in Lightroom, not in folders on your desktop or external drives.

As I mentioned, all of my raw files are held in a single folder on my main external drive (housed in my drive enclosure). This means I store thousands of raw files in a single folder on that drive. I only organize my images in Lightroom using smart collections that reference these raw files on my external hard drive. These collections do not alter or move the files from whatever folder or directory they are stored in, so I never have to worry about my raw files getting moved or lost.

4. Check to make sure photos have been copied to the main drive

After importing the raw files from my memory card into my Lightroom catalog, I check to make sure that all of the files from the memory card have been added to my main external hard drive.

Since I always have my import setting set to “copy” the files on import, I should have copies of the photos I just imported still on the memory card and now also on my main drive.

5. Backup photos on a second hard drive

If everything looks good and the raw files have been successfully copied onto the main drive, I will then use Carbon Copy Cloner to copy all of the raw files on my main drive onto a second external hard drive.

This second drive is the other SATA HDD mentioned in step one that I keep docked with the main drive in my drive enclosure.

The purpose of the second hard drive (or backup drive) is to back up my main external drive.

The goal is to have every file on the main drive duplicated onto the backup drive.

Hard drives can fail, so if my main drive ever fails, I always have duplicate copies of my raw files safe (hopefully) on my backup drive.

Carbon Copy Cloner is an easy-to-use software that will sync the files from your main hard drive to your backup hard drive, making them virtually identical. I have been using this tool for years and it works amazingly well, however, it only works on a Mac. If you use a PC, I’ve heard good things about Acronis for syncing your drives, but I have never personally used it.

Tip: A hard drive enclosure makes it easy to store and sync your main and backup hard drive.

It helps you avoid having lots of external hard drives lying around that you have to plug in individually (at the same time) in order to sync them together.

If you don't use a hard drive enclosure to manage your drives, you can use Carbon Copy Cloner or another syncing software to sync any two internal or external drives that you want.

6. Create an off-site hard drive backup

As extra insurance and to make sure I'm following the 3-2-1 backup guidelines, I always make a second backup on a third external hard drive that I keep at an off-site location away from home. This counts as an off-site backup (the "1" requirement in the 3-2-1 rule).

I keep this third drive at my mom's house, which is about 30 miles from my house. About once a month, I will swap a backup drive from home with the backup drive at her house. Once I get the external drive from my mom's house back to my house, I will sync it with my main drive using Carbon Copy Cloner so that all of the new raw files that I have imported over the last month are copied (but not duplicated) onto the backup drive.

I continue to swap out these backups every month so that I always have an updated backup hard drive at an off-site location.

Tip: It's a best practice to keep your off-site drive at least a few miles away from your home where you keep your main and second backup drive. This can be at the home of a friend or family member. The point of this is to always have a backup of your images at a separate location in case you lose your two drives at home due to a robbery, fire, etc.

7. Upload photos to the cloud (optional)

As extra insurance and to have a second off-site backup, I upload all of my raw files onto Amazon Photos. This counts as an off-site backup (the "1" requirement in the 3-2-1 rule).

I didn't always use to do this because large raw files take so long to upload to cloud services. If you don't have fast internet, I would not recommend uploading your raw files to the cloud.

If you prefer not to deal with uploading photos to the cloud, use the other off-site backup strategy I explain in step 6 above.

As I mentioned in the article (above), I use Amazon Photos because you get unlimited photo storage included in a Prime membership. This is an awesome deal if you have Prime!

Tip: Most cloud services offer a desktop application that you can download to your computer. These allow you to select which drive you would like to sync to the cloud without having to do so through your web browser. I set my Amazon Photos app to sync to my main drive. These apps also let you sync files automatically so that your cloud always stays up-to-date with any changes you make to your main drive.

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