To SQUISH or not to SQUISH:
JPEG – compressing your photos

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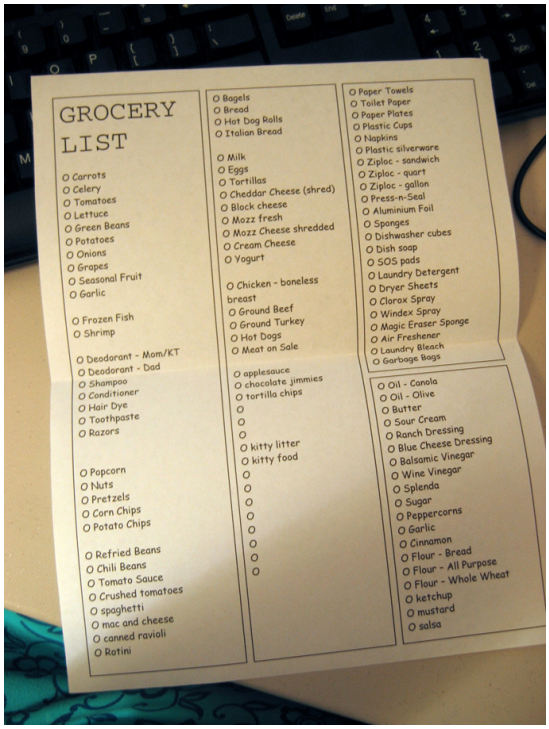
JPEG (or Joint Photographic Experts Group) is the format in which we most often save our images. This format was agreed upon by the Joint Photographic Experts Group a long long time ago (in a galaxy far, far away?) for compressing images. By using a single standard compression method, the Group ensured that images saved by your camera can be read by your computer, or my computer, or the computer at WalMart… you get the idea.

The problem with JPEG is… you don't want to save an image as a .jpg file too many times. "Why?" you ask? Let me show you:



When you take a photo, your camera compresses it to fit it onto the camera card.

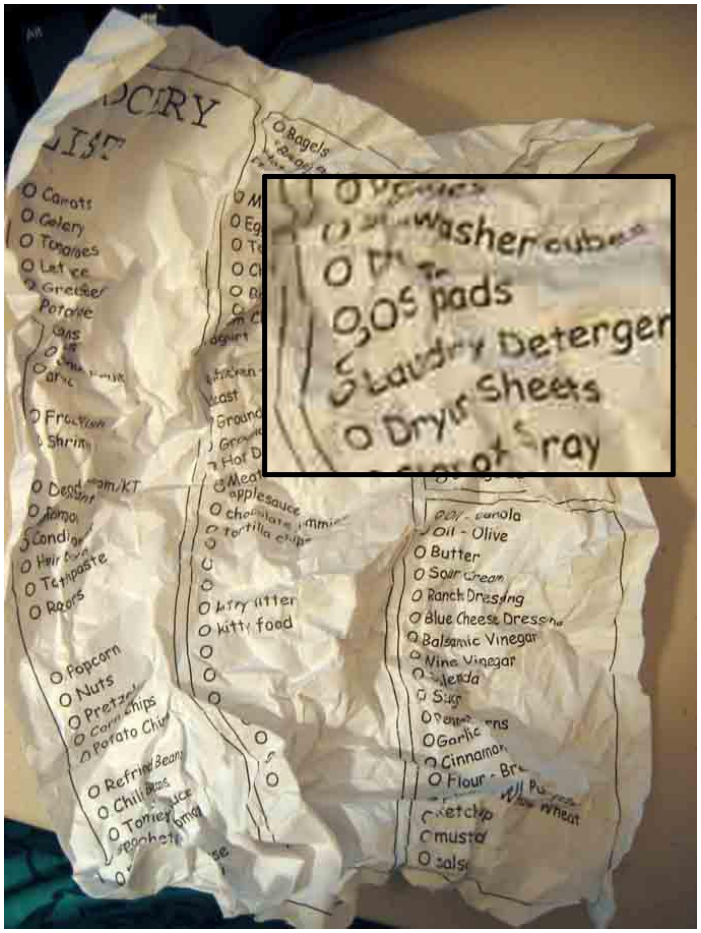
This can be compared to folding a piece of paper in half. When you open it back up, the fold is there, but doesn't substantially change the image, it's still readable easily.

When you open that image the first time, it will look practically perfect!

IF you just close the file, without making any changes or saving it, you do not affect the file. BUT…

Let's say you correct the red eye, then save again, choosing the .jpg format. This will compress your photo AGAIN, just like folding it again.

On our paper, folding it several times does not make it impossible to read, but harder, and some of the details in the folds may be hard to make out. (as at right.)



NOW – let's say you open a photo, change the redeye and save it. Then you come back later and fix the brightness and save it. Then you change it to B&W, and save it as a different file, but still as a .jpg. THEN you put it on your layout, and save that. THEN you open up that layout, resize it, and save as .jpg again.

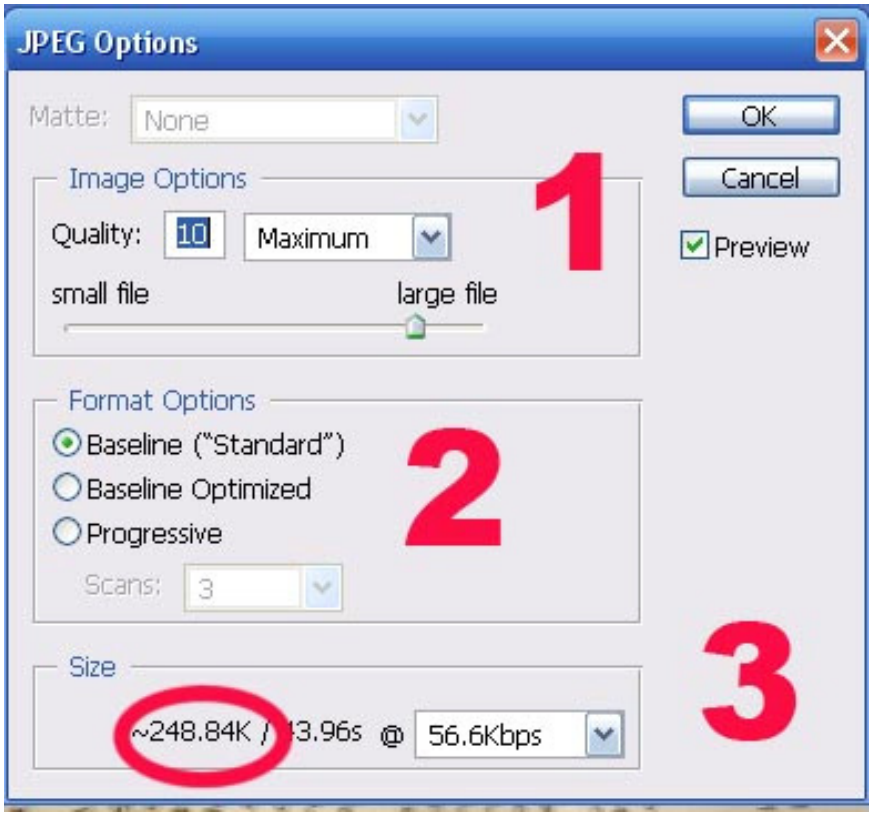
If we compressed our paper that much, we'd end up with a crumpled mess, we could still make out what it was, but it wouldn't be anything we'd want to work with!

When you compress your photos too much, you end up with artifacts as in the inset at left. Look closely around the letters, see the funny looing light spots? Those are a result of extreme or repeated compression.

I see layouts in galleries all the time with these artifacts. Partly because people have saved the image or portions of the image over and over, and partly because their compression rate was set too low.

"TOO LOW? Do I SET that??" you say?

Yes, you do. Here is the dialog box you get when you select JPEG as your file format:



1. Quality – this is where you set that compression rate. You can choose a setting from 0 (low) to 12 (Maximim). As indicated on the slider in the box, the lower number makes a smaller file.

2. Format Options – you don't need to mess with this, leave it on standard.

3. Size- if you wait a second after changing the number under quality, you will see the size of the compressed file at the bottom. This can be useful if you are trying to upload to a gallery that has size limitations on your files.

DON'T BE TEMPTED to compress your file a whole lot (to LOW) to meet those limits, better to resize your image and try again.

WHEN SAVING TO PRINT – save at the MAXIMUM settings.

So here's how we recommend saving your work:

1. If you think you still will make changes to your work, then save as a .psd file. This does not compress the image at all, you can open and save the image a zillion times with no bad effects!

2. When you are DONE done:

a. if you plan on printing the layout, save at the Maximum compression. (Even a 10 is usually ok for most things)

b. if you are uploading or only viewing on a screen (TV, DVD) then RESIZE your image to 72ppi. This will automatically make the file size much smaller, and not require as much compression. (For a discussion on ppi or pixels per inch, look here: http://scrapkittydesign.blogspot.com/2006/08/lesson-on-pixels.html) Then you can save the file and choose a medium or high compression level.

Thanks for reading, we hope this helps you understand image compression!

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