

# Tech Talk

Navigating the world of technology one gadget at a time  
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## Organizing, Editing, and Displaying Digital Photographs

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### I've got a bunch of digital pictures. What can I do with them?

The recent holiday gift-giving season has spawned many first-time digital camera owners. Digital cameras, which capture images on memory cards instead of film, have grown in popularity over the past few years (see Tech Talk: Vol. 1, No. 3). Featuring many of the same controls as film cameras, bright LCD screens which allow users to preview pictures before taking them, and physically small, yet capacious memory cards (see Figure 1), these cameras make it easier than ever to quickly amass a large number of photographs.

Unlike film cameras, where your decisions begin and end with selecting a photofinisher, digital photography gives you more control over the output. You get to choose which of the images to keep, edit, and print, how you want to print them (at home or via a commercial service), and whether to share the images over the Internet with others. This series of choices can be daunting to a newcomer.



Figure 1: This memory card, the size of a U.S. Quarter, can hold over 200 digital pictures from a megapixel (6MP) digital camera.

Tech Talk to the rescue. This issue will guide you through the steps necessary to get your pictures into final form. Once you learn the options available, you may find working with digital images to be more convenient than the traditional develop-and-print routine.

### Step One: Transfer the photos to your computer

Using the cable which came with your camera (or, optionally, a memory card reader), copy the picture files to your computer. Fortunately, many digital cameras come with software which automatically copies new photos to your computer when it detects an attached camera.

## Step Two: Organize your photos

If you are copying your photos from your camera manually, the simplest means of organizing photos is to keep them in separate folders on your computer according to event or date. For example, birthday party photos could be organized in any of these ways:

- \My Documents\My Pictures\Carla 12th Birthday\
- \My Documents\My Pictures\2006\_0822\Carla Birthday\
- \My Documents\My Pictures\Family Photos\Carla\

This directory-based organization scheme can be effective if you are consistent in your naming conventions.

Another organizational technique relies on special software to organize all of your digital images. These programs let you assign descriptive words (called keywords) to photos to make them easier to find later. For example, if you religiously assign keywords (a process called tagging), you will easily find every photograph taken of Carla at grandma's house, or every photo with Fido in the frame.

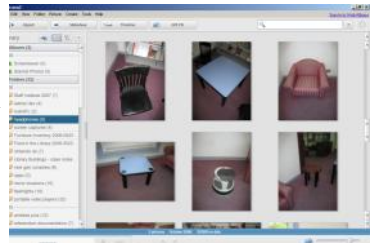


Figure 2: Picasa, a full-featured digital image manager, is free.

Your camera's software may allow you to assign keywords. Alternatively, on Windows computers, programs like Picasa (see Figure 2) and Adobe Photoshop Elements are good bets for photo organization, as is Apple's excellent iPhoto for Macintosh computers. On Linux, F-Spot is popular.

## Step Three: Edit your photos

Today's digital cameras are capable of taking pictures which look fine as is, but most images can benefit from a few minor tweaks on the computer. All of the image management tools mentioned in the previous example offer easy-to-use editing tools to enhance photos. With a bit of editing, you can significantly improve your photos (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: Digital photograph before editing (left) and after editing (right).

For example, editing allows you to:

- **Crop:** Remove a distracting fire hydrant from the side of your photo or zoom in on your main subject to fill the frame.

- **Enhance contrast:** This is one of the easiest ways to improve a photograph. Simply click the “auto contrast” button and achieve a marked improvement in many cases.
- **Straighten:** Despite your best attempts to keep the camera parallel to the ground, your subject may be askew in the frame. The straighten tool lets you quickly fix this problem.
- **Remove a color cast:** If your photos look overly blue, green, or some other color, check to see if there is a “color temperature” control (often a horizontal slider). Simply move the control back and forth, and you may be able to find a setting which make the colors look more natural.
- **Sharpen:** You can sometimes make digital pictures look more crisp by using the sharpen tool. Don’t overdo it, though. Photos with excessive sharpening have an unpleasantly harsh and etched look to them.

Don’t be afraid to give basic digital photo editing a try. Most software packages for the general user make it easy to achieve impressive results.

#### Step Four: Print your photos

Here’s where it gets interesting. You have a number of choices in turning your image from a digital file to a printed photograph. Each is capable of producing a finished product which looks just as good as a traditional photograph. The great thing about digital photos is that you can print only the really good ones; there’s no need to print the rejects. Here are a few of your printing options:

- **Print them at home:** A inkjet printer can provide excellent results, but avoid bottom-of-the-line (sub \$100) models if you seek photo quality output. If print longevity is a concern, pick an inkjet that uses pigment-based inks rather than dye-based inks. Finally, if you tend to print only 4 x 6 inch photos, a pint-sized “snapshot printer” may be a perfect choice.
- **Use an online service to order prints for delivery:** Online services like Shutterfly (<http://www.shutterfly.com>) and Kodak EasyShare Gallery (<http://www.kodakgallery.com/>) allow you to upload your photographs to their Web site. Once they are on the remote servers, you can select which pictures to have printed and mailed to you.
- **Use an online service to order prints for local pickup:** This is essentially the same process as in the preceding option, but with local pickup instead of delivery. National retailers such as Wal-mart, Walgreens, Costco, and Target offer this convenient service to their customers. In many cases, your photos will be ready for pickup within an hour of submission.
- **Use an in-store kiosk to print photos:** Many retailers have self-serve photofinishing machines which read your camera’s memory cards. These machines can make prints in many sizes, or, in some cases, elaborate creations like greeting cards. Kiosks can be exceptionally convenient for spur-of-the-moment prints, provided you have your digital camera or memory card at hand.

## What else can I do with my digital pictures?

Some people are content to leave their pictures in the digital realm and never commit them to paper. This doesn't have to mean that they have to stay hidden away in a dusty corner of your hard drive. Consider these possibilities:

- **Email them to loved ones:** Using a digital photo manager like Picasa, emailing is a piece of cake. Simply select the photos you want to send, press the email button, and enter the email addresses of your recipients. Picasa can even shrink the images so they take less time to download.
- **Make them available online for others to see:** Sites like Flickr (<http://www.flickr.com/>) and Fotki (<http://www.fotki.com/>) allow you to upload, tag, and share your photographs with friends, family, and the rest of the world. Commercial photo printing sites like Shutterfly and Kodak EasyShare Gallery provide some online sharing too.
- **Display them with a digital picture frame:** For a mere \$75 to \$300, you can buy a digital picture frame which displays your photos on a miniature flat-panel monitor. They often come with a tiny remote control to allow you to advance to the next picture or rotate the image 90 degrees if necessary. Higher-priced units have larger screens and are capable of displaying more detail than the inexpensive frames. Please note: Some models may require a monthly subscription fee and Internet access, while others simply allow you to insert your memory card into a slot. Read the fine print to see how you load your pictures.

## Final Thoughts

The world of digital photography can be a bit daunting to the neophyte. Thankfully, camera manufacturers and software companies have gone out of their way to make the process easy for the average person. With free tools like Picasa, anyone with basic computer skills can organize, edit, and print photos with results that are every bit as good as film prints from the local drugstore. In addition, the ability to easily email and share photos online makes it easier than ever to keep friends and family in the loop.

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