

Top Photo-Editing Tips

Dashing off your photos on e-mail? Follow our essential tips to prepare your digital images before you send them. Your recipients will be glad you did.

By [Dave Johnson, PCWorld](#) Sep 18, 2002 4:00 am

Digital camera in hand, you mingle with friends and family on the lawn for the last big summer BBQ. As you take a few pictures, though, they all approach you, one by one--and beg for copies.

Wait a minute. That wasn't part of the plan! Now you need to turn around and e-mail shots from this photo collection. And when you sit at your PC later and examine the images, you realize that they're not your best work. Some are crooked, others have *Omen*-esque red-eye. Others are dark and murky--guess the flash didn't fire.

Don't worry, though. Here are ten quick and easy ways to fix your photos and make them look so good you won't have any qualms when you click *Send*.

1. Stop Looking Sideways: Rotate the Picture

Cameras don't take square pictures; they take rectangular ones. To frame a scene that's taller than it is wide, you probably turned the camera on its side before you snapped the shutter release. That's great, but don't send those sideways pictures to your friends. Turn them right side up first.

You can rotate your sideways pictures in almost any image-editing program. In [Paint Shop Pro](#), open the picture and choose *Image, Rotate* and turn it to the left or the right by an even 90 degrees. If you have Windows Me or Windows XP, it's even easier. Just double-click a picture to open it in the Windows Picture and Fax Viewer. Then click the *Rotate Clockwise* or *Rotate Counterclockwise* buttons at the bottom of the screen.

2. Seasick? Straighten the Picture

In the rush to take a photo, we don't always get the camera perfectly level--and that adds up to photos in which the horizon is slightly askew, as if you had shot the pictures from a sailboat. Fear not. Crooked digital photos are nearly as easy to straighten as picture frames hanging on your wall. (And they're more likely to stay straight after you fix them, too.)

All you need is an image editor that lets you rotate pictures a degree at a time, and most programs have this feature hidden somewhere in the Edit or Image menus. Look for an option to rotate the picture and enter a very small value, like one degree to the left or right (depending upon which way you need to adjust the photo).

In [Paint Shop Pro](#), click *Image, Rotate* and check the radio button beside *Free*. Then enter your small value. If that doesn't fix the problem, undo your edit (choose *Edit, Undo*) and try again with a

different number. You can rotate your photo by fractions of a degree, like 0.7 or 1.4 or 2.5. When you experiment, always undo your last rotation and try again from the original version; if you pile rotations on top of rotations, you can create noticeable "glitches" or blurriness in your photo.

3. Crop Away the Background

In your mind's eye, the picture may have been a shot of your nephew's birthday cake. But now that you see it on your PC, you realize that you didn't zoom in very far--so you've taken a picture of half the room as well. Use your image editor's cropping tool to cut away the unwanted part of the picture and isolate just the meat of the scene.

In most image editors, the cropping tool lives in the tool palette and looks like a picture frame. Click the cropping icon and, as you hold your cursor down at a starting point, use the tool to draw a rectangle inside the picture. Arrange the crop mark to re-compose your photo and discard the unwanted background. To do this in Paint Shop Pro, draw your rectangle, then click the *Crop Image* button in the Tool Option box that floats around on the screen.

4. Shine Some Light in the Darkness

Is your photo too dark? A slight underexposure can ruin an otherwise great photo, so punch up the brightness a bit to give it some life. Try your image editor's gamma control--a tool that's designed to brighten the darkest parts of the picture without "overexposing" the parts that are already bright. If your image editor offers gamma control, you'll usually find the feature in menus like Colors or Image. Some programs, such as Microsoft Photo Editor, let you access the tool (Image Balance) from the toolbar.

In Paint Shop Pro, choose *Colors, Adjust, Gamma Correction*. You can raise the gamma as high as 1.3 or 1.4 in many pictures before the scene gets too washed out. But whatever level you choose, be sure to keep an eye on the evolving picture as you experiment with each setting.

5. Zap the Red-Eye

Using your camera's flash can sometimes cause the dreaded red-eye effect. If your photos look like they're filled with demonic partygoers, you can zap the red-eye out of your shots automatically in many image editors. In Paint Shop Pro, choose *Effects, Enhance Photo, Red-Eye Removal*, then zoom in on the red eyes and create a circle of color directly over the red spot.

If you have a basic image editor, like Irfan Skiljan's [IrfanView](#) or Microsoft Paint, that doesn't have an auto-correction tool, just zoom in on the eyes and paint over the red with a natural-looking shade of black or blue.

Remember that you don't have to be Picasso to eliminate red-eye convincingly. When you zoom back out, the eyes will be small enough that your brushwork should look more than adequate. The important thing is to paint over the red.

6. Would You Like Text With That Photo?

You can add a caption to identify the people in the picture, the location, or the date of the event using almost any image editor. Find the *Text* tool in your program's tool palette. In most programs, the icon is often the letter A or T. Enter the text you want, and set the font and text size to your liking. Look for a fat font, because skinny ones are often hard to read in a digital picture.

Some paint programs, like Paint Shop Pro, require you to click on the photo in the spot where you want the text to appear before you can type your caption. Other programs, like Adobe PhotoShop Elements, let you type directly on the picture. Either way, don't forget about the Undo tool if the text doesn't turn out exactly the way you like.

7. Make Your Pics E-Mail-Friendly

When your photo is finally ready to send, be considerate to your recipient by resizing it for e-mail. If you attach a bunch of huge 3-megapixel images to an e-mail message, you can bog down your recipient's in-box with a huge file. The message will take a long time to send and receive as well.

Open your image editor and resize each picture first. In Paint Shop Pro, choose *Image, Resize* and shrink the photo down to about 640 by 480 pixels. If you have an older digital camera that takes pictures at this size to begin with, don't worry about resizing--they're ready to send. (Windows XP will automatically resize photos when you send them from the pop-up menu. The original pic remains intact and unreduced.)

8. Create Easy File Names

After you download your digital pics, you'll probably end up with file names consisting of zeros and other random digits or letters. When sending your photos as attachments, be sure to rename the files so that they make some sense. "SteveWithCake.jpg" is instantly recognizable, while "000002031.jpg" looks like something that belongs in some obscure folder deep inside your computer's system files.

Speaking of attachments, how your friends and family receive your photos at the other end is another matter. Preferences vary. Some people prefer an attachment rather than a direct paste of your photo in the body of the e-mail message; images pasted into the e-mail can be too hard to tinker with at the other end. Consider this before you paste the photo into the e-mail. (Even better: Ask people what they prefer.)

Remember that even if you do send your photos as attachments, images often get pasted into the e-mail automatically at the other end if your recipient's e-mail program is configured for HTML mail.

9. Do a Rehearsal: E-Mail Yourself

If you want to make sure your friends will speak to you again after they receive your first set of digital pics, why not e-mail the batch to yourself? It never hurts to do a run-through, until you get the hang of it. You'll get to see first-hand what your photos look like at the other end.

If your e-mail program hangs while you're trying to open your message, then you know that something is up. Just go back and see if some resizing will solve the problem.

10. Make a Slideshow

The great thing about digital photos is how much freedom you have to create the perfect package for your friends and family. You can send single images, a group of photos, or even a complete slideshow, with music and text.

If you want to make a multimedia slideshow out of your photos, give a program like [PhotonShow](#) a spin. The basic version, at \$29, is inexpensive, but it lets you combine your digital images with a wide assortment of clever backgrounds and slide-show themes.

You can add voice narration and MP3 music to your show; the program also lets you tweak images with red-eye removal, color adjustment, rotation, and sharpening tools. When you're done, you can load the completed slideshow onto a Web site where others can view it, or copy the show onto a CD-R disc and mail it to friends and family.

If you have a ton of photos--and you're reluctant to clog up your recipients' e-mail in-boxes--consider trying one of the many Web services that let you post your photos online for all to see. [Ofoto](#), [Shutterfly](#), and [Picturetrail](#), for example, offer basic photo-sharing services for free.