

ST. LOUIS CAMERA CLUB: GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVE JUDGING

“When one has finally built up the courage and chosen to share an image, it is often the critique and not the score that will determine if the maker will try again or stop sharing their images” (and possibly not return to camera club)...John Meek, PSA.

Purpose

These guidelines were developed as a resource for individuals who are asked to evaluate images in St. Louis Camera Club photography competitions. They provide a framework for image evaluation and selection that promotes fair and constructive judging while, at the same time, making the experience educational and enjoyable for participants and judges alike.

These guidelines are not intended as hard and fast rules. Just as good photography cannot be reduced to a formulaic approach, there is no single correct way to evaluate images, and judges are encouraged to rely on their own unique styles and methods. There are some criteria, however, that can be applied to assure a fairer and more balanced assessment of competition entries.

This information was compiled from a variety of sources and contributors. Please see the “References” section at the end of this document for credits and additional information.

Evaluating an Image

I. What the image communicates - the “Message”...¹

This can be defined as the impression and impact the picture has on the viewer, the qualities it expresses and how the maker achieved the feeling.

It is important to develop the ability to feel a picture in addition to visualizing it. More

often than not, it is very hard to verbalize the feelings and emotions that a picture conveys. A judge who finds it difficult to express emotions stirred by an image should not feel inadequate; most people find it is difficult to verbalize these clearly. Like all abilities, this improves with practice and preparation and can add tremendous value to a judge's comments.

It is not essential for a judge to determine what the image maker was trying to communicate. More important are the feelings and thoughts it produces in the mind of the viewer. A good picture catalyzes different reactions in different people. A picture's ambiguity can be its greatest strength, allowing viewers to project on the image their own thoughts, feelings and imagination.

Components of a picture's message can include¹:

- **The statement or story-telling aspects,**
- **an idea, inventiveness or unique creativeness,**
- **an interpretation of beauty, or**
- **other “qualities” of the subject.**

Different photographers identify with the same subject in varied ways and good judging requires allowing for this. Differences in photographic taste and experience will show in the entries and judging. Judges should try to clear their minds of subject prejudice (easier said than done) so they might better appreciate the visual diversity of the submissions². This diversity is essential to the education of camera club members and to the growth and continued interest of all club members.

II. The content of the image – the “Medium”...¹

Both the choice of subject and how it is dealt with is important. It is often the uniqueness of the presentation that makes the image stand out. Important considerations include:

- **the composition**
- **what is included in and excluded**
- **the choice of background or setting for the chosen subject**
- **the interpretation of movement**
- **color and tone balance**
- **exploitation of perspective**
- **capturing “the moment”**
- **a sense of place**
- **exploring the subject**
- **pattern, texture line and form**
- **choice of format - horizontal or vertical**

III. The technical aspects of the image...¹

In assessing the technical merits of the picture, judges should consider

- **the choice and control of lighting,**
- **handling of tonal range and color**
- **proper exposure,**
- **sharpness or lack of it in the picture depending on the subject, and**
- **presentation of the picture, i.e., mounts for prints, cropping of slides.**

Based on his or her preferences and the photographs under consideration, the judge should decide on the appropriate weighting of the three components discussed above.

AVOID THESE PITFALLS...

Over adherence to “rules of composition”²

While the conventional rules of composition can be very instructive, judges are encouraged to avoid over adherence to those rules. For example, following the “rule of thirds” often makes for an effective composition but there are times when a centered subject is equally dramatic. Likewise, a diagonal composition isn’t always preferable to a vertical or horizontal presentation

Failure to see the merits of the picture as a whole¹

A photograph is not simply a collection of technical components. The image, as a whole, has qualities which transcend the parts of which it is made. It is generally better not to overly dissect a picture or too closely scrutinize a particular section of the photograph without first assessing the whole. Judges should not dwell on or comment at great length on problems like a bright area on the edge of a picture, a minor imperfection, an awkward mount, or an out-of-focus region in the foreground, without first considering the overall picture. When presented in a constructive and balanced fashion (and, only after completing a general assessment of the image), comments on specific technical deficiencies can be helpful for the photographer and the audience alike.

Critical rather than constructive commentary or approach^{1,3}

Consider "pluses" as well as "minuses" in commenting and scoring. Judging is done for instruction as well as selection. Some judges work on the premise that judging means finding out what is wrong with a picture or selecting the one with the least faults. That approach is not likely to be constructive. It is important to keep in mind that the manner in which the commentary is presented greatly affects the picture maker’s ability to hear the critique. Judges should be positive and sensitive to the feelings of the

image maker to support the learning environment of the club. On rare occasions when criticism is warranted, it should be done politely and non-judgmentally.

Avoid snap judging based on sensory overload²

Snap judging caused by initial sensory overload, e.g., emotional subject or theme, should be avoided until the image is fully considered.

Consideration given to effort in getting or making of the image¹

One should judge an image based on its merits, not on how difficult it may have been to capture or create.

Avoid the temptation to over describe an image

Judges should avoid trying to describe in detail where a picture was shot, how it was shot or exactly what it is unless he or she is 100% certain. In most cases it is best to stick to the image that is in front of you.

Closing ideas

Good judges discuss why an image is successful and how its component strengths contribute to its overall success. Positive information is a powerful teaching tool. Effective judging involves explaining opinions, both positive and negative, in a constructive fashion. Expressing an opinion without a supporting explanation is of lesser value because it provides little opportunity for learning.

Good judging is uniformly consistent in its commentary and selection. It requires mental preparation and familiarity with section rules (i.e., color, nature, photo-travel, and photojournalism) and the selection process. Club judging procedures should be reviewed prior to a competition; section and theme considerations should be understood and adhered to. Be aware of the general range of

quality (what section you are evaluating) in the photos to be judged so that your commentary is commensurate with the images. Fair evaluation of all images can only take place if the judges take care to consider each entry in its best “light”, be it print or projected.

Finally, let it be known that good judging is hard. We all recognize that it is easier to criticize than to constructively comment and this applies to both competitor and judge alike. Effective judging is of critical importance to the education and ongoing viability of our camera club. Those asked to judge the work of their peers have been given a high honor. The entrants deserve the judge’s respect and best efforts in evaluating their images.

References:

Material in these guidelines is taken from and based in part on the following references:

¹ Sethna, Eddy, An Analysis of Judging http://www.btinternet.com/~eddy.sethna/thoughts_on_judging.htm

² Aksoy, Mark, The Eleven-Fold Path to the Zen of Good Photo judging, Delaware County Camera Club <http://hometown.aol.com/newimage9/photojbegin.htm>.

³ Meek, John, Photographic judging and critiquing PSA journal February 2004 p20-21.

⁴ Reynolds, James Photo Tips.

⁵ Clutton, Wade W. Judging Notes 1997.

⁶ Kitson, Burt, “Things for judges to look for”.

⁷ Preston, Burr, (and Lucy) from Santa Rosa Photographic Society.

⁸ THE ART OF SEEING, from The Kodak Workshop Series, (Janet McNichols compiled a word list included below).

⁹ PSA article “Putting Snap in your Snapshots” June 2003.

Appendix

Here are some useful words and ideas.

Positive Descriptive Words

abstract, accent, aesthetics, against the light, angular, appealing, attributes, awareness, background, balance, behind the light, bold, breezy, brightness, brilliant, caress, color balance, compassionate, composition, conjure, conjuring, context, contraption, contrast, culture, curiosity, delicate, delicate, depth, depth of field, dewy, dimensions, disembodied, distinct, dramatic, dynamic, elements, embraced, empathy, energize, energizing, energy, engaging, enlightened, entertaining, evocative, exciting, existing light, exotic, eye-catching, fear, flamboyant, flare, flat, form, forms, fragments, frame borders, frustration, gentle, gentle, ghostly, glare, glow, graceful, grandeur, hard, harmony, haunting, head-on, highlight, humorous, hypnotic, illumination, imprisoned, innocence, interpret, intriguing, joyous, judicious, light streaming, limiting, linear perspective, loveable, lucid, lush, magnificent, meandering, melancholy, merging, mood, mysterious, mystery, mystique, nobility, oblique, observe, original, overlap, pattern, patterns, pitfall, polarize, pristine, progression of tones, proportion, purity, rapport, razzle-dazzle, receptive, relationship, relaxed, reverent, revive, rhythm, rich, richness, riddle, ripples, romantic, rough, rousing, satisfying, scale, see the light, sensitized, serene, shape, shapes, shimmer, shimmering, side-lighting, sift, silhouette, simple, simplify, size diminution, sizzle, smooth, snarl, somber, spacious, sparkling, splendor, spontaneous, spray of light, squelch, stacked upon one another, statueque, stimulating, stop action, stress the distance., stressed, striking, stunning, subtle, symbols, symmetry, tack sharp, tangle, tension, texture, gradient, timeless, tonal, top-notch, transforming, trapped, triangular ar-

rangement, vastness, vibrant, viewpoint, vision, wash of color, wilted, wisp, wonder, zigzag.

Negative Descriptive Words

boring, cliché, cluttered, common, confusing, conventional subject, crowded, dim, distracting, dull, familiar, frequent theme, harsh, hidden, imprecise, lifeless, misleading, mundane, obscure, over or underexposed, overwhelming, passive, pointless, restricting, stale, static, stereotype, trivial, un-sharp, vague, vapid, weak,

Try to avoid using words and phrases like “interesting”, “nice picture”, “good”, or your favorite word or phrase too frequently.

Camera Club Judging Tips (Procedural)

- Hold microphone close to your mouth.
- Speak clearly and loudly enough so the projectionist can hear you.
- Speak decisively and with commitment.
- Avoid redundancy in words and phrases.
- Avoid unnecessary or useless remarks – silence can be golden.
- There is a sense of urgency to your commenting due to time constraints, but don't go overboard.
- Be positive and constructive in your comments. Never degrade or joke about an entry.
- Be careful with the number of images you pass. Better to review than to have to recycle an image from the pass pile.
- Prepare for your judging assignment by reading pamphlet above and specific section guidelines.

PHOTO CHECKLIST: JAMES REYNOLDS	
ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS Interest Composition Technical quality	ENHANCING CHARACTERISTICS Lighting Color Creativity Visual qualities Mood Impact Story Human interest Timing Action Added element
STEPS IN MAKING A PICTURE Finding a subject (Looking) Exploring the subject (Exploring) Interpreting the scene (Visualizing) Making artistic decisions (Creative act) Taking the picture (Technical control) Post visualization (Enhancing)	
TECHNICAL CONTROL Film/CCD Camera position Lens focal length Aperture Shutter speed Exposure Accessories	ARTISTIC CONTROL Subjective choice Point of view Boundary Composition Perspective Depth of field Rendering motion
COMPOSITION Balance Proportion Harmony Rhythm Unity Visual flow Domination Contrast Separation Tension Perspective	VISUAL CHARACTERISTICS Line Tone Mass Pattern texture Color shape