

JUDGING PHOTOGRAPHS FOR EXHIBITIONS/COMPETITIONS

Judging of photographs is inherently subjective. We all know what we like and what we don't like and how that varies between individuals.

When judging photographs the first thing a judge must do is to forget the subjects that he/she likes and judge all picture types equally. The aim is to objectively rank the pictures presented against each other and some basic standards.

The Basics

Photography is a visual art medium that captures a three dimensional scene and presents it in two dimensions. The key to a striking picture is usually the use of angled light to produce a 3-d effect in the picture or to create a mood. Early and late light generally produce the best 3-d effects and colour saturation – this light exaggerates shape and textures in photographic subjects. Middle of the day light generally flattens 3-d separation because of the short, overhead shadows – this usually reduces the impact of photographs.

A good photograph will be well:

- **Exposed** – highlights will not be 'burnt out' and have some detail; likewise shadow detail should not be blocked out with no detail – some detail in shadow areas is generally preferred unless the picture is a silhouette.
- **Composed (1)** – the elements in the picture will be pleasingly arranged and taken from an interesting angle – ideally a picture that looks 'right' to the viewer is well composed. Strong compositions and viewpoints that are not always at eye level usually have an impact – a 'wow' factor - that is evident on first viewing.
- **Composed (2)** – the centre of interest (or main subject matter) is presented simply or without visual distractions. Distractions can include objects that partially obscure the centre of interest, or light/colour patches that take the eye away from the centre of interest. Be wary of strong highlights and bright colours that surround the centre of interest – the viewers eye is always attracted to the brightest or most colourful part of a picture.
- **Focused** – by the use of either aperture (for depth of field), or point of focus, the photographer can direct the viewer to the most important part of the picture.
- **Saturated** – colour pictures may appear natural, moody or vibrant. The most important thing here is that the colours work together and do not clash or look obviously 'tweaked'. Soft or muted saturation in a picture taken on a sunny day will usually indicate over exposure.
- **Toned** – monochrome pictures rely on the gradation of tones to create their impact and tell the story. Shadow detail and highlight detail is evident in the best monochrome pictures. Most often you will be asked to judge black and white, but sepia and blue toning are also common. A picture that looks flat and lifeless will generally be lacking in tonal range and/or contrast and will lose the effect of light creating 3-d or mood impacts.
- **Presented** – framing, matting and picture quality must not contain obvious errors or technical faults. Matts/borders must be straight, balanced and the border colour must not clash with the picture. Print quality (or the projected picture) will have no obvious

blemishes or technical faults that detract from the overall impact. Presentation quality should be used as one factor to separate equally rated pictures at the selection of awards.

- **Created** - creative and manipulated pictures often break some of the exposure and saturation guidelines above and should be encouraged. When judging these pictures, a rule of thumb to use is that if you can see the detail of the technique used, more than seeing an overall enhancing effect to the final picture, then the technique has not worked as it should.

After all that you are allowed, as a judge, to find the picture interesting and reward that in the points you give. Originality and creativity is to be encouraged – but creativity starts in the camera, not just in the computer. Creativity is the total design, composition and execution of the picture making – not just the application of ‘photoshop’ type filters in the computer.

Photographer’s Own Work

Another issue of both originality and integrity is that pictures that copy another person’s art are not allowed and can represent plagiarism and copyright breach. A picture of a painting, mural etc with no added elements is not acceptable.

A picture of public art (eg. Sculpture) or using elements of such an art work as part of a creative composition are a grey area – judges should always apply a common sense test to this issue. If you are unsure, it is better to reflect this in the points allocated and keep the picture away from the awards. The key test is – has the photographer used, altered or added to the public art in a way that has some originality or creative merit.

Point Scales

Most club judging is given out of a 10-point scale, but you may occasionally be asked to judge out of 15 or 20. Most national and international exhibition (panel) judging comprises three judges each judging with a 5-point scale. Many clubs now use 10 point scales for panel judging as this usually provides for a better separation of the top ranked images.

Club Judging

The main aim here is to provide positive feedback on the picture’s quality and impact within the set available to be judged (where commentary is involved). Use the point scale to separate the pictures in the set.

1-4 Obvious technical problems in picture capture, production or presentation. Comments should be sensitive to ‘newer’ photographers offering suggestions for improvement.

5-6 A picture with only minor blemishes but without pictorial strength.

7-8 A good picture almost worthy of recognition for minor awards (merit/highly commended)

9-10 Strong visual impact with evidence of creative composition, use of light, viewpoint. Should not contain technical blemishes. At this level – pictures are also often separated from the 7-8 range by exceptional presentation quality and or picture quality.

Panel Judging

The main aim here is to select the best pictures for acceptance and display in the exhibition. Photographers are rewarded by having pictures 'accepted' into an exhibition.

If you are in any doubt about the suitability or eligibility of any image seek guidance from the exhibition director. This applies equally to section definitions, issues of 'other's art' and same image/plagiarism

Here, as one of three judges (usually), the point score is applied as follows and aggregated for a total score.

- 1 Obvious technical problems in picture capture, production or presentation.
- 2 A picture with only minor blemishes but without pictorial strength.
- 3 A good picture worthy of acceptance into the exhibition
- 4 A strong picture almost worthy of recognition for minor awards (merit/highly commended)
- 5 A very strong picture that you consider worthy of consideration for major trophies

Often the panel will review the highest scoring pictures for trophies/awards and may alter the order of the highest scoring pictures after review – often a minor technical or quality issue is apparent at review that is not noticed on initial judging.

Such a review process is always to be encouraged as it is better to get the best pictures to the top awards rather than stick purely to the initial point scores.

Acceptance percentages vary at different levels of exhibition. A national exhibition will usually accept and display 25% of pictures – an international may be even less. At a club or local level, the acceptance rate may be 60-70%, depending on the space available to hang the exhibition.

Competition Photography

Competition photography is challenging in that it is an art form that is accessible to all, but has technical and artistic considerations in the judging. Everyone can take a photograph, but not everyone can make a good picture.

The successful competition images are often simple in composition and have an impact on the viewer because they can make something special or even spectacular out of everyday subjects.

Judging photographic competitions and exhibitions is an enjoyable experience, and I often find that I get ideas and inspiration from the work that I judge. Good Luck

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