

HOW JUDGES CRITIQUE PRINT AND DIGITAL PHOTO COMPETITIONS

As in any competition, judging is subjective with each judge bringing in their own personal biases, experience and likes. The following guidelines are meant simply to give entrants a basic understanding of what constitutes a good image. All of the guidelines, with exception of a few that are specific to prints, can be applied to your digital submissions.

The same guidelines can also pertain to monochromatic images. For more information on Black and White or Monochrome images click on the following link: [Black and White Photography Tips: The 5 Cornerstones of All Great Monochrome Photos](#).

The following 12 elements are listed in the guidance provided to entrants of the International Photographic Competitions organized by the [Professional Photographers of America](#).

1. Impact Viewing an image for the first time always evokes some kind of feeling. Sometimes they can make us sad, happy or angry. Sometimes they force us to look inward at ourselves. That's called an impact, and the more powerful the image, the more powerful the emotional response of the viewer.

2. Technical Excellence This is the print quality of the actual image itself as it's presented for viewing. There are a lot of aspects that speak to the qualities of the physical print. These can include Retouching, Manipulation, Sharpness, Exposure, Printing, Mounting, and Color correction.

3. Creativity Your point of view is exactly that— yours. And it's unlike anyone else's. This element speaks directly to that perspective. It shows your imagination and how you used the medium to convey an idea, a message or a thought to the viewer. This is how you differentiate yourself from others.

4. Style There are many, many ways to apply this element to your work. Maybe you use light in a specific way on a subject, or maybe you make a technical decision for the express purpose of underscoring desired impact. When subject matter and style come together in an appropriate manner, the effects on an image can be spectacular. But remember, when subject matter and style don't work together, the results can be, well, less-than-spectacular.

5. Composition When all the visual elements of an image come together to express intent, that's when the magic of composition happens. Good composition captures a viewer's attention and directs it where you, the artist, want it to be. Depending on your intent, you can make something that pleases the viewer— or disturbs them.

6. Presentation How you showcase an image is just as important as how you compose it. Everything in the presentation should work to enhance your image and not distract from it. Keep this in mind when choosing mats, borders and everything in between.

7. Color Balance Proper color balance can bring a sense of harmony to an image. When the tones all work together to support an image, the emotional appeal is that much greater. But color balance doesn't have to be used to bring harmony to an image. You can use color balance to evoke any number of feelings from a viewer. The choice in how to take advantage is entirely up to you, but no matter what, be sure your choice enhances rather than distracts.

8. Center of Interest This is where an image's creator wants a viewer's attention focused. Sometimes there can be a primary and a secondary center of interest. Sometimes everything in an image will work together to create that center of interest.

9. Lighting The use and control of light has an effect on every aspect of an image. It informs dimensions and shape, it sets tone and mood, and, like every other technique, proper lighting can be used to enhance your image while improper lighting can detract from it.

10. Subject Matter Even though it lacks words, your image is still telling a story, and your subject matter is central to that. So make sure that your subject matter is right for the story that you're trying to tell.

11. Technique How you choose to execute your image is key. It's also a holistic decision. Technique informs everything in the creation of your image. From lighting and posing to printing and presentation, it all works to show off the techniques that you've mastered and applied to your craft.

12. Story Telling What does your image evoke in a viewer's imagination? What do you want your image to evoke in a viewer's imagination? Keep in mind: You are creating art. And while the act of creating is a personal thing, so too is the act of viewing. Your image is a story, and the one it tells your viewer may be one you never knew you were telling.

Technical Flaws

A photograph, whether digital or printed, should be virtually free of technical flaws that would distract from the essence of the image. An absence of such is normally a prerequisite to qualify the image as art. Most judges begin a critique of an entry by noting any significant technical flaws.

Most technical flaws cited by judges can be summarized as follows:

- 1. Out of focus** Do out of focus areas of the image enhance the subject or the story?
Sufficiently out of focus areas can create separation between the subject and the background. Out of focus areas in the main subject can be distracting and draw the eye from the main points of interest. Does the combination of in focus and out of focus areas make it an appealing image.
- 2. Empty space** Large areas of the image that have no content, such as a plain sky or wall. If the blank areas do not add to the impact of the image, they are likely unnecessary.
- 3. Distractions** Anything that draws the viewer away from the subject of the image. These can be bright areas in the background, objects extending into the image from the edges, small parts of the subject extending out of the frame, a leading line that leads away from the subject, and the like.
- 4. Over Sharpening:** The over ambitious application of sharpening to an image can cause halos at the edges between dark and light areas of an images, such as between the sky and mountains or buildings.
- 5. Excessive contrast** Unless an image is obviously abstract or includes an intended area of dark shadow, all significant areas of a photo should be lit adequately to show some texture or other detail.
- 6. Weak coloration:** The image appears flat. Faded color, or a gaping absence of tone where strong color saturation would normally be expected, is considered a technical fault by many judges (for example, a substantial white (or “bald”) sky.)
- 7. Over-saturation:** Colors appear too strong or exaggerated for effect.
- 8. Overuse of HDR** Correctly executed HDR looks as if the image was properly lit, as if the scene could be viewed as natural. Unless the intent is the so called “Grunge” look, or other unnatural effect, excessive use of HDR results in odd looking segments that do not contribute to the overall success of an image.
- 9. Over- or underexposure:** A relatively rare occurrence these days with automatic exposure control with digital imaging.
- 10. Image not level** Tilted horizons are often the first thing a judge notices, and an easy thing for a maker level in cropping to correct. Curved horizons in very wide angle captures may also be a distraction unless it contributes to the image design

Resources

<https://www.nmra.org/national-photo-contest-judging-guidelines>

<https://www.iconicphoto.com/pdf/how-judges-critique-photo-competitions.pdf>

<https://blog.lexjet.com/2009/05/28/twelve-criteria-used-to-judge-print-competitions/>