

<http://www.ppa.com/competitions/content.cfm?ItemNumber=1792>

12 elements of a merit image - professional photographers of america

The Photographic Exhibitions Committee (PEC) of PPA uses the 12 elements below as the “gold standard” to define a merit image. PEC trains judges to be mindful of these elements when judging images to the PPA merit level and to be placed in the International Print Exhibit at Imaging USA, the annual convention. The use of these 12 elements connects the modern practice of photography and its photographers to the historical practice of photography begun nearly two centuries ago.

Twelve elements have been defined as necessary for the success of an art piece or image. Any image, art piece, or photograph will reveal some measure of all twelve

elements, while a visually superior example will reveal obvious consideration of each one

The Twelve elements listed below are in accordance to their importance.

- 1.) Impact** is the sense one gets upon viewing an image for the first time. Compelling images evoke laughter, sadness, anger, pride, wonder or another intense emotion. There can be impact in any of these twelve elements.
- 2.) Technical excellence** is the print quality of the image itself as it is presented for viewing. Retouching, manipulation, sharpness, exposure, printing, mounting, and correct color are some items that speak to the qualities of the physical print.
- 3.) Creativity** is the original, fresh, and external expression of the imagination of the maker by using the medium to convey an idea, message or thought.
- 4.) Style** is defined in a number of ways as it applies to a creative image. It might be defined by a specific genre or simply be recognizable as the characteristics of how a specific artist applies light to a subject. It can impact an image in a positive manner when the subject matter and the style are appropriate for each other, or it can have a negative effect when they are at odds.
- 5.) Composition** is important to the design of an image, bringing all of the visual elements together in concert to express the purpose of the image. Proper composition holds the viewer in the image and prompts the viewer to look where the creator intends. Effective composition can be pleasing or disturbing, depending on the intent of the image maker.
- 6.) Presentation** affects an image by giving it a finished look. The mats and borders used, either physical or digital, should support and enhance the image, not distract from it.
- 7.) Color Balance** supplies harmony to an image. An image in which the tones work together, effectively supporting the image, can enhance its

emotional appeal. Color balance is not always harmonious and can be used to evoke diverse feelings for effect.

**8.) Center of Interest** is the point or points on the image where the maker wants the viewer to stop as they view the image. There can be primary and secondary centers of interest. Occasionally there will be no specific center of interest, when the entire scene collectively serves as the center of interest.

**9.) Lighting** —the use and control of light—refers to how dimension, shape and roundness are defined in an image. Whether the light applied to an image is manmade or natural, proper use of it should enhance an image.

**10.) Subject Matter** should always be appropriate to the story being told in an image.

**11.) Technique** is the approach used to create the image. Printing, lighting, posing, capture, presentation media, and more are part of the technique applied to an image.

**12.) Story Telling** refers to the image's ability to evoke imagination. One beautiful thing about art is that each viewer might collect his own message or read her own story in an image.

[Read Bob Hawkins' article, "Elements of a Merit Image"](#) to learn even more.

## The Power of Impact

1. A successful photograph causes a reaction in a viewer, a visceral recognition that an image's story has been told. Compelling photographs evoke emotions in the viewer by approaching the subject in a unique way, whether literally through camera angle and perspective or metaphorically through lighting, composition or technique. The Photographic Exhibitions Committee of the Professional Photographers of America considers impact the most important criterion on its list of 12 merit image elements as criteria for judging originality.

## Technical Execution

1. Focus, exposure, composition and lighting contribute to the expression of an effective image, and context is critically important when evaluating technique. For example, a landscape photo that is sharp with long depth of field is no more or less valid technically than a softly focused available light portrait. Judging technical merit requires some adaptation to the subject and impact of a photo. In a contest setting, a judge may also consider the photograph mounting, retouching and overall print quality.

## Composing the Story

1. Any visual media relying on two dimensions must give consideration to the design -- where things are placed within the frame of the image. Photo contests are filled with images showing slavish

devotion to the rule of thirds to the point that the composition is the subject rather than an element of presentation. Effective composition leads the viewer's eye through the photograph as an aid to storytelling, uniting the visual elements of the image in a supportive way. Again, context dictates effectiveness.

## The Creative Approach

1. No matter how many elements a judge may consider, a photograph must unite each element to succeed. There is no formula to a successful image -- rules are at best suggestions. Images may share traits, techniques, subjects or settings, but the myriad of instinctive decisions a photographer makes are what define the style and creativity an image displays. National Geographic photographer and contest judge Jim Richardson notes that communication is the heart of a photograph, not the photograph itself.

Read more : [http://www.ehow.com/how\\_5089126\\_judge-photograph.html](http://www.ehow.com/how_5089126_judge-photograph.html)

<http://rising.blackstar.com/national-geographics-jim-richardson-how-i-judge-photo-contests.html>

## National Geographic's Jim Richardson: How I Judge Photo Contests

October 12 | By [Jeff Wignall](#) | Posted in [Art of Photography](#) | [Print This Post](#)

[Tweet](#)

*The following is excerpted from [Winning Digital Photo Contests](#), a new book by Black Star Rising contributor Jeff Wignall.*

[Jim Richardson](#) has a career that most photographers can't help but envy.

### **What is it that makes a particular photo stand out during judging?**

First, I always try to do a scan and go through all of the photos pretty quickly to see if there are things that really just pop out — photos that give you a rush of recognition the instant you see them. Those pictures, whatever their technical qualities, whatever their shortcomings, you give weight. If you have a reaction to the picture, something visceral and emotional, then you have to think that there's something going on there, even if it breaks all the rules. That's what a picture is supposed to do, to cause a reaction, to get to us.

That process of doing a scan helps me to find some of the best pictures and eliminate others — pictures that are simply “me too” pictures. Those pictures may be done well and have perfect exposure, but you realize you've been seeing the same shots for 15 years. I don't care how perfectly it's executed; if I'm jaded to the very approach and the very presentation, it doesn't get nearly the mark up that more inventive photos get.

I had an English composition teacher in high school that used to say that the greatest tool that a writer had was a unique viewpoint. That is so often the

case in pictures. There are other pictures that take time to appreciate and their gifts aren't delivered instantaneously, so you don't want to use that barometer all of the time on all pictures. But as you're sitting there doing the initial scan of images, if they can't grab your attention in a second or two, then they probably aren't going to grab your attention at all.

### **What mistakes do people make with photos they're entering in contests?**

One of the greatest sins that you see in photo contests is the overuse of things like the saturation slider. You see that over and over again, people turning up the volume too high. And it doesn't have to be just saturation, either. It can be sharpness, or extreme focal lengths, all kinds of things. They assume that if some saturation is good then more is better, if a wide-angle lens is interesting then a fisheye lens would be even more interesting.

They make the mistake of assuming that it's about technique rather than vision. There's an analogy here to the ballet. Yes, all the dancers have to be technically perfect, but the perfection of the dance won't get to your heart. It may get to your appreciation of perfection, but it won't stir your heart like the agony of Romeo and Juliet.

### **Do you think that trying to win a contest is a good motivator for taking better pictures?**

If that motivates people to go out and take pictures, then good. But on the other hand, if having better pictures of their family motivates them, then that's also good. One of the good things about entering a contest is that it gets your pictures out of the hard drive and in front of someone. Getting pictures in front of other people is a good thing because no matter how good your pictures are, a picture that doesn't get seen is essentially mute.

One of the best things you can do to improve your photography is to get your pictures in front of other people where you can see their reaction. I give a lot of talks and lectures where I show my pictures and I always try to watch the reactions when they flash on the screen. There are times when I show pictures that I think are the most wonderful photographs in the world and the people just sit there. But then a certain picture comes along and you see the eyes

widen and the people sit up straight. Those are the reactions that you want to see and believe.

That's why sites like Flickr are good, because you have strangers giving you comments and reactions to your photographs. I also think that you have to absolutely discount the opinions of relatives and friends and the people who like you. They're just not objective enough.

### **Do you have any tips for helping people decide which pictures are right for entering a contest?**

One thing that people can do is go through National Geographic or some other magazine, cut out a lot of pictures, and spread them out on the floor with some of their own photos in the mix. Then have someone come in and tell you which pictures don't belong — and tell them to be brutally honest.

You have to find a way to replicate what's going to happen when someone like me, a contest judge, is looking through all of these photos. You can't explain your photos to the judge or point them out. The picture has to do the work.

Years ago I judged a KINSA (Kodak International Snapshot Awards) contest and someone had sent in a picture of a tree. The picture was of the entire tree, but there was an arrow drawn on the photograph pointing to one leaf in the middle. The tag at the end of the arrow said "Hummingbird." It was a pretty humorous photo but I don't think the photographer meant it that way.

### **Are a lot of contest pictures too predictable?**

Yes, I think so. When it comes to photographing the Grand Canyon, for instance, most people go to the south rim and stand at exactly the same place and get the same picture. It's going to be tough for you to get one of those pictures to stand out. But if you were on the north rim at 6 a.m. after it snowed, that picture is much more unusual and judges haven't seen it so much, so it will get attention.

This is exactly the same thing that I go through when I'm showing pictures to picture editors at National Geographic. These are people who have been looking at thousands of pictures every day for the last two or three decades.

You can't go in there, show them something they've seen before, and expect them to pat you on the back.

### **What kind of photos make you yawn?**

The same old pictures. You can see the photographers who are simply following the rules of what makes a good picture. They've used the rule of thirds, the lighting is perfect, and they've sharpened it exactly. If you're talking about photographing in a pub in Ireland, for instance, you can take a picture of a pint of Guinness sitting on an old wooden bar, and I don't care how sharp it is or how perfectly exposed it is. If it makes me wish I was in that pub having a pint of Guinness, then that's a winning picture.

### **Travel is a common category in contests. What makes a great travel photo?**

Fundamentally travel photography has changed. It used to show us places that we were never going to see in person ourselves. We kind of assumed back in the 1950's that very few people were going to actually get to Paris and see the Eiffel Tower. Now everyone travels and travel photography is about being there, what's it like to be there? Your pictures have to provide that visceral sense of what it's like to be in the middle of a place.

My eyes glaze over when I start to see yet another picture of a Tibetan monk in the saffron robes. I've seen enough of that. But if you bring me a picture that makes me feel like I can plop myself down in the middle of a place and get the feeling of what it's really like to be there, that's a winning photo. That's what travel photography is all about.

### **Do you have any advice to photographers that want to win a contest?**

I think that trying to make a picture specifically to win a contest is difficult. Almost invariably you're going to end up with a picture that looks like a contest picture and doesn't have at its heart something that offers real communication that would get to another human being. And it's that "getting to me" as a person, as the judge sitting there, that's essential.



Pictures can't be just about pictures; pictures have to be about life. If they are really and truly about life and beauty and understanding and our souls, then they have a pretty good chance in a contest. If they are simply about photography and about the contest, then they're probably be going to be pretty shallow and transparent. Take pictures of your passions, pursue your love of photography, and the contest prizes will soon follow.

**And what is the one thing that photography does best?**

It connects us. Good photographs are quantum packets of understanding; they allow ideas to leap from one person to another, almost magically. That is the connection and the link that photography creates as almost no other medium does.

<http://tomang.com/2013/02/judging-photographs/>

## **Judging pictures and time travel**

Categories: [Presenting](#), [Speaking](#), [Teaching](#)

Earlier in January I was in Dubai on the jury of the Hamdan International Photography Award (HIPA). While there, I gave a talk, on the 14th, about judging photographs. It was a contentious topic and I did not want to be drawn into specifics of judging photography awards. While of course there is common ground between some, the differences are bigger: you can expect an international wildlife photography competition to work differently from one for Czech news photography which is again a long way from a New Zealand camera club.

The most marvellous memory I have is of the audience: Arab men and women – some in traditional clothes, some not – Philipinos, Europeans, Chinese and Indians all sitting together, having coffee together. All united in their passion for photography.

Here is the text of my lecture. It's longer than what I delivered as I was running out of time. So those of you who were there, it may be worth your while reading the whole thing. It's about an hour's worth of lecture, so pour that espresso, turn Bach's Goldberg Variations, put your feet up and read on ...

Every hour of every waking day we make judgements. We're interested here in value judgements about images: good or bad, lovely or ugly, high-quality or low-quality, beautifully composed or clumsy.

Those who work in photography make many more judgement calls than most. With more than a trillion images on the planet, we would be drowned in a grey mush of images if we did not make judgements that filter out the unwanted, to find the jewels in the dust. A typical professional picture editor views more three thousand images every single working day. Out of these he or she selects perhaps only ten to twenty images to use.

### **Image confrontation**

You don't have to be a picture editor to be confronted with thousands of images. We know the average person living in an American or European city sees a thousand to fifteen

hundred separate images every day. Images really are a distraction from the contemplation of God and nature!

Without knowing it, each person assesses each image they see.

Is it a new car they'd like to drive? They see beautiful shapes expertly lit and composed. (Below, Ferrari PR shot, but apologies to the photographer, and please correct me if wrong.)

Is it a holiday destination they dream of reaching? They think, 'Lovely! I want to be there!'

I mention these examples to introduce the idea that judging pictures is a highly complicated process: what happens depends on the context and purpose of the judgement.

In this talk I will share my understanding of how judging at the highest levels – such as for international awards – relates to picture selection at the amateur level. But this talk is not a workshop on picture editing – that is a different aspect of the subject.

### From the past

The basic level of picture judgement is something we all share. We aren't looking for merit in photography but at the subject of the photographs. All that matters is that at the moment we captured the image, the photograph holds something that we want to remember.

Our judgement of the amateur picture is therefore pitched squarely in the past: did our friend capture the moment? Can we see everyone in the wedding picture clearly? If it succeeds in these tasks we are pleased with the images.

Of course, there's a simple proviso: the image quality must be such that our attention is not drawn to defective technique. It's when image quality interferes with the subject, that we object to poor quality.

These are the basic criteria for quality assessment. I won't go into these in any great detail. They are standard and uncontroversial.

## Basic quality criteria

1. good sharpness: details are resolved to good contrast
2. rich tonal quality
3. variety of colours appropriate to the subject and treatment
4. depth of field should be appropriate for the subject and treatment
5. correct white balance correction: correct colour reproduction with no fringing
6. no artefacts due to stray light reflecting around inside lens
7. resolution and file size should be adequate for final size
8. image noise level should be below perceptible unless required to be visible
9. camera should be aligned to the subject and to verticals and horizon as appropriate to treatment

The prime characteristic of amateur picture assessment is that it comes from individual response: that's what we hear from comments like 'That's a great shot' or 'Wow!' or 'Lovely' on websites like Flickr or Facebook. No-one references anything apart from their response to what they see before them.

## And present

In contrast, picture judgements made in higher education, workshops, competitions, and in professional situations are all made under the scrutiny of the present. By this I mean that we are asking questions of the photos such as

1. 'Does this work?'
2. 'What is the photographer trying to say?'

These are questions which attempt to relate what is visible in the image to overlying layers of context and purpose.

Notice that we take for granted the qualities of the image which the amateur judgement concentrates on. The image has all the technical qualities necessary, it shows the subject clearly, it is artistically and technically a well-executed image.

So we are asking for more. For specific genres of work we may ask:

1. Does the portrait express the character that we want to show?
2. Does the view show the beauty of the building, and in a good light?

In the professional context we will also ask more penetrating questions:

1. Is it legal?
2. If it is legal, are there any aspects which may lead to legal challenge?
3. Has the image been manipulated in any way, and if so, is it acceptable?
4. Will it cause offence to any religious or cultural groups?

In the educational or training context, we pursue different agenda from the publisher. We therefore examine different aspects. We try to work out what the student is trying to communicate. We ask whether the student shows an understanding of how the images relate to the tasks set. We ask: does the student have a strong control of the medium, or are the results somewhat unpredictable?

Consider musicians or actors: these artists must be certain that they can deliver their performance note- or word-perfect. Simply we should expect the same standards of reliability of a photographer.

### Beauty parade

Perhaps you are waiting for me to answer the question 'How do you know when you have an image that is visually stunning'.

Extraordinary, exciting, thrilling, beautiful, brilliant, wow!

These are all words that we might use of an image which gets top marks, wins prizes and awards. So how do we know when we have seen one?

I know this is a central issue, but notice I have wrapped around with many other considerations, and soon I shall place more issues on top. The reason is this: a brilliant, absolutely outstanding image does not, in itself, guarantee publication, fame or even winning of a prize. There are many reasons why brilliant images may have to wait their time.

One of the best known images of all time, Korda's picture of Che Guevara (left) was almost unknown for seven years after first publication. And before that, legend has it that it languished in a shoe-box.

Back to the question of how we know a great shot when we see it? Is the response instant? Do we need to go through some kind of check-list? Or perhaps it's a bit of both.

The great photographer Ernst Haas wanted to see

1. an eye,
2. a heart
3. a brain.

An eye that is sensitive to light, colour and design, constantly open to opportunities offered by the subject. The photographer's heart tells us about the response to the subject: heart motivates and gives life to the image. Finally, we want evidence of the photographer's brain – intelligence, experience and knowledge – being used. Well, Haas was an analytic, thinking artist and photographer, but my guess is that he is not suggesting you have to tick off his list of attributes when assessing an image.

Nor me. In my view, a great picture also has three qualities:

1. Resonance
2. History
3. Revelation

Resonance results from the photographer organising the contents of the photograph in a way that suits the subject. Image resonance makes the whole experience of a photograph stick in the mind – like a tune that will not go away – long after the finer detail of the image is dimmed.

Next, the historic element of a great photograph represents the conjunction between the taking of the photograph and a significant event. It may be the moment of the knock-out punch of the champion. Or the historical moment may be quiet like the passage of a figure through a landscape. It is the precise moment that a photograph and event come together that shapes the picture's destiny.

Finally, a good photograph is revelatory. Its content lifts it out of the ordinary to an elevated or removed reality; it touches hearts and teaches minds by presenting an engaging, a fresh, unfamiliar insight.

I wanted a view of the famous Registan Square in Samarkand that was not the usual one. For a start it's in the snow, and most views show it in hot weather. But I needed some life – and the children enjoying the snow were sent specially to put life and soul into the image. The rest was up to me – to time the exposure as well as I could.

### So to the future

The process of judging photographs in international competitions builds on all these underlying processes, and of course, takes them further. In the same way that professional assessments take for granted that the photographer can produce a technically perfect image with flair and artistry and creativity, in international competitions we take all that for granted.

What we do at this level is to look to the future.

Depending on the competition and its aims, judges may be expected to look far into the future. In others, the futurology is not so demanding, but it is nonetheless implicit in the scale and prestige of the the award.

Let's consider awards or grants designed to support the development of a photographer's career or to encourage certain kind of work, often photojournalism and documentary photography. Assessors look at a body of work – related by theme or treatment. Here is a classic set by Eugene Smith – a textbook example of a coherent picture essay. Smith takes us, vicariously, into the subject's life: each image stands on its own but contributes to the whole, each image tells us about an aspect of the doctor's life and together the whole set (more than was published) tell a rounded story. Also textbook is the fact that some shots were set up for the photographer: a practice decried by some, but accepted by Smith as an occasional necessity.

Which entrant is likely to make best use of the award? Which entrant is most likely to overcome the difficulties they will surely encounter? Assessors must balance risks against success: the most ambitious projects – portraits of women in the Hindu Kush – are likely to

fail because of great administrative and physical difficulties, even physical danger – but they could produce unique coverage.

The projects with modest ambitions – portraits of Olympics heroes where they train – may not produce remarkable pictures but it's safe project almost guaranteed to produce work that can be exhibited.

As a judge are responsible for making sure the money is well spent. Do you vote for a high-risk, highly worthy project that may not produce any pictures at all (or worse the photographer could be killed) or support one on home ground that is sure to produce an exhibition?

Prize function

Not all high-level competitions are awards aimed at the completion of a specific project. Nonetheless, this future aspect is always in the background. What will the prize award be used for? What does the award say about the photographer, and the work?

The point of an award of any kind is encouragement. The celebration and approval are secondary because they relate to past achievements. Unless the award is for a life-time of achievement what we are saying when we award a prize is 'We like what you do; go and make some more!'

In that sense, major awards are educational in the purest sense of the word. They show everyone what we applaud, what we approve of and find admirable. That way, photographers are drawn – being drawn out is the original sense of education – photographers are drawn to produce work of similar standard. Photographers are encouraged to match the creative, technical and visual standards that we point to.

That's why, incidentally, it is important for the possibility that the first prize is not awarded. If standards are not sufficiently high to merit a first prize, you don't award it.

Or else you are saying that work that is not of the very highest attainment can be acceptable to the judges and organisers of the competition.

Leading by example



I have worked on international panels where it's clear that the prize-winning image one year leads to an increase in entries of the same kind the following year. This shows that a major competition has a tremendous influence: it shapes what thousands of photographers around the world aspire to. Photographers look at the winners and think 'That's amazing; I want to try that!' or they think 'I can do that; next year I'll send some pictures in.'

In short, the larger the competition, and the more prestigious it is, the greater are the responsibilities of the judges. The choice of winners go much further than rewarding a handful of photographers who win the awards. The choice of winners makes very powerful statements that go far beyond the competition itself.

### Subjectivity and objectivity

You may be thinking that so far I have left out a crucial discussion. Surely, you say out, judging photographs is a totally subjective matter. It is a matter of taste, of individual preferences.

We could spend many hours on this subject – it's one close to my heart. I spent a year studying Godel's Incompleteness Theorem which undermined the most cherished of beliefs (yes, mathematicians have them) in the provability of arithmetic. At the same time I studied the philosophy of science which showed that it is beset with subjectivity and, frankly, cheating. But enough!

I will cut straight to my view: objectivity and subjectivity lie on polar ends of a continuous spectrum of responses and assessments.

At one end, we conduct controlled tests to check our views before we accept them as theories. This is the theoretical ideal of the scientific test of hypothesis. At the other end, we accept the first feeling, or thought that comes to mind.

Much of our life is conducted in between these extremes. In the process of making a decision or evaluation, we often start with feelings, but we also test them and check them against other relevant facts. We may also seek opinions from people we respect.

If you think about the last decisions you had to make, you will find it was compounded from:

1. your feelings and desires (you love fast, Italian-designed cars),
2. but: you're aware of constraints (you can't fit the family into an Italian super-car)
3. add the facts you must accept (you and your wife need a practical car to move your family and all their stuff)
4. add opinions you respect (your uncle recommends this model of people-mover)
5. and other relevant facts (your father-in-law can get you a good deal on a Toyota but not on a Mercedes).

In the end the decision is yours, but all these factors – some subjective, some objective – all play a part.

In similar way, the quality of the assessment of photos varies with the viewer and context.

With amateur judgements, the process is generally subjective. People view with their eyes but respond with their guts. They like or they don't like. They think it's funny or it's a bit boring. It's all about their feelings.

With professional judges, picture assessment is surprisingly objective. Professionals look at pictures in a very different way from amateurs. Think of how any expert looks at something they are expert at – whether it's a car mechanic, an oil-refinery engineer, a doctor – with how a lay-person looks at the same thing.

I see a mass of pipes and valves. A refinery engineer sees that one valve is shut off when it should be open and notices a dial is showing too high pressure (I didn't even see the dial).

You see a picture of a pretty girl with a camera. A picture editor sees a slightly over-exposed image taken in not very interesting light, with the tower of Big Ben coming out of the girl's head, and the image is strongly tilted. If the image gets any more attention a non-English editor will probably notice that the image is flipped: left and right have been reversed (an English editor would, of course have spotted that immediately).

Here's a real, commissioned image. At the shoot, the art director said it was perfect. But how many flaws can you find? All these small flaws will have to be corrected in post-processing. Once I have an image like this up on screen, I can find these imperfections within two seconds.

At the same time, this image is not composed the way I would if I was free to do as I like. Instead it had to fit a layout, in order to make space for various items. So when the art director said 'That's perfect', he meant only that it fitted perfectly with the scheme he had in mind.

In addition to these side-considerations, professional judges bring a lot of experience and history with them. They have viewed tens of thousands of images of the highest quality over tens of years. They have seen it all before. For example: the Twelve Apostles in Australia. There is a limited choice of viewpoints, so do we need three-quarters of a million pictures of more or less the same thing? (And that's only what's on the Web.)

So they look to be surprised, or better to be astonished. They will recognise work that is derivative – based on someone else's creation. They know their history of photography, and will automatically relate today's pictures to historic images. So they will know if they see work that is really innovative, that shows the world in a fresh way.

To this extent, assessments can be very objective. But because no-one has a full command of history or has seen the whole range of work – for example, a newspaper editor sees different work from a gallery director – we need panels of judges. This way we pool our experience, share our knowledge. This makes the process even more objective, more balanced.

Finally, I leave you with one key experience which I know all picture editors, photography examiners and judges will agree with. We spend the most time arguing or analysing work that is only very good. When the work is exceptional, something really special, there's no argument. It's curious but true: the better the work, the less time we judges (tutors, assessors, jurors) will spend discussing it. And that is an objective measure.

## Judging - AAPS

<http://sapf.org.au/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Judging-Photographs-for-Competitions.pdf>

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.
- Focussed – 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. Mats/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 2 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. 3 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 Keith Seidel AAPS, SSAPS prepared February 2009 and revised March 2013  
[kseidel@bigpond.net.au](mailto:kseidel@bigpond.net.au)

Joshua Holko on judging <https://vimeo.com/132513453>

Polar photography specialist  
light quality - soft ethereal at poles  
tell a story, present/generate emotion  
frame to simplify, capture essence