



WESTERN AUSTRALIAN PHOTOGRAPHIC JUDGES ASSOCIATION

November 2022 Workshop

Judging photos with
empathy and kindness

Empathy

Empathy is the capacity to understand or feel what another person is experiencing, that is the capacity to place yourself in another's position.

Contemporary researchers often differentiate between two types of empathy: 'Affective empathy' refers to the sensations and feelings we get in response to others' emotions; this can include mirroring what that person is feeling, or just feeling stressed when we detect another's fear or anxiety. 'Cognitive empathy' refers to our ability to identify and understand other people's emotions. Both types of empathy are important in judging photographic competitions.

The capacity to empathize is a revered trait in society. Empathy is considered a motivating factor for unselfish, pro-social behaviour, whereas a lack of empathy can be related to indifferent or dismissive behaviour (although it could also stem from a personality disorder).

Nevertheless, we should also be aware that too much empathy can be problematic.

Our ability to identify with and imagine someone else's point of view is deeply ingrained into the architecture of our brain. Photography plays a unique role in triggering the network of brain regions that underlie empathy.

Being able to practice empathy is one of the most important skills we as photo judges can learn. In a world that spends so much time picking at flaws and igniting fear and anger in people, empathy can be a balm to that fear and anger. Empathy means you have to put yourself in the photographer's shoes and be aware of and sensitive to their feelings.

Kindness

While we all know the meaning of kindness, it is more than just behaviour. The art of kindness means harbouring a spirit of helpfulness, as well as being generous and considerate, and doing so without expecting anything in return. Giving kindness in critiquing photographs is simple, free, positive and healthy.

What WAPJA expects

Under 'About Us', the WAPJA website states:

'WAPJA expects its members to adopt a philosophy of respect – respect for the images, respect for the photographers who submit their work for assessment, and respect for the clubs and organisations that run the competitions and exhibitions.'

WAPJA recommends starting and finishing your critique by commenting on the good points of an image (ie commend, recommend, commend).

Tips for delivering a photo critique with empathy and kindness

Be mindful of context: Where possible, understanding where an artist is on their photographic journey means criticism can be in line with their skill level. Advice should be different for a seasoned photographer versus a beginner. If you know someone is new to photography, don't lecture them on advanced processing techniques. However, during live judging, we usually don't know whether the photo we are judging was taken by a beginner. When this happens, all your comments should be neutral as far as expertise goes. At other times, such as when undertaking remote judging, a club's competition director may be able to provide the necessary information before the critique is given.



To get us started, here's a photo that looks like it may have been taken by a beginner but you are not sure. How would you critique this one?

Answer the question 'why?': Avoid short, indeterminate feedback like 'it's over-processed' or 'the scene is confusing.' Be prepared to answer the question 'why?' for any critique you deliver. Make the feedback actionable.

Intend to help: When you receive a critique you probably want tangible, constructive criticism. Reciprocate. Help your fellow photographer make the next step with clear, actionable advice.

Sometimes, artistic vision exceeds technical ability: There are some really original creative thinkers out there who might not yet have the tools to achieve their creative vision. Try to critique the artistic aspects of a photograph separately from the technical. Someone's ability to properly expose a shot is not indicative of their creative vision or vice versa. Don't dismiss one by virtue of the other.

Challenge your own prejudice: It's hard sometimes to remember that just because you firmly believe in something doesn't mean it's right. Take time to analyse your own prejudices.



How would you comment on this altered-reality image (referring to both the editing and message and meaning)?

Personal preferences: There's nothing wrong with expressing a personal preference, so long as it's framed as a preference and not a critique. Critiques should focus on factually based characteristics. If someone chooses to colour tone a photograph a certain way, you can certainly express your preference for another colour palette, but you can't argue the superiority of one or another. If someone presents a blurry shot, there are objective quantities such as shutter speed, aperture, and ISO that can be invoked to discuss why the shot was blurry and how it can be remedied.

Personal bias: Personal bias can affect a critique. We have probably all seen cases where the bias shown by a judge might be subtle, unsubtle or even discriminatory. One example seen at a local club was a judge dismissing a photo of a spider because the judge 'didn't like spiders'.

Have a purpose: Blanket criticism without justification or suggestions for improvement is extremely off-putting. If you truly want to help someone improve, don't just tell them what's wrong, tell them how to improve it.



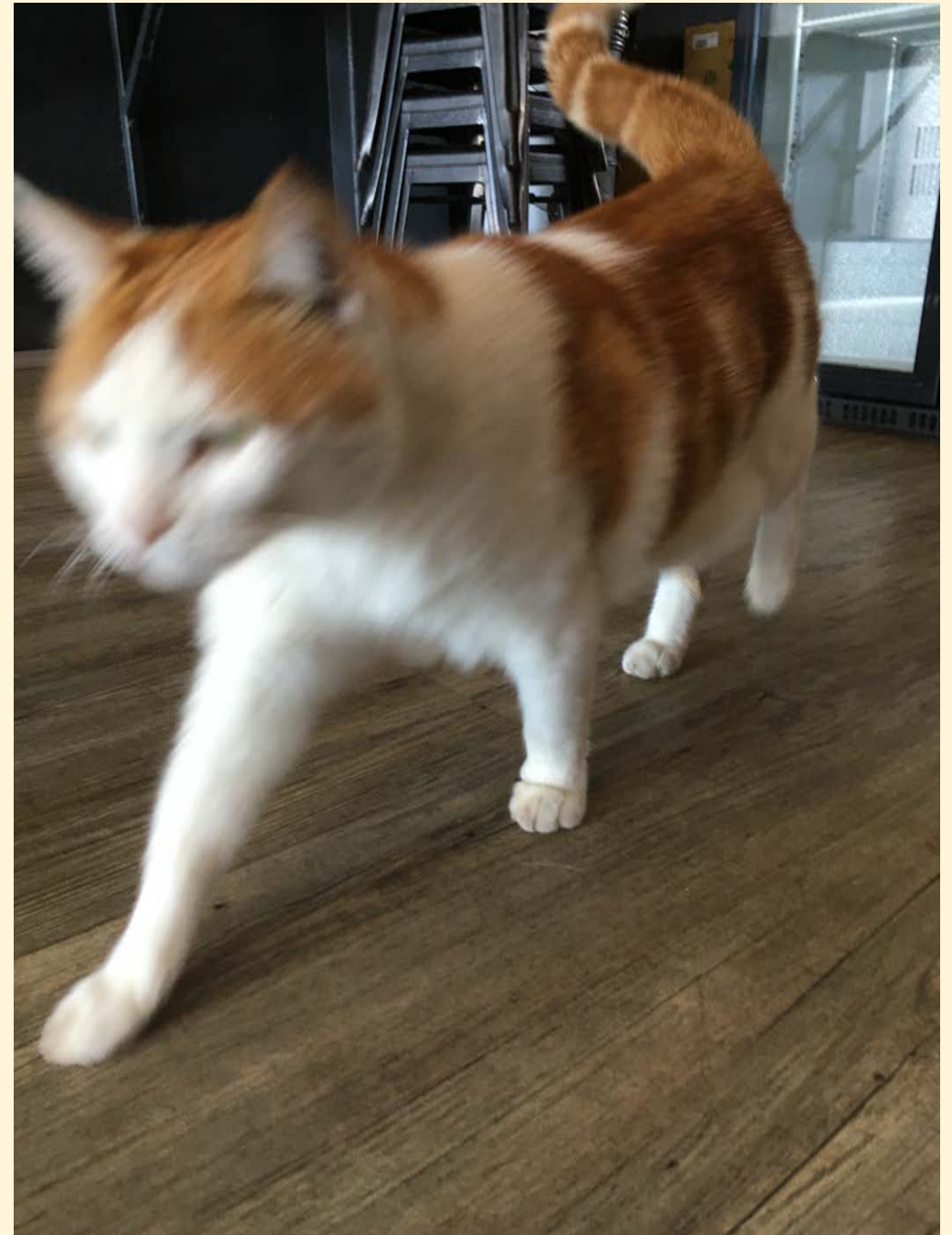
What would you say about this image and what advice would you offer the photographer?

It's not about you: We may sometimes hear critiques that seem to be more interested in demonstrating how much the judge knows than in helping the photographer, or even as a way to advertise the judge's own work. Doing this helps no one and does little to endear the judge to his/her colleagues. Critiques are no place for ulterior motives.

Remember the context: Don't just look at the photograph, think about the environment in which it was taken. Sometimes, there are variables we simply cannot control (such as lighting at an event that doesn't allow flash). Critique the photographer on how well they worked within the environment they were given; however, if they had some control over the environment, such as introducing their own lighting, you should address this.

Too positive. Too negative: It's exceedingly unusual that a photograph is so mind-blowingly spectacular or so jaw-droppingly bad that it truly deserves an unequivocally positive or negative critique. When a judge's critique seems out of sync it may be because he/she is biased.

Here's a photo that has a number of issues you could discuss (and during competition judging before an audience you don't want to concentrate on too many of them). Most noticeably, the photo is blurred and the blurring doesn't look intentional. What advice would you offer and are there any positives you could mention?



Stop, look, understand, critique: Some critiques we may have witnessed may have been knee-jerk reactions and as such, showed a superficial understanding of the photograph and the processes involved in its making. Some judges may spend five seconds looking at an image and 10 minutes writing a critique when, really, these numbers should be much closer to one another. Look at an image, think about it, then look again. You'll see and understand things that simply won't be evident upon a cursory examination.

Be polite: Being considerate to others is particularly important in judging photographic competitions. If someone has shown the requisite bravery to put their work and creative mind in front of you, reciprocate that with respect for their courage. There should be no reason why a photographer walks away from a critique with lower self-esteem, even if that critique was mostly negative. Be sensitive to how you say things and remember that we all experience the words of others differently. A little empathy and kindness can go a long way.



How would you critique this photo which was taken in a difficult environment?

Avoid using the word 'I': When judging, avoid using the word 'I' because it's not about you and your personal preferences and biases. For example, don't say 'What I love most about this image . . .' but 'What is working well in this image . . .' (the word 'love' is also to be avoided). Also, phrases such as 'If this was my work I would try . . .' and 'In the future I would think about . . .' should not be in a judge's vocabulary.

Check the caption: If captions are allowed in a competition make sure you read them as it may give you a better understanding of what the photographers are trying to achieve.

How would you 'stop, look, understand and critique' this particular image so that the photographer does not walk away with a lower self esteem?



Judging photos with no redeeming qualities

In all probability, the most difficult part of judging competition photos is critiquing a really poor photo without causing offence. When faced with this problem give yourself time to try to find something worth complimenting – something that may have been outweighed by all the problems. There are so many things to look for and some of them may be found in the following table provided by courtesy of Emma Gillette of the Australian Photographic Judges Association. (The last column might be especially helpful in this regard.)

Technical Skills	Aesthetics and Artistic Ability	Concept and Subject
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Sharpness & blur ▶ Aperture & depth of field ▶ Shutter speed & camera shake ▶ ISO/grain ▶ White balance & colour casts ▶ Lens choice ▶ Exposure ▶ Detail in shadows / highlights ▶ Lighting ▶ Time of Day ▶ Editing ▶ Printing & Mounting ▶ Timing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Focal Point ▶ Distractions ▶ Creativity (in camera and post production) ▶ Aesthetics ▶ Art elements ▶ Design principles ▶ Art Concepts ▶ Composition ▶ Camera angle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Choice of subject ▶ Relevance & Audience ▶ Set Subject & Definitions ▶ Planning ▶ Originality ▶ Unique Perspective ▶ Purpose / Intent / Meaning ▶ Conceptualisation ▶ Influences / inspiration ▶ Mood and emotion ▶ Story-telling ▶ Unity and Cohesion

Some problem areas

Family-album portraits: Don't dismiss a photo of a child as a 'family-album' photograph. As always, discuss the positive aspects of the photo first. Is it a good portrait or a photo more suited to a family album than a photographic competition? Explain in a gentle manner why some portraits may only be enjoyed by those who know the model while a really good portrait can be enjoyed by all its viewers. Lighting and styling can be critical in this regard.

Photos of other people's artwork: No matter how good they are, there's an understanding that photos of other people's artwork (including that of a statue or graffiti, where the photographer has made no effort to put his/her own creative input on the photo) are often not awarded points in photo competitions. In such circumstances explain why you can't award the photo any points but do stress its good points. For example, even a direct photo of a painting may be well lit and technically excellent.



Judge each of these two portraits. Would you consider one of them to be a 'family-album' type of portrait'?



Critique and score these two images.

Bird on a stick: Most people here today will be aware of the local ‘bird-on-a-stick’ saga. Was this a good example of judging without empathy? Unfortunately, this debate now seems to have had a spin-off effect and has encouraged some judges to dismiss or judge photos of perched birds rather too harshly. Once again, judge photos purely on their photographic merits.

Poor processing: Be cautious when critiquing a photo if you not sure of – or familiar with – the processing techniques and/or the specialised software used, as well as the desired final affect. If you are not sure admit it and comment on the aspects you are familiar with.

Product photos and record shots: Where necessary, explain (with empathy, as always) why these may hold little interest for the viewer. Consider the styling and lighting. For example, if the lighting is too harsh, discuss how an umbrella or soft box might have helped.



Should these two photos be dismissed as ‘birds on a stick’? Should any photo be judged as such? How would you score each of these images?

Make your score commensurate with your comments: In trying to show empathy be careful not to go overboard with positive comments. There is hardly anything worse for a photographer than having a photograph praised and then to receive a low score.

Judging is a strange beast

Giving a critique properly can facilitate both technical and artistic growth, but given improperly, it can derail development, damage self-esteem, and undermine the strong sense of community that makes photography such a group pursuit. Embracing empathy and kindness and taking time to understand a photograph from all angles: technical, artistic, motivational, contextual, environmental, etc, can facilitate a full and deep critique, one that truly addresses an image in a way that is beneficial to both the judge and the photographer. As a judge you might find that doing this also helps you to examine your own images in an increasingly beneficial manner.



That's it and good luck
with your judging

Appendix – photos with no redeeming qualities

As previously stated, the most difficult part of judging competition photos is critiquing a really poor photo without causing offence. When faced with this problem try to find something worth complimenting, something that may have been outweighed by all the problems. There are so many things to look for – some of them may be found in the following checklist:

- **Angle:** The vantage point from which the photograph was taken.
- **Background:** A pleasing, often soft, background that doesn't distract from the main subject.
- **Balance:** The distribution of visual elements in a photograph.
- **Caption or title:** How a good caption can enhance the understanding of a photo.
- **Centre of interest:** The object(s) which appear most prominently in a photograph.
- **Colour:** The use of colour with emphasis on mood and the colour wheel.

- **Composition:** The arrangement or structure of the formal elements that make up an image.
- **Content:** The subject, topic or information captured in a photograph.
- **Contrast:** The difference in darkness or density between one tone and another. Strong visual differences between light and dark, varying textures, sizes, etc.
- **Depth of field:** The range of an allowable focusing error which will still produce an acceptably sharp image.
- **Diffused light:** A light source that comes from a scattered light source such as from a cloudy sky, or a light bulb under a lamp shade.
- **Exposure:** The intensity of light. Is it correctly exposed?
- **Eye movement:** How the viewer's eye moves around within the frame of the photograph.
- **Focus:** The areas that appear clearest or sharpest in the photograph.

- **Framing:** What the photographer has placed within the boundaries of the photograph.
- **Impact:** Does the photo have any impact?
- **Layout:** The overall design of a photograph.
- **Light source:** Direction and quality of the light illuminating the photographed scene.
- **Message:** Does the photo provide a strong message such as joy or grief, or the beauty of nature, or anything else?
- **Point of view:** The place from which a photographer takes a photo.
- **Repetition:** Lines or shapes occurring over and over that create a pattern.
- **Separation:** When the main subject is nicely separated from the background.

- **Shape:** Something distinguished from its surroundings by its outline.
- **Styling:** Even in a poor photograph, the arrangement of the items photographed (such as in food photography) may be really good and worth commenting on.