

“What I Look for When I Judge”

There has been much discussion in the club lately about what constitutes “good” judging. There is always the question of “what in the world was the judge thinking?” I can’t speak for anyone else, but I also believe that most experienced judges share many of the following opinions with me.

This is a very important point that should come first: One of the hardest things to do is not actually something to *Look for*, but rather something to try to *Avoid*. I do my best to ignore my own likes and dislikes of *subject matter* when I am judging. The only fair thing to do when judging is to view each image on its own merits, whether you like the subject or not. Anything else is grossly unfair to your fellow photographers. Treat their work as you want your work treated.

There are very few “perfect” images among those I have given 5 rating. Do not go into any competition expecting to find perfection. Winning images, even those receiving the highest scores possible, do NOT have to be perfect. Do not let Perfection be the enemy of Excellence. Excellence is a range, and *true excellence does not equal perfection*.

Ensure that you have read and understand the rules of the section you are judging. Entering an amazing image that is illegal to the section in question, should lead to a disappointed photographer. I suggest re-reading the rules before the start of each club year. Links to our rules are on the club website.

In any case, the following is what I look for when I judge. The following elements are not ranked most important to least. They are all important. I just weigh them differently depending on the category or division I am judging.

1. Does the photo have "Impact?"

In my experience, winners catch my eye and hold my interest. They it knock my socks off and make me want to look at them again and again? If there are minor "flaws" (and there almost certainly will be), the excellent image still interesting and visually arresting. Do not expect perfection.

2. Does the photo clearly display feeling and emotion, or does it draw emotion from me?

This is especially important in the Photojournalism (PJ) category. The very best PJ images have what I call universal appeal. The emotions portrayed or elicited, regardless of the emotion, are usually instantly recognized by most people.

3. Does the photo tell a "story?"

Is it quickly recognizable what the photographer was trying to say? Was the photographer, in fact, trying to say anything?

3a.) In Nature, Photojournalism, and Photo Travel, the primary driver for the judge should always be the Nature, PJ, or PT **story**, not the pictorial quality.

3b.) In Pictorial, sometimes the whole point is the abstract composition or a lovely play of colors. That is okay, too. Here the judge may be more influenced by the "impact" and "emotion" conveyed by the image rather than the story.

4. Does the photo have good technical quality?

Here is where I take into account the focus, clarity, composition, technique, etc. (Remember, Nature, PJ, and PT must be judged to a different standard here.)

Sharp focus is extremely important in the main subject. You know how you don't want to watch a movie that is blurry – well most of us don't want to look at blurry photographs. Now soft focus and blurry are not the same! Soft focus can add to the emotional impact of the photograph if it was intended, not because of poor technique.

Are the colors true and clear? If a monochrome, are the whites white and the blacks black? Are there details in the light and

dark areas? Just as I don't like blurry, I don't like muddy, "flat" images.

Is the composition pleasing? The photo should hold the eye in the picture, not lead the eye out of it. There should not be any annoying bits that draw the eye away from the subject and story, or bounce your eye all over the frame. Be very careful about light areas around the edges of your photos, as your eye tends to be drawn towards the lightest areas of the picture.

Always be aware of what the background does FOR not TO your photo. You may not have noticed that post sticking out of your sister's head, but the judges will. The subject usually should have enough room – for example, I don't want to see a jumping horse that looks like he is about to bump his nose on the frame.

5. Was the presentation good? Did the photographer take the time to think about the "whole package?" For example, if the top of the print is a light sky and the paper is white, did the photographer put any kind of stroke or border that stops my eye from continuing to wander on out of the image? The border does not have to be large or at all obvious - often a very subtle, thin line is all it takes to make a huge difference in presentation. Avoid light, brightly colored, multi-colored, shiny, or textured-looking borders. All of these draw the eye away from the

photograph. When I judge a competition, I never want the border to be more interesting than the picture. I want to be sold on what is inside the borders, not what surrounds the photo.

6. In Altered Reality/Creative competitions, our Club's rules require that the image must immediately appear to have been obviously altered from reality. It really does not matter how much the photographer "did to" the image, if when viewed the end result can pass for a "straight" photo.

So, grab those cameras and have fun! In the long run, that is all that matters. Remember that YOU are the artist. If you are happy with your image, then that is what really matters.

Respectfully submitted by,
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