

How To Critique Photographs

This article belongs completely to Ed Shapiro, a professional photographer, who contributed a lot to the art. It is based on the content of [a topic of forum](#) where Ed gives recommendations how to exchange critiques to photographs. It was intended for users of [forum at Zuga.com](#), but could be applied to any photography critique forum we visit. I have to thank Ed for answering this difficult question. At the moment of publishing this article I could not find any place where Ed gathered and published his knowledge, so I decided to extend the audience of the forum where he posted this topic with his consent. So here it goes...

How To Critique Photographs

One would think that the concept of critiquing photographs is simple - a photographer submits his or her prints to a competition or a "judge" or judging panel, ostensibly of his or her peers or perhaps a person or persons of a known quantity of higher expertise, for the purposes of constructive criticism or for validation of their existing skills and talents. The all encompassing reason for this exercise, in a perfect world, is so that the submitting photographers can get an honest reading, if you will, on the quality level of their work - an essential component of growing as an artist.

All one needs to do is turn on the 11 O'clock news to realize that we do not live in a perfect world, the status of photographic education being the least of it. Suffice it to say that in our smaller world of photography, continually educating ourselves in our ever changing craft, is a formidable job in which the exchange of ideas, concepts and knowledge is the essential tool for success and survival. The concept of good - shall we invent a term - "critique management" is vital in keeping this exchange alive. Critiquing, in my opinion, is the most powerful device in teaching, learning and the stimulation of creativity. Since it IS such a powerful force, shouldn't we pay some attention to the "art" of delivering and accepting critiques? When misused, the power of the critique can become damaging and discouraging, rather than strengthening and inspiring.

Taking the above philosophy in mind, it becomes apparent that critiquing has become a more complex endeavor than one might have originally thought and carries along with it some responsibility, ethical questions, diplomatic obligations and even sensitivity issues. To make things even more difficult there are endless variations in judging concepts and the motivations and expatiations of those submitting their work. To confound things even more, there is all the political, emotional and rhetorical stuff that often surrounds the critiquing process which, in turn, leads to childish behaviors, egoism, cronyism, one-upmanship and downright rudeness - all counter productive elements that degrade and erode an otherwise proud and time-honored teaching and learning tradition. Some of these negative issues can be proven by participating in and observing print shows and critiquing sessions, acting as a judge at these events. More importantly, to observe as a current issue, right here on our boards, some of the head banging that goes on. It is a shame when people refrain from posting their work for critique, for fear of being personally attacked - what a bummer! So here it comes: As a veteran of a billion print competitions - on both sides of the judging table - having given and taken zillions of picks and pans - holding a PhD from the school of hard (print) knocks - are my humble ideas and insights into the art of Critiquing

Disclaimer:

In the following article, references are made to standards, print competitions, judges, photographic organizations, and rules and regulations. These references are only made to illustrate my experiences. This does not mean that I am suggesting that all the folks at Zuga (you and I) and the administrators should adopt any such concepts (such as P.P. of A rules). All the suggestions herein are designed to enable photographers to enjoy the critiquing process, here on the boards or if people are submitting their work or are asked to sit on a panel or be an adjudicator at a competition - that they can rise to the occasion. Also remember that these are my own opinions, based on my experiences and are also subject to your criticism or praise.

The Submitters

You are the folks who enter the competitions, go for the critiquing sessions and post their images here on the boards, especially in the print room and competition section. The question is, what motivates you to do so? If you are strictly looking for ribbons, prizes, accolades, pats on the back and validation, you are bound to be disappointed, disillusioned, hurt, disenchanted or just plain ticked off. If you want to get a good reading on you images, suggestions for improvement and the best stimulation for creativity you can get - you are in the right place. Sooner or later all the other good stuff will come. If your goal is to progress as a photography enthusiast, to become a professional, or improve your professional status - the "print room" is where you want to be. As I have stated before, competing and accepting criticism is a little bit like boxing - if you are afraid to take the occasional punch - don't go there. Those punches are ok if they go to your work - not yourself. There is no valid reason why anyone should accept personal attacks or rude comments - you have to learn to let that stuff go in one ear and out of the other - only the constructive stuff need remain in your brain. Any judge or photographer who delivers nasty criticism is probably someone to be ignored anyway regardless of their so called stature or personal savvy with a camera . Folks who do that, do so out of intolerance, jealousy, fear of competition, narrow-mindedness and or just plain old stupidity - all bad motivations - all to be ignored. Nasty critiques are generally not accurate.

When you attend a seminar, you pay your fee to listen to someone that you want to learn from. If a critiquing session is held during the seminar you might tend to more easily accept the criticism as part of the learning process. The same sort of acceptance usually occurs when your prints are being judged by a selected judge or panel of respected photographers of masters status. You know that these people, have themselves, been through the mill, so to speak, and the medicine they dish out is a little easier for you to swallow. But even the best of judges might base their criticism on subjective rather than objective reasons - we are all human and sometimes that happens. When you post on the forums, the "judges" are your fellow members and it is hard if not impossible to assess their level of expertise, talent, or experience unless they are known to you or are one of the founders or administrators who's reputations precede them.

Sometimes you can tell by the way they deliver their critiques and sometimes it is difficult to tell. There are people who can absorb and later on can regurgitate lots of information and then deliver it with very little substance - lots of techno-babble. There are others who simply do not know what they are talking about but post comments just for the sake of participating - or worse yet, to start a fire fight. It is then up to you to take the criticism from whom it comes and deal with it accordingly. You must separate the wheat from the chaff using the good stuff and ignoring the bad.

"Show Me Yours And I'll Show You Mine"

Some submitters, when posting their images, will take offence to a negative critique and "retaliate" by challenging the offending "judge" to show his own photography - this to earn the privilege of commenting on the work in question. I hate when that happens because that whole exercise will more often than not become kindling for a forest fire. When you post an image on a public forum, like [ZUGA](#), you are exposed to anyone who wants to comment on you work - again it is up to you to determine the validity of the various opinions. When I receive a comment with which I disagree, I might post a reply explaining my reasons for doing what I did, hoping to engage in some good technical repartee. If the response becomes intransigent, I simply agree or disagree and get on with other things. If I am in a slightly combative mood I might politely respond "I am beginning to understand your point of view, but for the purpose of clarification, could you kindly post a similar subject illustrating your preferred method of treatment for that particular type of subject" - then I let the feathers fly and land where they will! - it's fun! That is about as far as I will go - I never suggest pouring gasoline on a fire! On the boards we can enjoy this kind of communication. When however, we send our prints to actual print shows and competitions - the decision of the judges are final and you have to accept whatever you get and hopefully use the information to your advantage.

Your Duty As A Poster Or A Competitor

Prepare you submission, send it or post it according to the rules. Take your results or score in stride and use whatever you have learned to your advantage. When you are on the boards, refrain from nasty or retaliatory comments. If you ignore bad comments, the absence of your angst will become apparent to others on the thread and you will gain respect.

On Being A Good Judge

When I started to sit on judging panels we used to have to take judging lessons. The lessons spelled out the rules and regulations and more importantly the criteria for actually analyzing and scoring prints. I am not suggesting that these rules be adopted officially but they can serve as good guidelines when you wish to give a critique or comment on photographs that have been posted on the site. Remember YOU ARE THE JUDGE and folks are depending upon you for fair and honest adjudication. Your job is to assign a score (say 0 to 100) to each print or body of work and or make a critique thereby sending an important, accurate message to the makers of those prints. The message has to contain an accurate assessment of the quality and craftsmanship in the piece, designed to set the maker in the right direction. If a critique is involved it should clearly and succinctly point out the areas that need improvement and if possible a remedy for the problem(s). When doing an informal critique, for the sake argument, you can set your own standards. , Remember this is an exercise on the boards, not an official competition - have fun with this and consider it a learning experience for all concerned. My favorite method is to score on a percentile basis.

- 1-60 = somewhat below professional or advanced amateur standards - needs a whole lot of re-thinking - would probably not hang in a professional level print show - one or two pointers would not fix things up.
- 61-74 = Getting there but no cigar.
- 75-80 = Professional level work.
- 81-85 = Pretty Good Stuff .
- 86-90 = Kick butt work and
- 91-100 = Masterful exemplary photography.

Criteria (what to look for) - here's the list:

- Visual impact
- Composition
- Lighting
- Posing (when applicable)
- Treatment
- Printing quality - contrast, density, color balance etc.
- Finishing - spotting and retouching (where applicable)
- Surface finishing and cleanliness
- Presentation - mounting

Just some final Dos and Don'ts:

DO

- Always give an honest objective opinion.
- Always suggest areas for improvement where required.
- Always encourage the maker to continue posting or submitting work.
- Be specific on all your points.

DON'T

Judge or criticize work based on the photographer's approach or style. Things like That is a PJ style of image - I would have like for you to have posed those subjects in a more formal manner. This just does not communicate anything constructive and contributes nothing to the education or improvement of the maker.

By the same token don't say "I love that print - do you have a web site?" - It's better to say "I love the way you have captured the texture in the bride's gown and managed to get a spontaneous expression all at the same time."

Please Remember

Being a "please everyone judge" is just as bad as being a "kill everyone judge". Sending the wrong message to a contestant or poster is a gross disservice - they work hard to make their prints and deserve your honesty and professionalism.

Don't post disclaimers like - "I don't know what I am talking about but here's my 2 cents" . Say what is on your mind and how the image has effected you. If it a boring flat image and does no send you a message - it is probably deficient in some technical or artistic way - so put your cards on the table and communicate.

I think that the critiquing that shows up on the boards should be fun, entertaining and educational. It gives us all a chance to be the contestant or the judge. It is healthy and can serve as an interesting exercise as long as humility, fairness, decorum and sportsmanship prevail. Except for these "rules" please do not take the rest of my suggestions that seriously - it's up to you. If you intend to "enter the ring" as a contender or someday participate, as a judge in an official capacity - this is good practice. Remember - No pain - no gain! Whether or not you want to heed my advice is up to yourself because - YOU ARE THE FINAL JUDGE!

Special regards to Jay - His comments, on another post encouraged me to write this thing. Thanks to all who had the patience to read it.

Ed Shapiro