

## CRITIQUING PHOTOGRAPHS

## Notes for Critiquers

The purpose of a critique is to help you learn to take better photos. A critique is not meant to be a put-down of your work, but a tool to help you see your photography and develop your own critical eye when it comes to your photography. When others point out a technical problem, or gives a cropping suggestion to tighten up your work, this is invaluable information for you. You don't have to agree with the comments made, but listening to evaluations of your work can gain you valuable insights to increase your skills.

When placing your work up to be evaluated it pays to use your best work. If you put something up you know is flawed, it doesn't help you learn, you already know it is flawed. It does take courage to place your best work to the public eye to have others review. Keep an open mind that when others give you their opinions they are trying to help you be a better photographer. This is a good time to check your ego at the discussion door and listen to what the other has to say about your photograph. This doesn't mean you have to necessarily agree with the opinion, but it does serve to help you think about how that photograph could be better with lighting, angle, cropping or any other numerous ways to improve your photograph.

Sometimes the critiques were favorable but most times they show what could be done to make the photo better. By going back out and re-shooting the subject one can use the information given by a critique. The information brings one closer to understanding what they are seeing and creating both in the camera and the dark room/ computer. It also aids in improved technical skills in the use of the camera and in the darkroom/computer.

Sometimes it is easy not to want to listen or feel the necessity to defend the work. But both these attitudes of not listening, or getting defensive towards a positive critique doesn't anything of value. It is real easy to slip into that position of defense. If it is just praise one wants on their work, they would never learn how to be a better photographer

This information is compiled from a number of photograph critique guidelines as well as a number of fine art critique guides. Many of the methods of critiquing art pieces apply equally well for photographs.  
*Terry Tallis Member of Valley Viewfinders 1/16/2006*

First of all, remember that a critique is (or should be) a thoughtful, reasoned response to a photograph - and it can be positive, as well as pointing out any defects. Critique does not mean criticism! That being said, a well articulated negative comment can sometimes be an illuminating moment for the photographer; conversely, being told that there is nothing wrong can be a good confidence builder.

(Honest feedback is a useful aid for the photographer to learn and progress: if no-one points out possible problems,

The focus of critiquing should be providing feedback that will help the photographer—and onlookers—learn something.

**What has been done well—**select some the best things and say why you think they work.

**What could be improved—**select areas where the biggest improvements could be made and give your reasons. Where appropriate provide links to relevant examples or reference material.

we all carry on doing the same thing forever, instead of working out ways to improve. Some varying ideas will allow the photographer to pick and choose those that will help develop his/her own style.)

Second, remember that you are trying to help people improve their skills - not to puff up their egos or destroy their self-confidence. Try to balance any perceived problems with an appreciation of the good points of the image. That way, you will get a better reaction from the photographer, and perhaps encourage

more useful discussion from other members.

If you point out a problem, see if you can offer some constructive help on how to fix it for next time, by choosing a different viewpoint, aperture or shutter speed for example. Do not assume everyone knows as much as you do, so explain in simple terms how to fix what you may see as obvious: not everyone understands the relationship between aperture and depth of field. (Even if the photographer is knowledgeable, other people hoping to learn from the critiques may not be.)

On the other hand, do not be put off making a critique just because you are not a technical expert: anyone who can see can form an opinion of an image and tell the photographer what they like and dislike about it. Since it is very hard to be objective about your own work, the reactions of fresh eyes can be really invaluable.

You will probably find that critiquing helps you to improve your own photography too: by analyzing what works and what doesn't, you will learn new techniques and approaches you can use.

While you are free to respond to other people's critiques, and it is perfectly valid to disagree, you should of course exercise courtesy and restraint in doing so: remember the primary purpose of the forum is to help photographers improve. Sometimes, a simple apology for unintentional offence may be diplomatic, however unreasonable you may feel the response to be.

### Making A Critique of a Photograph

A critique is a written or verbal evaluation of a photograph based on careful observation. It does not do to just say "I like the photograph". The critique must mention what you like and why you like it. Here are some guidelines on what you should look at and consider making comments about in a photo critique. These tools are helpful to the photographer in analyzing their own work as well.

*To the critiquer: Just because you may be bored with seeing (for example) sunsets with palm trees, boats with reflections or macros of bugs on yellow flowers, that don't necessarily mean that the person who took this photo is. We all have to start somewhere, and what is common to you is fresh and exciting for someone else. Instead of pointing out that it is formulaic; suggest a way to lift it above the ordinary. If you can't, then concentrate on the photo technique, not the subject, in such cases.*

**Composition—content** - This is what the photograph is saying.

- ◇ What is the Center of Interest in the photograph?
- ◇ Where does your eye come to rest in viewing the photo? If there is more than one focus point does that add to the photographs interest or distract from it?
- ◇ Where was the Center of Interest placed within the frame of the photo?
- ◇ Did they use the rule of thirds?
- ◇ What other eye control elements are in the photo (leading lines, contrast, diagonal lines, etc).
- ◇ Do the elements lead you into or out of the picture?
- ◇ Do they create a circular flow into the center, do they form a triangle or other shape, i.e., what is the pattern of movement in and through the picture?
- ◇ Is the composition in "formal" or "informal" balance?
- ◇ What is the "focal point"? Is there more than one focal point?
- ◇ Is there a visible foreground, middle ground and background?
- ◇ Does the design of the composition give a sense of

visual tension, restfulness, energy, etc.? Can you discern why?

- ◇ Did the photographer get close enough to the subject to include only what is important? In other words, are there wasted parts of the frame that contain items not adding to the message of the photo?
- ◇ Is the image oriented appropriately, i.e. if the subject is wide is the photo horizontal; if the subject is tall is the photo vertical
- ◇ Is the photograph visually satisfying, or static, or just plain inept?

*Don't get too hung up on the rules of good composition - part of having a good eye is in knowing when to break the rules. Not every shot of a tree by a lake needs to conform to the rule of thirds, nor does every bird portrait need to be inclusive of the whole creature, or a head and shoulders looking at the camera*

- ◇ Is your eye led around the frame in an interesting way by use of layers, curving or intersecting shapes, diagonals, repeating themes, symmetry/asymmetry etc?
- ◇ Is there a discernible subject? (Does there need to be one for this shot - not always necessary for a "tone poem" type landscape for example?)
- ◇ Is there a good balance between the subject and the background? Beginners often chose a safe, middling approach by getting the subject more or less to fill the frame, where a more distant shot including context, or a close-up of a detail, would be more compelling.
- ◇ Have any important parts of the subject been lopped off at the edge for no reason?
- ◇ Are symmetrical objects truly symmetrical; i.e. are they the balanced equally on both sides or do they need adjusting?
- ◇ Conversely, would a better crop have eliminated unnecessary areas and improved the image? Beginners often present full frames regardless, and rarely think to turn the camera 90 degrees for a better result.
- ◇ Has the photographer missed some obvious problems with the subject: litter in a tree, a fence post sprouting out of a figure's head, unwanted object in the foreground etc?
- ◇ Is the horizon level, for sea-, river-, and lake-scapes? And for architecture shots, is any perspective distortion considered, or accidental?
- ◇ Does the photo tell a story, show a scene, record an event, or in some way evoke a memory or feeling? Or does it make you imagine the photographer saying "Whoops, I just pressed the shutter button"?

**Regardless of our expertise in photography, we are all learners..**

**Background-** How did the photographer use the tools of selective focus or depth of field to deal with the background?

- ◇ Is the background simplified, included or a solid or is it nonexistent?
- ◇ How does the background add or distract from the message of the photo?

#### **Camera Work—Technical -**

**Exposure and focus** begin in the camera.

- ◇ Is the subject sharp and clearly in focus?
- ◇ Are parts of the photo that need to be clearly focused out of focus?
- ◇ Is the depth of field appropriate?
- ◇ Is the subject contained within the depth of field or are parts of the subject fuzzy?
- ◇ Are there distracting elements in the background that are in focus which would have been blurred out by a wider aperture?
- ◇ Exposure is observed in the details of the shadow area. A properly exposed photo will have some texture in the shadows. Is the photo exposed properly and give some evidence of what you see? Contrast in processing the film or the contrast of the photo paper affects the highlights in a photo. Is there detail visible in the brightest parts of the print?
- ◇ If there are areas of the print that lack detail is that good or bad?
- ◇ **Effort:** Has the photographer made full use of the facilities at his disposal? Or, are there things that the photographer could have improved with a little more work? Does it look like the photographer made an extra effort to capture the best possible image under the circumstances, or did they just go with what was in front of them?
- ◇ **Color:** Was the photographer's choice to use or not use color sound?
- ◇ If the photographer used black and white, then is the subject of the photo something that is normally associated with color, like an apple?
- ◇ If the photographer used color, does the color add to or detract from the image?
- ◇ What is the "temperature", i.e. cool, warm, neutral, etc.?
- ◇ Are the colors at the appropriate intensity for the subject; too strong or too weak?
- ◇ Does the overall value and temperature seem appropriate for the subject?
- ◇ Are the colors bright or dull
- ◇ **Spatial positioning and composition:** Is the subject in the center of the frame?
- ◇ Usually a centered subject looks boring, but it works in some cases. Did it work this time?
- ◇ Does anything look squeezed up against the side of

the frame?

- ◇ Are there big open spaces around the edges that could be cropped out?
  - ◇ Is there a clear subject that occupies the majority of the frame, or is the subject unclear or small and surrounded by irrelevant material?
  - ◇ Direction of attention: What do you see first in the photo? Is it the right thing?
  - ◇ Do you have to hunt for the subject or does it stand out?
  - ◇ Is your eye drawn to objects in the background, rather than the subject, or do you look to the edge of the frame, expecting to find something that isn't there?
  - ◇ **Exposure:** Is the photo properly exposed?
  - ◇ Are there details both in the highlights and in the shadows, or are there large "blown-out" highlight areas or "blocked-up" shadow areas?
  - ◇ If the exposure is biased towards light (high key) or dark (low key), did the photographer make a good choice
  - ◇ **Light:** - Where is the source of light coming from, i.e. sun, artificial light, etc.?
  - ◇ What direction is the light: from above, below, left, right, etc., and is this appropriate for the subject and mood you're trying to convey?
  - ◇ How strong is the light: is it soft and subtle, bold and dramatic, etc.?
  - ◇ How does the light affect the subject and mood of the painting?
  - ◇ What color does the light appear to be and how does this affect the color of the subject and its surroundings?
  - ◇ **Technical Aspects:** - Is it in focus where it needs to be (including appropriate use of depth of field)? For example, although landscapes are traditionally expected to be sharp, soft focus and a narrow depth of field are quite appropriate for certain subjects. And for macro shots, the part of the subject in focus is really critical.
  - ◇ Is camera shake evident? (You cannot always tell the difference between shake and mis-focusing, but overall blur in a twilight shot is often subject to it.)
  - ◇ Is the color balance right? (Unnatural color casts may indicate the wrong film or digital white balance was used.)
  - ◇ Is the exposure right: can you see details from shadows to highlights, or are bright parts washed out for example? Is the overall impression very gloomy or too bright (taking the subject into account)?
  - ◇ Was a good choice of lens used for the subject? (focal length: wide angle to telephoto; fisheye, macro...)
  - ◇ Was a good choice of film / digital technique made: grainy monochrome, supersaturated color, infrared... - or has the photographer used an inappropriate filter or special effect to beef up what would other-
-

wise be a really boring shot?

- ◇ For JPEG images, are there any obvious artifacts, typically caused by oversharpening or excessive compression?

#### Craftmanship -

- ◇ Does the photo have stains, spots, dust and scratches?
- ◇ Is it nicely displayed in the frame or is it just slapped in?
- ◇ Does the photograph look like care was made in making it or is there evidence that the person just rushed it?

#### Your opinion of the photo -

- ◇ What do you like about the subject?
- ◇ Is it an emotional shot, a story, a statement, a humorous photo, or what?
- ◇ Is there anything about the photograph that you would do differently if you were the photographer and had the chance to do the same shot?

**Emotional Aspects:** Does the subject speak to you, and evoke some reaction other than a yawn? Sometimes, the impact of a powerful piece of photojournalism or a stunning scene can outweigh minor technical problems, and conversely, a beautifully executed shot can leave you quite cold. Tell the photographer how you felt about the photo: it is impossible to be really objective about one's own work, so third

- party opinions are invaluable, as we have already said
- ◇ How did you respond when you first saw this painting/drawing?
  - ◇ How do you respond to it after having gone through this checklist?...Do you have a better appreciation for the piece -- see it as stronger, weaker, etc., than when it was first created?
  - ◇ What specific things will you do to correct problems identified in this photograph?
  - ◇ What specific things were done well and are worth repeating in future work?
  - ◇ What specific things have you learned through critiquing this art work, whether it is yours or someone else's?

If you like a photo then say so. If you see something that

you don't like about a photo, then say that. You can't be wrong. If you don't like something about a photo then either the photographer intended it to be that way, in which case you simply have a difference of opinion, or the photographer didn't notice it, in which case your critique will be enlightening. If the photo looks dark then say so. Maybe the photographer intended it to be dark, but so what? If you don't like the darkness of it then probably other people don't as well, and the photographer should be aware of that.

#### For the photographer:

Use this list as a guide to analyze your own work—did you learn anything by using this guide? Have you made any notes on areas to concentrate on for your next photo session.

#### For the critiquer:

#### When all is said and done...

##### Don't

- ◇ Let checklists (like this one) dictate the form of the critique—you do not need to comment on every item. Use them to help you pinpoint and analyze what was done well and what could be improved.
- ◇ Overwhelm the photographer by including too many suggestions or too much information.

##### Do

- ◇ Critique in a positive, non-judgmental spirit
- ◇ Try to pitch your critique to the right level—you will not turn a beginner into an expert in a single step
- ◇ Try to be as objective as possible and set aside your own taste in photography—the critique is about the photographer's work, not your own.

As mentioned above, this is a guide to help you in critiquing other work (as well as your own). In that this is just a guide, recognize that not every rule will apply. It is often the surprise of a rule-breaking photograph that makes it special and unique.

These are just some things to think about: if you don't understand or care about the technical aspects, then just concentrate on the others, which are equally valuable.

Finally, when giving a critique, try to think for yourself as being

hired by the photographer as a mentor or teacher, or perhaps a defense attorney whose job it is to make your client's work look its best in court (even if it is hideous). If you truly dislike something and really can't think of anything that would help, it is best to refrain from commenting. If the photographer has specifically asked for your opinion, perhaps, instead of a critique, you could suggest some exercises, articles, other photographs or reference material to look at.

And finally, enjoy! Everyone here enjoys their photography, and we hope you will enjoy critiquing too. This list will equip you to complete a basic critique of your and/or other's art work. Feel free to print the list and for your personal use customizing if necessary depending on the type of work you are evaluating.