

NOTES on JUDGING at CAMERA CLUBS...

(Article first posted to the FCC Forum Dec. 2003 by [Len Brown JP, AAPS, SSAPS](#))

The mere thought of being asked to judge a club competition can often intimidate even the most experienced photographer, but if taken carefully in reality the task is not all that difficult!

Most of us, even beginners, have some idea of what constitutes a good photograph & we react to a really high quality print or slide almost instinctively, but often have some difficulty in putting into words our feelings for that photograph. This ability to comment on a photograph probably comes through experience & practice both of which can be developed by the study of good images (prints or slides) in exhibitions, galleries, magazines, books etc & by endeavouring to ascertain the elements in those photographs which help to make them good. Examine them carefully to determine how they were made & how the photographer expressed their ideas.

In most club competitions you will find that there are usually one or two photographs that are of such a nature that they stand out from the others. These are quite easy to appreciate & would form a small group from which you would be able to select the award winners. In the same way there are usually some unsatisfactory works (in subject or treatment) which can be eliminated immediately. Thus, by quietly studying the collection before you for evaluation, you can commence by narrowing the field down to those few top photographs which would qualify for awards. However, remember that it is the weak & mediocre work which requires your most careful comments as it is obviously the photographers of such who require your help.

It is not so much the selection of prints or slides that daunt a judge as the need to comment in a lucid & helpful manner. In this respect you could do well to think of the basic rule in the evaluation of all photographs - be honest & say what you have to say in simple language & try in all your comments to be helpful & not destructive. Do not express yourself in long & involved sentences, or to put it more plainly, don't waffle. Refrain from using too much photographic jargon as beginners may not understand what you mean & therefore your comment would be wasted. After all, everything you need to say can be said in plain English & would be all the better for it.

Speak clearly & loud enough for those in the back of the room to hear you, otherwise you are wasting your time & what is more to the point, you become boring. If the audience cannot hear all that you are saying they are liable to just give up & go to sleep. Don't spend several minutes dissecting every print but simply pick out the most important aspects & move on to the next one. There is nothing more boring than to listen to a judge, however good, who steadily & slowly works his way through every square centimetre of each print & slide. Always express your thoughts in a considerate manner & endeavour not to offend for you can quite easily criticise without giving offence. If you are not naturally humorous then don't try to be funny & most certainly not at the expense of the photographer, because you will find your efforts falling flat.

The most important thing to realise is that, as a judge, **YOU ARE NOT THERE TO SIMPLY CRITICISE EVERYTHING.**

You are there to evaluate. This may well involve being critical of poor work or technical faults but is also means commenting on the good aspects of the photograph.

Too many so-called judges merely seem to be set on finding every fault in a photograph & completely overlooking the virtues. Your role is to help & instruct, NOT to destroy.

Once a photographer has selected the subject & determined the composition in the camera most of his work from thereafter becomes more technical. He must develop & print using various techniques in the correct manner if he is to produce the feeling & mood of the original subject & because you are also a working photographer, you may well be inclined to give undue attention to the technical qualities & forget that the content of the photograph is also of the utmost importance. Always remember to look at the photograph as a whole for there is no one element that does not contribute to the overall quality of the final photograph.

In any group of club entries you will find photographs of many different subjects & with many different forms of treatment, some of which you may personally like & some dislike but you must consider all with an open mind. Your personal tastes are not that important. What you are really called upon to discuss is whether the photographer has carried out their ideas successfully or not & you must give credit for good work even when that type of photograph fails to create any great interest in you.

DO NOT HARBOUR PRECONCEIVED IDEAS OF WHAT THE PHOTOGRAPH SHOULD BE!

Simply look at the photograph without prejudice of any kind & consider if it is a good example of the type of work that the photographer has tried to create. Then you can make your comments.

As you look at each photograph you should ask yourself the following classic questions

- [What is the photographer trying to do?](#)
- [How well has it been executed?](#)
- [Was it worth doing?](#)
- [Does the subject or treatment show originality?](#)
- [Is the treatment appropriate to the subject?](#)

■ [Does the photograph exhibit a high degree of skill?](#)

If you study the above questions carefully you will find that the answers will provide you with a very good basis on which to evaluate the work before you. In that way you will give due weight, not only to the technical aspects but will also give due consideration to the artistic ideas of the photographer. After all the thought & work that has gone into even a modest photograph the photographer deserves your total consideration of their efforts & not just a comment on one aspect only.

If you are called upon to judge a SET SUBJECT then you must give consideration as to how well he has portrayed the subject & take this into account in your allocation of awards. If the competition is OPEN then do not try to put each photograph into a certain category & judge it as such. For example, what may be quite unacceptable in a Nature Set Subject may be most successful in an OPEN. You do not have to classify each work before passing judgement nor do you have to recognise each & every object in it.

Be prepared to accept a new or unusual idea - do not just dismiss it out of hand because it is unfamiliar or does not fall into the usual standards. Study it carefully to evaluate its worth before you open your mouth.

A photograph may have considerable impact at first glance because of high contrast or colour treatment but be careful to look beyond for the actual content. Impact is not all there is to a photograph. There must also be greater qualities to it for it to succeed. Conversely be prepared to give consideration to a small subded print or slide for it may well have the qualities that grow on you with longer viewing.

Tell the truth as you see it but be careful not to tell the whole truth. If the photographer is only a beginner the listing of all his faults without mention of any virtues may well discourage them from attempting further work. Try to encourage not discourage.

If in doubt as to the value of a print or slide give it the benefit of that doubt. It is better to overvalue than undervalue. An extra point may well encourage the photographer to try to do better next time.

First look at the photograph as a whole (impact, lighting, composition, subject, technique) & comment before you start talking about its faults. Almost every photograph that comes before will contain faults of some kind so don't wait for the perfect print before you allocate a Merit or you will probably never make any award.

Comment on matters that are really significant. There well may be faults but don't make mountains out of a molehill. Far too many judges give undue emphasis to trivial faults to the detriment of the photograph as a whole.

Always remember that the photographer made the photograph, not you, so do not try to trim or alter it to suit what you think they should have taken. Judge it good or bad as it stands. You could well suggest alterations if those alterations would improve the portrayal of the subject but not if they tend to make it another subject. If you support your suggestions with constructive criticism then you can be of great assistance to the photographer.

There are a number of various methods of marking employed by clubs & therefore you should be sure to find out which method is being used before you commence your work. Some clubs will instruct you as soon as you arrive but others often forget to tell you. A brief word with the President or Secretary before the meeting will clarify the position.

If you are not certain that you recognise a certain treatment or how an effect was created then don't mention the matter. It only makes you look silly if you make a statement on some matter only to find out later that it was not so.

You do not have to recognise every item in the photograph to be able to judge the whole so if you don't know just what an object is don't say so & mark it down accordingly unless you feel that it is of considerable importance to the photograph to require identification.

Your responsibility is to honestly evaluate all types of photographs to the best of your ability & to express yourself simply & sincerely. If you do just that then you have nothing to fear from the job. Very rarely will everyone agree with your decisions, but that is only to be expected as a photograph is such a personal thing & what appeals to one may well leave another cold. If you give sincere & valid reasons for your decisions, even if some of the club members do not agree, they will at least respect your point of view.

Finally, remember that you are not "THE ORACLE" but only one person expressing an opinion.

More reading... [Have a look at the PassionForPixels website owned and run by the Melbourne Camera Club, Australia.](#)