



Critiquing Photographs

Detailed analysis and assessment

Always remember the golden rule,
“Do unto others as you would have them do to you.”

A critique is a written or verbal evaluation of a photograph based on careful observation. Having yourself or a second party evaluate your photographs is an important and constructive step in developing your craft. If your purpose for taking photos is to exhibit them to the public you will surely reach this step almost immediately. It does not do to just make a statement such as, “I like the photograph.” The critique must mention what you like and why you like it. A proper critique for a photograph usually focuses on both aesthetic and technical qualities

One of the first considerations you must make is: “What is the purpose of this photo critique?” Take into consideration the moment in which the photograph was taken.

- Was it created in a split-second of time, which cannot be repeated?
- Was it painstakingly created within a studio? In the outdoors?
- Did the photographer take the time to wait for the right light? The right moment?

It is important to remember a critique’s main purpose should be to help a photographer develop their abilities. Giving feedback should acknowledge areas still needing work and skills, which have been developed. Do your best to always find some positive aspect of the work. Feedback should help the photographer grow, so give helpful suggestions on how to improve.

- “I like this photo, the contrast is cool,” **means nothing** to the photographer, it only means you like this particular photo, and feel its contrast is a good thing.
- “I like this photo, because it shows you’ve thought about the lighting, and the increased contrast adds to the overall impression of the amount of time you’ve put into lighting this item”, for example, would encourage the photographer to continue putting more work into their lighting. They’re on the right track.

The following information includes guidelines on what you should look at and consider making comments about a photograph.

Aesthetic Qualities

Composition (Content)

Remember: composition creates a hierarchy (order) within the work, which tells the viewer the relative importance of the imagery and elements included.

- Think about how the basic building blocks (elements of art) of line, shape, form, color, value, texture and space are used.
- How are these elements of art combined with the nine principles of art — balance, contrast, emphasis, movement, pattern & repetition (rhythm), proportion, unity/harmony and variety — to create a visually attractive photograph?
- How does the photographer use the rules of focal point, simplicity, fill the frame, point of view, perspective, rule of thirds, the golden mean, leading line(s), balance, framing and avoid mergers to show the hierarchy within the photograph?

So how do you do this?

First of all, take a close look at the photograph. Let your eyes scan it closely: Make sure that you've caught every possible detail of the photo. If something jumps out at you as being really good or really bad, note it, but don't comment or write anything at first.

Then really examine the photo think about the following:

- Look at the order within the photograph.
- What statement is the photograph making?
- Do you have to hunt for the subject or does it stand out?
- 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).
- Did the photographer get close enough to the subject to include only what is important?
- Are there wasted parts of the frame containing items not adding to the message of the photo?
- What do you think about the crop and aspect ratio?
- Is there a good balance between the foreground and the background?
- Would the photo have worked better with a different prop or model?
- 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?
- 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?
- Was the photographer's choice to use or not use color sound?
- If the photo is in black and white, should it have been in?
- If they used color, does the color contribute to the image, or would it have been more effective in B&W?
- If its B&W, does that help to focus on the essentials of the image, or are we missing something important?
- Is the photograph appropriate for the assignment?
- Is it appropriate for the viewing audience?

A Note About "Rules"

Please remember that composition rules are not absolute. They are handy guidelines to what will often work well. For some photos, a centered composition will be perfect and using the rule of thirds would ruin it. So think about what works in each case. These will always be subjective judgments, of course, but hearing other people's opinions on this is useful.

Technical Quality

In the Camera & Taking the Photo

Is the subject sharp and clearly in focus?

- Is part of the photo that need to be clearly focused out of focus?
- How is the depth-of-field, is it appropriate?
- Is exposure observed in the details of the shadow and highlight areas? A properly exposed photo will have some texture and detail in the shadows and highlights.
- 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 effects the highlights in a photo.
- What's the contrast like?
- If there are areas of the print that lack detail is that good or bad?
- Is the action stopped appropriately for the assignment?
- Is the flash properly synchronized?
- Could the photographer have used lighting differently?
- Would a bigger or smaller aperture have been beneficial?

Craftsmanship

- Does the photo have stains, spots, dust and scratches?
- Was fixer properly used?
- Was the paper incorrectly/correctly exposed to light?
- Is the print fogged?
- Can you see pixilation?
- Can you see lines where masks were not done correctly in PhotoShop?
- How is the contrast, can you see every shade of gray as well as pure black and pure white?
- Is it nicely displayed or is it just quickly done?
- Does the photograph look like care was made in making it or is there evidence the person just rushed it?
- Are the colors accurately represented?

Your Opinion

For your opinion, start off by saying "When I look at this photo, I feel..." Explain what sort of emotional response the photo raises in you. Follow up with "I think this photo is about..." Any symbolism you spot, tell the photographer. If you aren't sure, let them know. 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? Talk about the photo for a little bit. This is the thing that is most frequently overlooked when doing critiques, but is actually one of the most useful things you can do to a photographer.

Final Points to Remember

Also remember that there's no right or wrong in photography. Gross technical errors (vast exposure problems, for example) can be universally wrong, but artistic considerations are not universal. Different people have different styles. No one style is correct.

Effort:

Has the photographer made full use of the facilities at their 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?

Good points

This is where you point out what you like about the photograph, and why. The why bit is most important: If you can't tell why you like X, Y, or Z, there's no point in mentioning it. "I like the sky" is useless. "I like the color of the sky" is better. "I like the deep blue color of the sky because it contrasts nicely with the yellows and reds in the photo" is perfect. Put some thought into this.

Points worth improving

This point is saved for last, because you've made the photographer more confident about their photograph by now. It is still important to remember that the photo has been taken, and that this photo can't really be changed anymore. As such, there's no point in slating people for their photographs. Tell them one or two specific points that could be improved on this particular photo ('clean up dust' and 'turn into black and white' are useful suggestions, as they can be done in the darkroom), and perhaps one or two points that you would have done differently, if you were the one taking the photograph.

Handling criticism

If you're the photographer getting critique, don't get defensive. In fact, just keep your mouth closed. Getting people to talk to you about your photos is a rare opportunity, so don't waste it. Let people talk (even if you disagree), it's their opinion, and your target audience should be important to you. Let them rant, and if you really have to, defend yourself afterward, once it's all finished. Although — honestly — if you feel you have to defend yourself, you might want to take a step back and consider why.