

Selecting and Preparing Images for Competition

(Club, National or International.)

Introduction.

Competition photography whether at the club level or on the international stage is a fast track method to improve your own worth and personal satisfaction as a photographer but to achieve that advanced level most of us are going to have to put some effort into it. It is not really about your equipment or your location/s so much as about developing your eye and instincts as a photographer. Capturing a competition worthy image starts before you even reach for your camera or decide on a location. It begins with your state of mind and the level of knowledge you have gained.

Essentially there are three stages to the process of creating images or competition images in particular.

1. You need to understand and be instinctive enough to 'see' a good image in any situation, including having a working knowledge of the basic 'rules' of photography.

Having captured your image:

2. You need to be knowledgeable and objective enough to select the most appropriate images you have.

Having made your selections you need to develop your awareness and processing skills so that you may:

3. Process those images to final competition standard.

1. 'Seeing'/Capturing a Good Image.

As an photographer, you need a message (ideas, vision, originality, inspiration) and a means to express this message. It doesn't matter if you use a point and shoot, a basic entry level Dslr or a top end professional Dslr or film camera: If your methods of expressing your message aren't up to scratch, your image simply won't be good enough for competition purposes.

Photography is viciously subjective, and ultimately the viewer will think what they want. Take the rule of thirds, for example (as discussed at our last workshop): It isn't an iron-fast rule in itself, but people who don't understand it, break it in ways that are un-pleasing to the eye and the image will fail.

The trick is to do something that works. In my experience, this means that you have to know all the 'rules' of photography (Get the exposure right, mind your backgrounds, have a vision, and get it all to work together), so you can choose which rules you want to break for a particular photo. Photography is very much about telling stories, and while you are using a visual medium to do so, you still need to be a good storyteller, and have an eye for what appeals to people.

I've worked in the Print Media for a number of years and we were taught: If it has a human element people can identify with, the story is far stronger. That's why newspapers after a disaster will tell the story of Mr and Mrs Smith and their individual tragedy, rather than the much harder detail that 200 people died: Remember the Black Saturday Fires and all the individual stories from that tragedy. We need to be able to feel that the people involved are related (or at least relevant) to us in one way or another. The best photographs, in my opinion, do the same thing. It doesn't have to be a tabloid story of murder, deceit, or deception, but if you manage to get an emotion in there somehow, you're onto something.

There are several levels of involving your audience emotionally. At the most shallow level, there is a recognition of emotion: A photo of a mother looking at a child might invoke this: You might feel that the mother loves the child, but the photo could leave you cold. Another photo would cause you to feel with the mother: Where you understand the feeling at a deeper degree. Finally, an image might be so strong that not only do you recognise and understand the emotion, you might actually feel the same.

Technical perfection paired with strong vision is important. Love makes blind, but you can't afford to be blind about photos you are going to submit to photographic competitions: You'll be up against some brilliant photographers and even small slip-ups will cost you enough points to score lower in club competitions or to lose a national competition. The thing is, creativity and originality can make up for some things, but there's only so much I'd be willing to forgive. A slight over-exposure on an extremely good, unrepeatable action photo? I can forgive that. Not getting the focus right on a studio shot? Not good enough. Go back, learn from your mistakes, try it again.

As a camera operator, you are a technician. Photography, in many ways, is pure physics. Optics, to be exact, but physics nonetheless. As with everything in optics, everything can be calculated. Exposures, white balance, focal distances etc: Everything can be described mathematically. With modern cameras, you don't have to worry about much of it, but nonetheless, you still need to get it right. The analogy is often drawn as such: A snapper that is technically perfect but lacks vision will never be a great photographer. You can imitate, but it takes effort to learn true photographic vision. On the other hand, having a great vision of what makes a good photo is not an excuse not to acquire the technical skills you need to express your ideas.

Theoretically a good image should have four elements: *composition, exposure, technique, and presentation*. An image should capture the interest of the observer or judge. It may be unique or common: but to be a winner, it should stand out from all the other images.

Photographers should compose images that include some of the following features:

- Point of Interest*
- Framing
- Background and Foreground
- Close view
- Cropping
- Lines
- Simplicity
- Contrast
- Balance
- Viewpoint
- Direction of Movement
- Diagonals
- So-called "Rule of Thirds"

Most importantly, as a competitor you will want to submit a photograph that you like rather than one that you think judges will like. If you want to please judges, you will never have your own style or individuality.

Keep taking images of all kinds, building up a portfolio of images that you can use in the future for competitions, contests, and your own use. I suggest that you try not to limit yourself to one type of image or you will be “type cast.” Make the most of ‘Set Subject’ topics to hone your skills and build your collections.

So, you’ve worked hard, and everything seems to be coming together. You’re on topic, you’ve carefully chosen which rules to break, your photo isn’t over the top, you’ve got a story to tell, and your technical skills are as sharp as they come. What could possibly go wrong? There is one additional factor, the X factor.

The final thing you need to keep in mind is that you’re up against hundreds of other photographs. If you take/submit a photo that is similar to what other photographers have done, you both lose impact, and will probably both not win the competition. The key is originality.

And yet, even if your photo ticks all the boxes and is refreshingly original, you may find yourself struggling without a bit of X-factor: That special, invisible ingredient which will transform your photographs from very, very good to ‘Wow, this is simply amazing’. X factor is that intrinsic something that you were instinctive enough/lucky enough to incorporate into the image at the point of capture.

2. Selecting the Images.

I am sure there are plenty of photographers out there who have met most of the requirements for seeing and capturing a great image right but fall over in the final stage of selecting the image. Let's start by looking at some of the basic considerations when selecting images for competitions.

Read the Rules and Definitions – Pay close attention to details. For example, they may have specifically asked that sepia or tinted photos not be submitted. There are often minimum or maximum file (or print) sizes. It is rare an organizer will contact you if you mess up, so double check your entry against the requirements and/or the definition, particularly in Club Competitions.

No Place For Humour – A photo competition is about finding great photos. Amusing and humorous photos, unless they hold their merit in other ways, are not going to win a competition. The exception would be a Set Subject with the topic of Humour.

No Time to Play It Safe – First impression is everything in a photo competition even at club level, and the safe photos are going to be judged accordingly. In a competition, it's worth taking such risks. Push the envelope, introduce something disconcerting and try to throw your judges off-guard. The risky photos are going to be the ones remembered. Most judges will have more respect for the risk-takers and the technical aspects of such photos will be given a little more flexibility.

Formal Portraits = Difficult Path – Formal portraits are at a disadvantage unless requested or specified in a Set Subject for example. Lighting, composition and everything could be absolutely perfect, but it still may not stand out to the judges. Why? Because portraits are safe (see above). Bottom line: Portraits are a difficult path but do strive to obtain that something special that will stand out from the pack and surprise the judge.

Effort Is Not a Factor – The judges are reviewing a final product and do not know (nor do they care) about the effort put into a given photo. What matters is the final product alone. If such effort shows through, so be it, it will probably help your score.

But the 2-hour hike to a location, the 25 strobes used, the 4-hour continuous exposure and all the time for post-processing doesn't hold any water if the photo is not aesthetically pleasing. Remove your attachment to each photo in this regard, and select a photo that is most aesthetically pleasing.

Subject Matters – Your subject should be clear and it should be interesting. It's as simple as that. If the subject is not appealing in some way, it will likely be overlooked. You shouldn't be afraid to select simple subjects – but make sure you use them in an interesting way. Again, first impression is what you're after and an interesting subject will help that.

Technique and Composition Matters – When faced with a large number of photos, judges will be less concerned about the technical and compositional aspects of a photo, unless the photo is that far off kilter. But when it came down to the final round and the field is narrowed down to just a handful of photographs, hairs get split and photos are weighed against each other. Very often it comes down to which is more technically or compositionally perfect. So make sure you're photos are as technically and compositionally perfect as they can be in the event that your photo faces such a situation. Have a reason for why everything in that photo is there. Why is the subject there? What is the object, or the point, or the 'effect', or the emotions, even? Does anything detract? Is it a clean shot? Can something be removed by the angle at which the photographer shot? Is the photo just of what you wish it to be? Think about what the shot is all about. Less is more.

Considerations for Photo Club Competitions.

Enter all that you are allowed: submit clean and well-mounted/processed Print/EDPI images. Do not submit for the judges, submit what you like and do well. When you are selecting images for competition you are really jurying your own images. This is a real opportunity to advance your photography on all levels via self evaluation.

Rules I have used over the past few years are:

1. Don't submit *similar* images—if the judge doesn't like them you lose more than once.
2. Submit images that will catch the judges' eyes and interest. If the image is too busy or complicated, the person judging will get confused and be less enthused by your image.
3. Watch for large areas of highlights that take the viewer's eyes away from the main subject.
4. Do not submit images that are not clean or have a "flat" appearance. When viewed under the judges' lighting conditions, the image will lack snap and impact.

I thought it would be educational to conclude this section with some quotes from **Jim Richardson** who has been a freelance photographer for National Geographic for more than 25 years. In an interview on judging photo competitions he made the following observations, to a series of questions, based on his years of experience.

Q. What mistakes do people make with photos they're entering in contests?

One of the greatest sins that you see in photo contests is the overuse of things like the saturation slider. You see that over and over again, people turning up the volume too high. And it doesn't have to be just saturation, either. It can be sharpness, or extreme focal lengths, all kinds of things. They assume that if some saturation is good then more is better, if a wide-angle lens is interesting then a fisheye lens would be even more interesting. They make the mistake of assuming that it's all about technique rather than vision.

Q. What is it that makes a particular photo stand out during judging?

First, I always try to do a scan and go through all of the photos pretty quickly to see if there are things that really just pop out — photos that give you a rush of recognition the instant you see them. Those pictures, whatever their technical qualities, whatever their shortcomings, you give weight. If you have a reaction to the picture, something visceral and emotional, then you have to think that there's something going on there, even if it breaks all the rules. That's what a picture is supposed to do, to cause a reaction, to get to us.

That process of doing a scan helps me to find some of the best pictures and eliminate others — pictures that are simply “me too” pictures. Those pictures may be done well and have perfect exposure, but you realize you've been seeing the same shots for 15 years. I don't care how perfectly it's executed; if I'm jaded to the very approach and the very presentation, it doesn't get nearly the mark up that more inventive photos get.

One thing that people can do is go through National Geographic or some other magazine, cut out a lot of pictures, and spread them out on the floor with some of their own photos in the mix. Then have someone come in and tell you which pictures don't belong — and tell them to be brutally honest.

You have to find a way to replicate what's going to happen when someone like me, a contest judge, is looking through all of these photos. You can't explain your photos to the judge or point them out. The picture has to do the work.

My eyes glaze over when I start to see yet another picture of a Tibetan monk in the saffron robes. I've seen enough of that. But if you bring me a picture that makes me feel like I can plop myself down in the middle of a place and get the feeling of what it's really like to be there, that's a winning photo.

Q. Do you have any advice to photographers that want to win a contest?

I think that trying to make a picture specifically to win a contest is difficult. Almost invariably you're going to end up with a picture that looks like a contest picture and doesn't have at its heart something that offers real communication that would get to another human being. And it's that “getting to me” as a person, as the judge sitting there, that's essential.

Pictures can't be just about pictures; pictures have to be about life. If they are really and truly about life and beauty and understanding and our souls, then they have a pretty good chance in a contest. If they are simply about photography and about the contest, then they're probably be going to be pretty shallow and transparent. Take pictures of your passions, pursue your love of photography, and the contest prizes will soon follow.

3. Processing Your Images For Competition.

So you have taken some great shots, made the right selections and you are now at the final hurdle, processing your images to competition standard. What do you need to consider to get over this last hurdle?

The following contains the key factors you need to consider as you work to process the images.

It is assumed you have made a copy of your image and converted it to an 8 or 16 bit tiff file before proceeding if you are shooting in jpeg mode. Those shooting in RAW format can skip that requirement for the time being.

Start by examine your image carefully and critically as a first step. Look for needed tonal adjustments. Check for wrong colour cast/white balance or a muddy looking image, distracting objects/partial objects particularly near the edge of images. Look for distracting high light areas, again near the edges or in general. Look for horizon off level, dust spots, lens distortion and/or chromatic aberrations. In other words critically evaluate the image before proceeding with any corrections so that you have an insight into what is required.

Those shooting in RAW can do many of the base adjustments in the RAW converter. The following five points I prefer to do in the RAW converter. Those shooting in jpeg should open the image in Photoshop or similar and work through the same sequence as applicable. These are predominately Global Adjustments.

1. White Balance - temperature and tint adjustment sliders.
2. Exposure - exposure compensation, highlight/shadow recovery sliders.
3. Lens Corrections - distortion, vignetting, chromatic aberrations as needed.
4. Remove all in camera sharpening.
5. Develop two or more exposures of the one image or a bracketed set if appropriate/required.

After RAW conversion I save the file/s as 16 bit Tiff file/s and open in Photoshop and apply the following sequence as required via non destructive adjustment layers. These can be both Global and/or Local adjustments.

1. Blend two or more exposures if required.
2. Noise Reduction - As and when required.
3. Dust spot removal along with any cloning of distracting objects etc.
4. Contrast - black point, levels and curves tools.
5. Detail - capture sharpening and local contrast enhancement if required.
6. Refinements - colour adjustments and selective enhancements as required
7. Save Master File as a psd file with all layers intact.

Make a flattened copy of the master file and perform the following.

1. Framing - straighten if required, crop (to ratio), if needed, as dictated by end use.
2. Apply any creative effects as required. Save new Master if warranted.
3. Resizing - enlarge for a print or downsize for Print or EDPI presentation.
4. Output Sharpening and/or vignetting - customized for your subject matter and Print/EDPI size.
5. Save file in jpeg or file type required for print or Electronic display with sRGB profile embedded.

By following the three stage process as outlined you should improve your photography in general and be on your way to more successful outcomes when you do enter competitions.

If you've never actively sat down and consciously evaluated your own photographs, it may be quite hard to get started. In fact, even if you've made a habit of doing just that, it may still be difficult to actually vocalise what makes a photo 'good', and how you can make it 'better'. Especially when you are just starting out, incorporating the above three stages of information can be extremely useful in increasing the percentage of photos that come out great.

Don't worry if the process feels like it takes quite a long time at first; like anything you are learning, it will feel a little unusual and clunky at first, but once you grow accustomed to running through this process it will become second nature to evaluate your own photos.

The secret to why this is so successful is that you're not just training yourself in evaluating your photos back in the comfort of your home, you'll also gain the ability to evaluate your photos as you are taking them! Below is a handy check list that I found that you may like to print and carry with you to refer to out in the field and to help in the final selection process back at home.

Finally, don't get discouraged but keep trying. The photos we see at our club competitions are great, and some could win international awards. The only way to succeed is to submit your photos. You will accomplish nothing when all you do is read the magazines or view our club prints and say to yourself, "I could have done that." Action speaks louder than words. Get moving! Start entering competitions! Good luck.

Check List/Self-Evaluation Aide (by Haje Jan Kamps)

What is the story?

All photography is ultimately about storytelling in one way or another: If your audience is to connect with your photograph on an emotional level, there has to be a 'story'. As such, the first challenge is to identify what the story is that I'm trying to tell.

Technical Quality.

Is the image in focus? Is the exposure perfect? What about noise and sharpness?

Composition: Does the composition of the photo improve / help tell the story I am trying to convey?

What was good?

Even if it isn't perfect, there's probably something I like about this photo. What and why?

The right tools for the job.

Could this photo have been better if I had used different equipment?

If so, what is the difference between the equipment I did use, and the equipment I wish I had used? Why didn't I use that equipment? Can the effects be recreated with the equipment I do have?

Hindsight.

Now that I am looking at my photograph over a cup of coffee, is there anything I wish I had done differently, creatively?

Did I tell the story?

Now that I've answered all the other questions, the line of questioning comes in a full circle. It's time to go back to the first question, and determine whether the story was successfully told. If the answer is 'no', chances are that one of the questions between the first question and this one holds the answer to why the image 'failed'.