Canadian Association for Photographic Art

Information Bulletin – Judging Guidelines

This Bulletin offers information to Clubs and Judges about CAPA/ACAP recommendations for Judging. Following these guidelines will help to standardize judging across Canada.

CAPA/ACAP's judging is a point system, from 1 to 10 points each by three judges (maximum total score=30). This system provides a wide scope for honest and accurate evaluation of each photo. Scores should follow these guidelines.

1,2,3 -	Extremely poor to poor, with serious faults
4,5 -	Fair, possibly minor faults
6,7 -	Good
8 -	Excellent
9,10 -	Exceptional

1, 2 and 3 should be rarely used. When assigning a score to an image, remember that one of the objectives of competition is to encourage the members who are competing and not to discourage their efforts. The score of an average image should be 6 or 7 out of 10.

Selecting Judges

Three experienced judges are selected from a blend of people such as professional or advanced photographers, or art and photography teachers. Nature judges should be familiar with natural history subjects. Judges should be fully aware of CAPA/ACAP's scoring method and judging philosophy. (Clubs may elect to use only one judge for in-house club competitions).

Advice to Judges

Respect for Photographers

There must be no discussion or comments made until all three silent scores are entered. If comments must be written down as part of the evaluation, those should be kept to a minimum, but in all cases these must be constructive. Many of you have had the experience of having your images criticized in a clumsy or insensitive manner. How did that make you feel? Whether the photograph is a less than excellent image by a very experienced photographer, or an attempt by a beginner, respect their efforts and try to understand and appreciate what they are trying to say.

Bias avoidance

Your personal feelings should not be part of your point scoring nor comments. It is not helpful to the photographer that you like the colour blue, hate spiders, don't see the point of abstracts or are offended by nudes.

The "rules" are included here too. No ultimate authority dictated that moving objects must always have room in front of them in the frame, noses must never break the cheek line, eyes must always have a catch light and the horizon must never, never be dead centre. Use them as guidelines; adhere to them on your own photography if you must -- but where would creativity be if everyone stayed within restrictive boundaries?

Educate

Call upon your experience and pass it on. Suggest a polarizer (or not), a tripod, fill flash, a reflector, colour correcting filter, cropping and so on where it might help the photographer produce a better image next time.

Encourage

Your enthusiasm and encouragement mean a lot. Spread it around. You don't have to praise to heaven for every image you see; but they all have some strengths or good points, and commenting on them will encourage the photographer and keep the session positive.

Considerations for Photo Selection for
CAPA competitions

CAPA uses an "intuitive judging" style. The judges do **not** analyse individual aspects of an image (technique, composition, etc.), assigning points to each element according to a template as is common in other photo contests. These judges are highly experienced and they intuitively incorporate these considerations, where relevant, into their score. Judging is done quickly so only elements that are important to the overall image are likely to be noted. There are no "rules", all elements are judged on the basis of how they contribute to … or detract from … the overall impact and message of the photo.

The judges try to understand what the photographer's intention may have been and establish what the photograph is about, judging an image on the basis of how well it achieves that intent. All aspects of the image should be consistent in supporting this. Any elements or choices that do not belong and muddle the message will negatively affect the score. The title you give an image can be used to help convey your intention while an inappropriate title may confuse, so carefully consider your titles and don't just try to be clever.

Keep in mind that, because each image is judged quickly, impact tends to reign supreme and subtlety often loses out.

While the expert judges do not analyse the photographs in detail, it is useful for us to do so to try to identify things that the judges will notice. Many books have been written on this, so what follows are just a few considerations to help get the thought process going:

Technique:

Sharpness – Generally the important subject elements should be pin sharp (but not over-sharpened in software). The point of optimal focus usually should be on the eyes of people or other creatures. Soft focus or motion blur are appropriate for some images, but it must be obvious that it is intentional.

Depth of Field – Landscapes usually should be sharp from foreground to infinity. For other subjects, a blurred background can help the main subject stand out, neutralize distracting background elements and simplify the composition. But you might want to have at least soft focus in the background if there is important context there. Blurred foregrounds tend to be distracting and strong, identifiable elements that are somewhat out of focus can be disturbing.

Lighting – Light is the essence of a photograph. Quality and direction of the light profoundly affect the rendering of an image. Quality mainly refers to colour temperature and intensity; soft, warm light, such as near sunrise or sunset, tends to be most appealing but cool light is appropriate for some subjects and treatments. The intense, high angle light of the midday sun is harsh and unflattering and creates difficult contrast issues but it can be used to effect in some cases. Frontal lighting retains full detail in a documentary photograph but form and texture are suppressed resulting in a flat appearance. Low angle side lighting emphasizes form and texture with detail lost in the shadows. Backlight can produce wonderful translucence or rim light in

some subjects but frontal detail is lost or must be provided by fill light if it is important. Otherwise, it usually is better to let objects become fully silhouetted than showing partial detail that the viewer strains to discern. Diffused light from a large source such as an overcast sky reveals full detail in a subject and produces no deep shadow, providing realistic rendering and soft contrast that suits many subjects. Artificial lighting and reflectors give a photographer great control but be aware of unnatural looking results. Most of your photos likely have satisfactory lighting but exceptional lighting is one of the most important factors that can distinguish a winner from an average image.

Exposure – There is no absolute correct exposure, but usually exposure should be optimized for the main subject and significant areas of blown out highlights are liable to be problematic. High key or low key treatment might be appropriate for any given image. Brightness will tend to affect mood. It can easily be adjusted in software but if the original exposure is poor, lost highlight or shadow detail cannot be recovered and boosting a dark exposure can produce artifacts and noise.

Contrast – Contrast is closely tied to lighting. It is another parameter that is easily tweaked in software, except when the original exposure has excessive contrast with areas of blown highlights and/or black shadows. Such extreme contrast is only occasionally useful for artistic effect. Many images benefit from a full contrast range from black shadows to pure white highlights, which gives them great impact. Low contrast, such as in scenes shot in fog, creates a soft and restful or moody effect. Global contrast (between bright and dark features) should be distinguished from local or fine contrast between adjacent elements. The latter is also known as mid-tone contrast or, in Adobe Lightroom and Camera Raw, clarity, which is a more intuitive term because increasing it can act like lifting a fog to make an image pop with enhanced detail and texture. Most images can benefit from this adjustment but do not overdo it. In Photoshop and some other programs, a less well targeted but often as effective version of this can be simply achieved by applying the unsharp mask with a large radius of about 50 or higher and a small amount generally not exceeding 20 to avoid artifacts.

Colour – Colour can profoundly affect mood; be aware of this effect from the colours in your images and consider whether it is consistent with your intent. If not, or if the colours are just distracting from what you are trying to show, consider rendering the image in monochrome. Do the colours in an image complement one another or do they clash? Be vigilant for overall colour casts that are unflattering or inappropriate. Boosting saturation can increase impact but should be done carefully. Decreasing saturation can be an effective treatment for some subjects.

Composition:

Again, there are no hard rules. In general, a well composed image feels **balanced**, though even that rule can be broken if the intent is to create an unsettling image, for example. Balance is not the same thing as symmetry, though symmetrical balance certainly can be used in situations where its static effect is desired. The "weighting" of an image usually is determined by a combination of such factors as the location, size and strength of interesting content and the distribution of tones and colour throughout the picture space. Consider where your eye goes initially and how it moves through the image as you view it. It should follow a comfortable path throughout the picture space, tracking natural compositional lines to take in all areas of interest

but tending to settle on the main centre of interest if there is one. The eye should not want to move outside the picture space at any point, unless maybe it can follow a natural trajectory back into the picture. If there is a substantial amount of negative space (unoccupied by significant content) adjacent to a border, consider whether that serves a purpose, such as to leave space for the perceived movement of an animate subject. Otherwise, cropping might improve balance.

Lines and shapes are primary compositional elements. These are produced not just by physical objects but include implied lines and shapes arising from the distribution of elements within the picture space. Diagonal lines are dynamic, implying motion, speed or tension. Opposing diagonals counterbalance each other. Less often desirable, vertical or horizontal lines tend to be static. Multiple lines of similar form trending in one dominant direction can be very powerful. S- curves usually work better individually as strong lead-in lines that ideally lead to something of interest. The strongest shapes are triangles. A triangle on a flat base suggests stability while a tipped-over or inverted triangle has more vitality.

A **centre of interest** is not essential for every photograph but a strong centre of interest often helps create a strong image. Aside from the strength of the subject itself, your eye will be lead to it by compositional elements such as framing, lead-in lines, tonal contrast, colour contrast, selective focus and negative space. Placement of the subject according to the rule of thirds or the golden mean is usually pleasing but may be boring in its commonality. Placement in the centre makes it feel static but that can work well for some purposes. A subject on the perimeter may create tension. An extreme composition can be very dramatic … on the rare occasion when it works. A centre of interest may not be needed or desired if there is rhythm, repetition or pattern that is the point of the photograph.

Impact is usually enhanced by use of simplicity, though a composition that is too simple might fail to hold interest. It is a common mistake to try to include too many elements in an image. Perhaps a particular landscape image should exclude any sky, for instance. A main subject that fills the frame can be powerful. Anything that is not the main subject or part of the story should be unobtrusive if it is not excluded altogether. Don't be afraid to crop, within reason.

Be vigilant for **distracting elements** in the background or, especially, around the edges. This will seriously degrade a composition. Very bright or dark areas especially can draw unwanted attention. Also watch for mergers of background objects with main subjects … a telephone pole emerging from a head is a classic example. In portrait or wildlife images, watch out for uncomfortable merging or cutting off of limbs or other body parts at the borders.

It is important for **horizon lines to be level**, especially in landscapes. Perspective can create the illusion in a 2-dimensional image that a receding horizon line (such as the opposite shore of a lake) is tilted, so adjustment must be made for this. Skewed horizons can be corrected in software if the required cropping that results from this does not destroy the framing. A horizon may be tilted deliberately for some purposes but this should be done dramatically enough that the intention is clear.

Consider the **image form**at. Horizontal formats may give a sense of stability and calm. Stretched into a panorama they can emphasize expansive space. Square formats evoke stability and balance. Verticals tend to imply power, prestige and energy. One caution to consider: the projector format is horizontal so vertical images will appear smaller on the screen and this may reduce impact. Wide panoramas can be similarly affected.

Creativity:

Creativity is not a substitute for good technique and artistic purpose, but an image that is

We all see the world a bit differently from anyone else but regular viewing of other people's photographs can tend to condition us to photograph in the same way. True creativity involves breaking out of this pattern and exploring one's own unique vision, albeit likely to be inspired by the work of others that excites us. Creativity can be applied at the time of making the exposure or later at the computer (or in the darkroom).

In the camera, creative techniques may include finding unusual viewpoints, using spectacular lighting, composing unconventionally, making imaginative use of colour or form, employing equipment that normally would not be used for the situation or using special camera techniques such as multiple exposures, time exposures and camera movement. The resulting images may or may not be abstracted. Even just coming up with a subject that others do not photograph can achieve the purpose of uniqueness … as Yukoners we have a bit of an advantage in that respect as subjects that are common to us may be unfamiliar to the southern judges.

Manipulations in the computer, of course, can range from minor tweaks to complete reworking of images until they are no longer recognizable. It is especially important in this case to make sure the technique is appropriate to the photographic purpose and not employed for its own sake.

Subject Matter:

Your choice of subject is less important than what you have done with it. However, as noted above, a unique subject will catch the judges' attention. Conversely, a commonly photographed subject invites comparison with innumerable other superb photographs of the same thing and it will be difficult for yours to stand apart from them unless you have given it a very unusual creative treatment.

The judges look for a photo to tell a story, make a statement or express an emotion. The subject inevitably will be central to this. Your choice of subject should guide the way you photograph and process it, with consideration for what you want it to say. If an inappropriate treatment has been forced on a subject the message will be lost and the photo will rate poorly.

Alternatively, what you want to say with an image should guide your choice of subject. If you want to capture the beauty of a flower, search out a pristine, perfectly formed specimen. A misshapen or wilted example might be selected for a different statement such as fragility, struggle for survival or fleetingness.

Finally – although you may find an image unpleasant, judge it by the same standards as any other photograph.

Note: Most of the information presented in this document was gleaned from the manual for the CAPA Judging Course. Only information relevant to CAPA open category competitions has been included.

Critiquing Photographic Images

Why Critique?

- Help others to

    - Improve their work

    - Understand technical aspects of photography

    - Maintain their creativity

- It helps the person giving critique to become a better artist

Why Critique?

The objective is NOT to create clones of our creative selves!

Technical Quality

- Focus

- Cleanliness

- Exposure

- Lighting

- Colours

Composition

- Balance

- Logic

- Purpose

- Clarity

Emotional Appeal

- Dynamic

- Provocative

- Creative

- Unusual

Questions or Comments?

The purpose of critiquing photographs should be to help photographers to improve their work through a better understanding and proficiency in the technical aspects of photography and the theory of visual literacy, and this while helping the photographer maintain his or her individuality and way of seeing.

The critique should attempt to open the photographer's own thought process; it should not be an attempt to change the photographer into a clone of the assessor - the very curse to creativity.

It is essential to determine the photographer's purpose for making the image: Was it to be a clinical study, story illustration, social documentary, fine art piece or perhaps an entry for a competition? Only then can the critique be properly focussed to assist the photographer along an effective learning path.

1. TECHNICAL QUALITY
Editors, judges and evaluators all agree: a successful photographic image must have good technical quality to start with.
- FOCUS: Is the image sharp? If not, is it intentionally soft and successful?
- CLEANLINESS: Is it free of scratches, dust spots, stains, lens flare, etc?
- EXPOSURE: Is it too light, too dark or just right?
- LIGHTING: Is the lighting too contrasty, too flat or just right?
- COLOURS: Does it have neutral colours or a strange colour cast?

2. COMPOSITION
Affected by the camera viewpoint and focal length of the lens. It can raise an image from a technical success to an artistic success!
- BALANCE: Is the image aligned correctly or is it crooked?
- LOGIC: Is the arrangement of the visual elements effective?
- PURPOSE: Is there a strong centre of interest, pattern or design?
- CLARITY: Is it simple, yet complete and without distracting elements?

3. EMOTIONAL APPEAL
The vital element for a truly great image, making it unique and memorable.
- DYNAMIC: Does it grab and keep your attention? Does it have the "wow" factor?
- PROVOCATIVE: Does it excite your imagination, or create a strong emotion in you?
- CREATIVE: Does it show a familiar subject in a new, unusual and yet effective way?
- UNUSUAL: Does it show a very unusual subject in an effective way?

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