

# Livermore Valley Camera Club

Established 1958

## Guide to Critiquing Your Own Work

by Lon Overacker

For the new member or beginner, the most important thing to remember about judges is that judging is very subjective and ultimately the judge's critiques and decisions are simply their educated opinions. All the judges that volunteer to come to meetings have years of experience in some aspect of photography; whether it be printing, nature photography, art or just years of taking photographs. For most of us, it's hard to take criticism, but we must remember that we're all here to learn and enjoy each others work; so welcome the judges comments as a chance to improve your photography. If you don't agree with their opinion, enter the photo again!

The following is a generic checklist of how you can best judge your own work to better the chances of doing well in competition. Over the years many common theme's seem to follow the judges over and over. These comments, quotes, and example's of judges comments are dispersed throughout the text, highlighted in *Italics*.

- 1. Do you like it?** What matters above all else is whether you are happy with the photo. If you like it, it's a good photograph. Along with that you must remember that you have an emotional attachment to the photo; a judge or someone viewing/critiquing your photograph wasn't there when you took the photo and will not have the same emotional response to the photograph that you do. It may be a photo of your most favorite thing in the world, but will be worthless to a judge; emotionally. Many times you will hear a judge say: *"I don't know what the photographer is trying to convey."* Or many times you might hear: *"The maker should have moved to the left a little"* or *"If I was there, I may have tried to get closer."* This can be frustrating to hear, especially when you know that one more step closer or to the left and you would be falling off a cliff. But try to remove yourself emotionally from the photograph when you evaluate and ask yourself some of the following questions:
- 2. Does it have IMPACT???** Will there be an emotional response from the viewer? Does it have impact, mood, or emotion? Shots that do well in competition are most likely the ones that get the "oohs" and "ahs" during judging. If a judge has to think too long about the photo or is slow to respond, that sometimes means he or she is having a hard time deciding if they like it and probably won't pick this one as a winner.

3. **Technical Elements** *Proper Exposure* is a must for a positive critique. Generally speaking, over-exposed slides or prints will not do well. The exceptions would be with "high-key" prints where over-exposure is intentional. A slightly under-exposed slide usually projects very well due to the brightness of the projector. If possible, view your slides with a projector before entering. Exposure for black and white prints is again quite subjective, but you will commonly hear: *"The print has black blacks and white whites."* or *"This print has a good tonal range from blacks to whites."* It is also very important that a slide or print be sharp where it's suppose to be. In other words, a soft-focus portrait may be okay, a soft or blurry butterfly wing is not. The importance of sharpness is sometime dependant on the subject and the intended selective depth of field, but if you don't have sharp and in focus what you want sharp, it may not do as well in competition.
4. **Composition** Composition is a key ingredient to having impact and for identifying your main subject. Following are some of the common critiques regarding composition:
- ***"Can't identify the main subject" or "It's too busy, cluttered"***  
Generally speaking, it's important to have a main subject or at least a place for your *"eye to rest."* If your photo does have a main subject, make sure that the composition emphasizes it. A Photograph that is cluttered or seems to busy, causes the viewer's eye to roam aimlessly around the photograph. Interest is quickly lost. By emphasizing your subject or eliminating unnecessary elements, your photograph becomes much stronger.
  - ***"This would work as a vertical."*** Don't be afraid to turn that camera in the vertical position! Try shooting both horizontal and vertical. Many subjects may be more appropriately shown in a vertical format such as tall trees, buildings, sailboats with tall masts in a marina, or even people. Conversely, rolling green hills, or grand scenics would suggest a horizontal format.
  - ***"Subject is too centered" or "The photo is split in half"*** These are two very common criticisms. Avoid centering your subject directly in the center or splitting the scene in the middle with a horizon. Try putting your subject just off-center or try using the *"Rule of Thirds."* This basically means dividing the photograph into imaginary equal thirds, both horizontally and vertically. The intersections of these imaginary lines suggest the most prominent location for the main subject. But please remember, rules are made to be broken and sometimes images like reflections are begging for a split image. Be flexible, vary your angle of view and be creative!

- **"The horizon is tilted! It looks like the water will spill right out of the photograph."** Double check those horizons! If you split the image and then don't keep the horizon level, you're in double trouble. The horizon can be straightened out by remounting the slide.
  - **"The maker should have moved in closer."** It's fairly common and normal for a judge to suggest what they might have done, had they been there to take the shot. All this is really suggesting is to move in closer to better isolate and emphasize your subject. Use a longer lens if you can. Which brings us to the next and probably most sound advice:
  - **"KEEP IT SIMPLE"** Or "KISS" for short (the second "s" is for stupid, but that's not necessary here.) The bottom line: the simpler, cleaner and more clear your image is, the better it will do in competition.
  - **"Try reversing the slide."** Many images, especially generic nature scenics, can be viewed reversed. Our eyes have been trained to read from left to right since Kindergarten, so it's only natural we view photographs in the same way. For example, a strong vertical element on the left-hand edge would mentally stop us from going any further into the picture. Flip the image around and now the eye is free to "enter" the photograph from the left. If you don't have any recognizable landmarks or numbers to read in the photograph, try reversing it to see how the image may change.
  - **"Make use of Lead-in Lines and the "S" curve."** Many successful compositional shots have lead-in lines. This is simply a path, pattern, or graphical element that leads the viewer right into the picture. An "S" curve is a simple, graphical element that is pleasing to look at.
- 5. Eye Sores** Always check your work before submitting your work for some of these simple, but not so obvious distractions that judges always look for and usually catch:
- **Bright Spots** Bright spots and highlights will normally pull the viewer's eye away from the main subject. With practice, using Spot Toner can reduce or even eliminate those hot-spots.
  - **Tilted Horizons** Already mentioned, don't forget to check.
  - **Negative Space** This is just what the term implies; space in a photograph that doesn't have anything in it. A blank sky, fog or the surface of a lake are examples of negative space. Judging this element is very subjective and some common advice for this is: *"If it's not working for you, it's working against you."*

- **Clutter** Repeated again here; keep it simple, eliminate as much garbage and unnecessary elements as possible.
- **Cleanliness** Always make sure your entries are clean and rid of dust, finger prints or other particles that tell the judge you don't care too much for your own work.
- **"Border Patrol !"** Always check your work (and before your press that shutter release) for obstructions and intrusions into the photograph. Unwanted sticks, poles, tree limbs, etc., unless intentionally part of the scene, are distracting. And if you're going to chop something off, make it obvious! In other words, if you're trying to include your entire subject in the frame, check to see that you've got it all by looking around the entire viewfinder.

Although this turned out to be more than just a quick guide, it should be able to help you edit and critique your own work. Remember that we're all here to enjoy each other's work and learn. Judging is subjective and based on a judge's opinion; let's learn from their experiences; regardless whether or not they like your photograph or not.