

How To Critique a Photograph

(Based on information from Becky Anderson and the The Fine Art of Seeing SIG and information provided by Lisa Griffis)

If you like an image, then say so. Tell the photographer what you like about it. Tell them how it made you feel, or what it made you think about. Very often, the most technically proficient photographers are at least able to express their feelings about an image, so people who can do that are particularly valuable “critiquers”.

If you see something that you don’t like about an image, then say that. You can’t be wrong. If you don’t like something about a photograph then either the photographer intended it to be that way (in which case you simply have a difference of opinion) or the photographer didn’t notice it (in which case your critique will be enlightening). If a photograph looks dark, then say so. Maybe the photographer intended it to be dark, but so what? If you don’t like the darkness of it, then probably other people don’t as well, and the photographer should be aware of that.

The purpose of critique is to provide useful feedback to the photographer on whether or not they achieved their stated objective and how they might better do so. The objective itself is not subject to critique.

A. How Does It Make You Feel?

What is the impact of the photo? What sense or emotion did you feel viewing the image for the first time?

Does the photo tell a story evoking your imagination?

What mood do you see in the photograph? Is it what the photographer intended?

Did the photographer succeed in telling his/her story with the photograph? Why or why not?

B. Critique the Composition

Centered Vs. Rule of Thirds

Is the main subject in the center of the frame? Is it on a third? Somewhere else? Does the chosen composition work, or would you have done something differently?

Are there leading elements that hold the viewers' attention and lead their eye through the image to the subject?

Has the photographer shown some creativity in their composition that is a new or unusual way of looking at a common subject? Is it effective?

Cropping/Framing

Is there wasted empty space in the photograph? Should the crop have been tighter? Is it cropped so tightly that important parts of the photo have been cutoff?

Tonal Range

What type of colors do you see? Are they too saturated? If you are looking at a black and white, is there a true black, true white, or is the image too "gray"?

Balance and Spatial Positioning

Is it formal or informal balance? Does it work? The rule of thirds is NOT an instruction handed down from the gods-it is a handy guideline to what will often work. Is there a clear subject that occupies the majority of the frame, or is the subject unclear or small and surrounded by irrelevant material?

C. Critique the Technical

Exposure

Is any area overexposed or underexposed? If so, can you say why you think that happened? How could the photographer prevent this problem in the future? Are there details both in the highlights and in the shadows, or are there large "blown-out" highlight areas or "blocked-up" shadow areas? Again, blown highlights are not necessarily wrong. If you look at sunlight reflected in a glass window, what the eye will see is a white area, so there is no reason at all why a photo shouldn't show the same thing. Sometimes blown highlights can be used to good artistic effect. As always, don't parrot rules; think about how well things work in this

photo. If the exposure is biased towards light (high key) or dark (low key), did the photographer make a good choice?

Focus

Is the main subject in focus? Is it sharp focus, or a soft focus? Is the focus appropriate for the situation? Is anything in focus? Is it the subject or something else? Is the depth of field appropriate? Is the subject contained within the depth of field or are parts of the subject fuzzy? Are there distracting elements in the background that are in focus, which would have been blurred out by a wider aperture? As with composition, remember that there are no fixed rules. Think about what works or doesn't work in the case of this particular photo.

Depth of Field

Is the DOF shallow or deep? Does the DOF work in this shot, or should more (or less) of the photo be in focus?

Lighting/White Balance

Is the light soft or harsh? Does the type of lighting enhance or detract from things in the photo? Is the white balance set correctly? Is there a yellowish, or greenish cast to the photo?

Color

Was the photographer's choice to use or not use the color work? If they used color, does the color contribute to the image, or would it have been more effective in black and white? This will always be a subjective judgment, but hearing the other people's opinions on this is often useful.

Does the color balance enhance the emotional appeal of the photo or is it not harmonious evoking diverse feelings for effect?

Effort

Are there things 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?