

## HOW TO REDUCE JUDGES' CRITICISMS by Roger Wates

Judges have to be critical, but why make it easy for them?

I have been interested in photography for many years and in the good old days developed and printed both in black and white and colour. My photography blossomed with the advent of digital camera technology when in 2000 I obtained my first digital compact camera. Then in 2001 I purchased a 3.3MP Canon D30 in preparation for a holiday in southern Africa, then progressing to my current Canon 5D Mk III.

I joined the Tonbridge Camera Club in 2006 after I visited the annual exhibition and was very impressed with what I saw; a much more diverse subject matter than I was used to, a real eye opener. Since being a member, my photography must have improved as I am now a permanent member of Class 1 for both prints and PDIs. Between then and now I have observed and noted many of the more common comments and criticisms that seem to be judges' favourites.

After all, the primary function of a camera club in my opinion is for members to 'improve' their photography/image making. In order to achieve this it is necessary to have some measure of the 'quality' of their work. This is not easy, as any form of art is very subjective but as you are reading this you probably do or intend to enter club competitions and develop your photographic ability. Club competitions seem to be a useful if not perfect tool for achieving this measure of 'quality'.

So if you are new to the camera club and intend to progress from our class 2 through to class 1 and maybe acquire Distinctions, here are my observations in the form of a check list with a few explanatory notes that may help to reduce point losing 'oversights'. Of course there is no need to take notice of any of them and just do what you want to do artistically. But at least being aware of them may be useful as a reminder of what to ignore.

Entering pictures in competitions requires considerable effort by the photographer, especially for prints, and to see your best efforts criticised can be, at best, character building. I remember feeling quite hurt initially with what I thought were unjustified comments. But in the cold light of the next day I realised that maybe the judge did have a point.

I have tried to list my point losing criteria roughly in order, but this obviously does vary from judge to judge and, I suspect, the same judge at different times.

### 1 FOCUS

If the image is a portrait it is vital that the eyes or at least the nearest eye is in sharp focus. If it is, say, a close-up of a flower, at least some part should be in sharp focus for the eye to settle on.



### 2 BLOWN HIGHLIGHTS

Another easy one for a judge. There are obviously some exceptions to this, i.e. spectral highlights, with the sun reflecting off shiny surfaces, or artificial lights at night etc. But otherwise be careful

### 3 TOO TIGHT CROPPING

Give the subject room to move into or look into the picture. Alternatively crop really close in so there's no mistake as to what is intended.



### 4 OVER-SHARPENING

Especially don't try to compensate for poorly-focused or soft images. If the image is to be a print and is not as sharp as you would like, try printing it smaller (within reason). Or save it for the Small Print competition.



## 5 BLAND AREAS

In landscapes in particular don't leave too much of what a judge may describe as 'uninteresting sky' or 'bland foreground' visible that doesn't add interest to the picture. If there is, say, a featureless white or grey sky visible, crop it out.

I have however seen some lovely pictures where this 'rule' has been abandoned to good effect.

## 6 MAKE THE PICTURE LOOK 'RIGHT'

Even if the picture is correct geometrically or colour wise, a judge won't necessarily know this. A slightly sloping field in the foreground of a landscape may give an uncomfortable feeling to the viewer. An unusual dominant colour in a scene may look like a colour cast. You may of course have a colour cast, so always view your prints under daylight conditions. Ideally your monitor and printer should be profiled.

## 7 CROOKED HORIZONS:

Water tends to find its own level, so show it that way. It's amazing how many club pictures I have seen with this problem.

## 8 CONVERGING VERTICALS:



Some judges subscribe to the myth that verticals should be vertical and should not converge. Verticals do converge due to perspective, i.e. go to a 'vertical vanishing point', but some judges don't seem to know this. However, perspective distortion is a reality which can be caused when the camera is not square on to the subject and appears worse with wide angle lenses.

I have seen many articles that show how to 'correct' converging verticals particularly regarding tall straight-sided buildings. The results appear to me to make the building appear wider at the top. I find what works for me when correcting excessive convergence is to adjust the amount of correction by eye until aesthetically correct. This usually means that the verticals are not absolutely vertical, but look natural.

A possible exception to this is record photography, where the emphasis is on portraying the object with total accuracy together with technical excellence. Maybe for camera club purposes it is better to stick with smaller more manageable subjects and avoid the problem altogether.

So you have a choice (for non-record photography) of making the verticals correctly converge, or have them absolutely vertical to avoid judges' criticisms. Your call!

## 9 IRRELEVANT OBJECTS

Try not to include objects that do not add to, or maybe more importantly, distract from the main subject of interest. This is especially true if the object is dissected by the edge of the picture. As an aside, judges will always draw attention to photographs of people or animals where a crop goes straight through a joint.

I think of it this way: if I were to attempt to paint the scene that I wanted to photograph, would I include everything I could see? Probably not, so why include it in the photograph if it can be avoided?

## 10 BLACK BACKGROUNDS

If the subject is a close-up of a flower for example, avoid a solid black background. Some judges like black backgrounds, some don't. Always try to have at least some out of focus detail just visible preferably complimenting the main subject.

## 11 HDR/TONE MAPPING

Avoid excessive HDR/tone mapping, or any other 'artistic' effect: some judges are just not appreciative. It's too much of a gamble so play safe.

## 12 LIGHT EDGE AREAS

Some judges don't even like dark areas or high colour contrast areas near the edges if they contrast too much with the main subject. Judges tend to say these areas 'draw the eye' away from the intended point of interest even if you don't think they do.

Additionally even if there aren't light areas near the edge, it is sometimes helpful to slightly darken the corners/edges with a soft-edged vignette. This can help to concentrate the viewer's attention on the intended subject. I find it surprising how little is needed to produce the desired effect. However, it shouldn't be obvious so don't overdo it.

Toggle the effect on and off to see the difference. Adobe Camera Raw 'Post Crop Vignetting' is a good tool for achieving this.

## 13 WHITE BORDERS AROUND PDIs

Most judges will adversely comment on white borders if they are thought to be unnecessarily wide. However, this technique may be useful where the image has a dark background and the edges would otherwise be ill-defined from the projector background.

To achieve this isolation a border need only be one or two pixels wide and preferably of a mid-tone colour sampled from the image itself.



## 14 COLOUR SATURATION

Don't be tempted to boost colour just to give more impact, it can be beneficial but often isn't. If the image is a landscape, judges love to pick on 'digital-green' grass. If you really think more colour is required, first try reducing the saturation by quite a bit, let your eyes adjust, and then return the saturation to as it was before. You may decide the colour is just fine as it is. I find this technique is useful to help

## 15 COMPOSITION RULES

The 'rule of thirds' which is possibly the most well known, is a reasonably good guide, but only a guide, and has many exceptions. At least a judge is less likely to criticise the composition from this perspective.

## 16 DE-SPOT

Remove any sensor dirt spots that are visible especially in areas of low detail like sky etc. Blemishes like this have a habit of becoming more visible when viewed on the club projector or print viewing box.

## AND FINALLY

Enjoy your photography and don't be too hard on judges. Obviously there are good ones and not-so-good ones but they all try to do their best. Try to put yourself in their position.