

Guidelines to Image Review

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Introduction

With digital photography generating more and more interest from an ever-increasing population base, online communities, web forums, web logs (blogs), have seen explosions in participation levels in recent years. The cost of entry for photography as a hobby is also decreasing, and even a casual photographer can get amazing results from their \$200 point-and-shoot camera. Even SLR cameras that were formerly out of range for hobbyists have dropped in price to become more accessible to the masses.

With this new image-intensive outlet, people like to get feedback on images they've shared with the world. Whether you are the one giving or receiving the feedback, there are always questions of form, etiquette, and manner in which feedback and critique are given. This purpose here is to identify the major forms that critique can take, and how we (as reviewers) should offer our thoughts in each of these capacities.

Critiquing photographs can take several forms. They can range from a casual glance by your friends, to peer review, juried analysis and professional examination of your work. Each of these forms has definite pros and cons. This is not to say that any one particular form of critique is better or worse than another form. Rather, each form has its time and place. Often the form a critique takes is subject to what the requesting individual is looking for.

A photographer sharing a snapshot with his or her spouse is likely not expecting the other to say "your depth of field is too shallow", "not enough bokeh", or "too blurry". Likewise, getting feedback from a juried review that says "I like this" or "Very nice" is probably not in keeping with what the photographer is looking for. Thus, as a reviewer, it helps to know in advance what type of critique is being requested.

The type of critique requested can usually be determined by context. Is the image presented in the context of a web log, a photography forum, or a juried contest? Depending on the form, the critique may take a casual approach, a technical approach, or some other manner. The important thing to remember is that the critique should match the context. Critiques given out of context are often received poorly and the net effect will usually not benefit the photographer because they got something they were not expecting.

Here, we will look at some of the more common forms that critiques can take, and what the photographer and reviewer should expect to give and receive from one another. Understanding the expectations from both perspectives is essential to giving and receiving feedback and critique in a useful manner.

Causal Critique

What it is

The casual critique is just that, a casual perspective, often given by a friend, peer, or family member. These critiques are easily identified because they are typically short, emotive responses to your work. We have all received them: “Oh, this is pretty!” or “Wow, I like that!” or even the shortest of all critiques, “Nice!” and “Wow!”

What it’s good for

These types of critiques are very useful, particularly if you are relatively new to photography, just starting out, or sharing shots with family and friends of your vacation to Aruba or Florida from last month. These are typically presented either as regular-sized prints (4x6”) passed around the table while sipping coffee, on a photo blog, or even in a community photo forum. Casual critiques are usually positive too, so if you need a confidence builder, the casual critique can also be invaluable to this end.

Expectations

So, what should you expect to get if you have an image presented in a casual context? As stated above, you can expect short, emotional responses to your images. Don’t expect any technical feedback here. This also answers the question of what the reviewer is expected to give: a short quick comment on a photo, and usually only if you like it for any particular reason.

What it’s not good for

The problem with casual critiques is that they do not really take an objective analysis of the technical pros and cons of the imagery. Additionally, we all know of the motto “If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything.” So, if you want some feedback on an image, but people aren’t particularly taken with it, you may hear nothing at all. This can be difficult to deal with, and many take silence or lack of feedback as a negative. Without something tangible or specific to latch onto, there is nothing that the photographer can do to improve here, because no directive is given.

Peer Review

What it is

A peer review is one of the most common forms of critique available. As peers, this means that the photographer is receiving a critique from other photographers. A peer review means that your feedback is no longer just Aunt Betty seeing a sunset shot and saying “Nice.” It consists of a peer that can consciously recognize the smoothness of the water, the sharpness (or lack thereof) throughout the image, as well as changes in color tones and contrast.

Since fellow photographers are more aware of these technical merits, they can actually comment on them with a certain degree of “expertise”. These are typically the types of critiques one will see requested and given in photo communities like www.photo.net, www.fredmiranda.com, www.dpreview.com. The very nature of these communities is that they serve as a venue to present and share images with your peers, as well as to give and receive useful critiques and analyses of your imagery.

What it is good for

Peer review is typically good for individuals who would like some objective analysis and feedback on what is good about their imagery, including times where there are areas that could use improvement. It takes a tougher skin to accept reviews of this nature, because you may get feedback that points out flaws either in your technique, style, equipment, or any combination of these. So, be forewarned, if you ask for a peer review; be prepared to perhaps hear things you wouldn't get from Aunt Betty or your sister, Mary.

Expectations

Since this is a peer review, the typical expectation is that the reviewer will give their thoughts on some of the technical aspects of the image as presented. Likewise, for the one receiving feedback, you likely are not going to get the typical sunshine and glowing responses that you get from Aunt Betty and your sister Mary. These reviews will likely include comments such as “I like the composition here, but it looks like your horizon isn't straight. You may want to fix that.”

So, what technical aspects can the submitter expect to get critiqued on? This varies, depending on the skill, experience, and breadth of knowledge on the part of the reviewer. In general though, there are 7 key areas that people look at when critiquing photographs on their technical merit:

1. Depth of Field (DOF) and Focus – Often confused with sharpness, DOF and focus speak to the entire image, rather the main subject. Depth of field considers the impact of blur and sharpness throughout the image. Questions often considered include: Is the entire image in focus or are some parts

blurred or out of focus? Is it blurred only in a particular region of the image (foreground, middle ground or background)? How does the DOF impact the subject? Does the blurring of the foreground and/or background help or detract from the image?

2. Exposure – Are there any areas of the image that are completely black (no shadow detail) or white (no highlight detail)? Does this help or detract from the image?
3. Lighting – What type of lighting exists? Is it soft even lighting, or harsh spot lighting? In either case, does it produce a visually appealing or stimulating result? Does that result help or detract from the image?
4. Sharpness – Often confused with depth of field and focus, this factor looks specifically at the subject of the image. Is it slightly out of focus(soft), completely out of focus (usually as a result of camera or motion blur), or spot on (tack sharp for the entire subject matter)? Is the effect (soft, blurred, or spot on) intentional, and if so, does it enhance or detract from the image?
5. Lines – Are lines present and/or are they used effectively within the image? Lines are used in photography to guide the viewer through an image. Lines can take several forms in photographs. Curving landscape, the arrows of a bird's feathers, the rippling circles of a water drop, the repeating pattern of bark on a tree, the random meanderings of vines across a wall, the veins of a leaf, the bold architectural lines of a church steeple or suspension bridge, and even abstract lines of blurred grass in the wind are all examples of how lines can be powerful anchors to an image that stimulate and direct the viewer to and through points of interest in a picture. Their presence or absence and effective placement can make or break an image.
6. Color – Are colors accurate, vibrant, or non-existent? If the skin tone is off or not corrected during post-processing, this can decrease the appeal and quality of an image in the eyes of a reviewer. Likewise, if colors are flat or subdued, depending on the nature of the image this can either enhance or detract from overall image quality. Finally, lack of color can also have a very powerful impact on images. The notoriety and recognition that one of photography's most famous, Ansel Adams, and his presentations of black and white imagery is still seen today in the work of people that strive toward those particular ends.
7. Composition/Originality – When critiquing photographs, some basic rules of composition can be used to measure the overall appeal. One of the most famous, the Rule of Thirds (ROT), is often applied to determine whether the composition of an image is “on” or “off”. Often times, images may not adhere

to the ROT principle by intent, to produce a new and original perspective. Since the composition and originality of an image is often subjective by nature, it can be difficult to quantitatively measure this. Nevertheless, the composition of an image is probably the fundamental cornerstone upon which imagery is presented. If the composition is not there, it does not matter whether the colors are accurate, sharpness is present, with beautiful even lighting, or depth of field is effective. The image will likely not be received well if it does not stimulate or engage the viewer on some level.

Generally, peer reviews will usually address one or more of the above technical merits, as well as offer general feedback. Commentary can vary wildly depending on the familiarity level the reviewer and the submitter have with one another, the type of community, and how it's presented. (Is it done by means of an email, private message, or other one-on-one communication, or is it done in an open community where everyone can read the review?)

What it is not good for

Peer review is generally not good for images presented outside the parameters of a peer review area. Typically photo communities like the ones mentioned above, or groups and gatherings of photographers in an organization (like regional clubs that meet regularly to share and critique each others works) are where peer reviews are done. If someone has images on a web log, or on a website as a gallery, this is not the venue for conducting peer reviews.

From a reviewer's perspective, this is also not the place to leave generic and/or non-specific commentary. Usually responses like "Nice", "overblown" or "I like this" will not be of much help because there is nothing specific that the submitter is getting back that either they need to work on, or that they know they are doing correctly.

Juried Critique

What it is

A juried critique is typically done by a panel of judges that make up a “jury” of sorts. These juries are typically set up to review a large quantity of photographs, usually as part of an exhibit, competition, or other type of gallery show where images are ranked on a number of criteria. Some of these criteria mirror the technical aspects of peer review, while other criteria are more subjective and may include considerations like aesthetics, appeal, or quality, depending on the semantics and predispositions of jury members.

Generally, for juried shows the jury members will each write their own notes, scores, and comments on cards individually. These individual scores are then added by another group or person, and either totaled or averaged. The ones with the highest overall scores or averages are then announced as the winners, and ranked on the basis of their scores (with the highest score winning, the second highest receiving a 2nd place rank, etc., going down to 3rd, 4th, and even 5th place finishers). If the show is large enough, there may even be images declared as Honorable Mentions (HM).

Another impact the size of the show can have is how intensely images are reviewed. Images may pass through several juries, to narrow the candidates down to rankings such as semi-finalists, finalists, and category winners. In large shows where images are juried in categories, such as landscapes, wildlife, portraits, black and white, etc., winners and rankings are made for each category, with all the winners looked at one final time to announce a Best in Show award.

Juried competitions often have financial and other recognition awards like trophies, medals, and ribbons. As a general rule of thumb, the larger the show is, the stiffer the competition will be. Rewards and prizes are often more desirable too. Some very large shows may often have registration fees and categorizations for amateur and professional photographers to help off-set the payouts and cover staffing and jury member fees.

If entering a juried show, there will usually be a set of Rules and/or Guidelines that images must adhere to for presentation, typically some form of matting or backer board application so that all images can be hung on display for the public to see before, during, and after review. These rules and guidelines give the submitter an idea of what to expect, establish parameters and the criteria judges will be looking at, and can usually be found by the hosting entity in advance of the actual competition, with notices often being made in local papers, radio and television stations, and other media outlets.

What it is good for

Juried shows are really good resources for photographers to get an idea of what the marketplace is like, and what people are generally interested in. Professional photographers may submit images for juried shows in many geographic areas so they can tailor their marketing to that area based on the results of the show. New talent and photographers looking to move from the enthusiast to the professional scene can often establish recognition, credentials and credibility through winning imagery in juried shows. Some photographers have even been able to make a decent living off the winnings of juried shows. The vast majority of entrants to juried shows though, are enthusiasts who enjoy the camaraderie and competition. Not only is the possibility of winning a palatable idea, it can also give invaluable critique and analysis to help them improve as photographers.

Expectations

Expectations for juried shows are usually spelled out well in advance of any showing. Rules and guidelines are typically published that specify everything image size restrictions and category restrictions to due dates, exhibition time frames, costs, and other details. The expected result is an objective analysis of your work, and to see where you “rank” in your field of participants. In general, to avoid conflicts of interest, it is also usually expected that judges or jurors do not submit their own imagery, and that friends and families of the jury do not share imagery with them beforehand so as not to bias them. Entries are also usually expected to remain anonymous for jury purposes, so no logo, name or identifying marks can be present on the front of the photograph.

What it is not good for

First and foremost, juried shows are not good for the faint of heart. While critiques are usually accurate, they can also be disheartening as a truly objective approach may bring out issues with your imagery that previously had been overlooked either because the reviewer was not experienced enough to see the detractions, or because the reviewer was biased by their relation to the submitter.

For those seeking to build their confidence, juried shows and critiques are generally not very forgiving for images that are substantially lacking in one set of criteria or another.

Additionally, juried shows usually require some investment of time and money to prepare images for presentation, even in the absence of any registration fees. Preparation expenses can vary depending on how the rules and guidelines for the

exhibition. Typically, expenses that are incurred include those for printing, mounting and sometimes matting your imagery.

Costs can also vary within these parameters depending on what tools the photographer has available to them. If you do your own printing, costs can drop considerably. There is also an art to matting and mounting images to protect the edges and image quality. The cost of tools or paying someone to do this is usually proportional to the result. Just like the age old saying, “you get what you pay for”, quality is usually directly proportional to the cost of preparations. Average costs can range anywhere from \$10/image to \$50/image depending on size, mounting type, mat quality, etc. Thus, juried shows are not really good places for those who may be operating on shoestring budgets.

Professional Critique

What it is

A professional critique is usually reserved for serious professional photographers who are requesting professional review prior to the establishment of an entire gallery of images. In these circumstances, the gallery as a whole is what is being evaluated rather than a single or small set of images. Often times, matters being evaluated include image placement on walls, framing choices, paint colors, gallery lighting and other nuances of presentation at this level of critique.

What it is good for

These types of critiques are usually done in preparation for exclusive gallery shows by marketing and other specialists prior to opening the doors for a new gallery to the public. These types of reviews are typically done for photographers who are well-known and have established themselves within their particular field, and who have a collection of images that has been put together for gallery viewing by the general public. Sometimes admission to these galleries is free, while other times may require paid entry for viewing. This is usually a function of the notoriety of the photographer, the amount of marketing, and the larger purpose behind the gallery. It is not uncommon for gallery showings of this stature to also include silent auctions once the doors are open.

Expectations

The expectation here is that the reviewer will offer minor suggestions on the various nuances of presentation. Perhaps suggestions are made for re-positioning a light, or moving an image from one wall to another, in addition to background music considerations, wall paint color, admission fees, and all these considerations are

done well in advance of exclusive gallery shows. On some occasions, the reviewer is given either a flat rate for their efforts while it is not uncommon to pay a percentage of sales. Alternatively, the photographer is expected to have already made their gallery image selections, ensuring that only their best imagery is being used, and that there is a cohesive theme or set of themes to build the marketing around to announce gallery shows to the media.

What it is not good for

These types of reviews are typically not for photographers looking to establish credibility or build a customer base for their work. Usually, a strong client base already exists along with a solid library of images and notoriety. Reviews of images on an individual basis are also usually excluded at this level of presentation. Image quality at this stage is expected to be superior to the vast majority of the marketplace. Additionally, presentation of images is usually also done in a final form, to include mounting, matting, and framing. Gallery sales are typically the determining factors in measuring the success of a show. Since the financial foundation for such shows is pretty steep, cost can be a very limiting factor.

Conclusion

Providing and receiving feedback is just a part of life as a photographer, whether you are an amateur, hobbyist, enthusiast, or seasoned professional. As a general rule of thumb, when submitting images for review, it helps to be aware of the venue that you are submitting to. The venue will determine the type of feedback you receive, and if you are not prepared for that level of feedback, it can really throw you for a loop.

The same holds true for reviewers, consider your venue. Are you participating in an online community, submitting thoughts on someone's personal blog, or are you a member of a jury review? Each of these venues, as outlined above, has certain guidelines and expectations that are associated with them. Providing an evaluation in the wrong venue, even if made with the best of intentions, can often produce volatile and sometimes hostile reactions.

In essence, using common sense, and tailoring your actions according to the environment you are in will likely provide the most promising development of a good rapport between photographers, their peers, and professional associates when reviews and critiques are at hand.