



Photo Competition Tips – What are Judges Looking For?

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Mike Goodman:

Competition is really about learning – the root of the word means “striving together”. Listening to judges critique your slides is about learning and starting to see differently.

Things to think about for a competitive image:

- Is it in the art domain (where you have put a lot of effort into it) or more of a “record shot” or “grab shot” (as for a family informal event – personally important)?
 - Does it speak to a broader audience and not just personal?
 - Does it have a story, grab peoples’ attention?
- Does it have impact? Catch our attention or move us?
 - Nature of the subject matter – interesting, unique, unusual, rare or overdone
 - Lighting quality – does the lighting support the image? Is it unusual?
 - Avoid mid-day – not as dramatic, flat
 - Use high ISOs in low lighting or to stop action in dim light
 - Composition quality
 - Keep things simple & clear to the viewer so the subject is obvious – strong point of focus
 - Isolate the subject and control the background – background should not compete with the subject for viewer’s attention – Minimize distractions in background
 - Fill the frame/crop in camera or via post-processing
 - Subject placement – not in the center – rule of thirds
 - Diagonal lines, s-curves, c-curves add depth to images & create impact
- Is it technically well done?
 - Sharp where it is supposed to be
 - Depth of field appropriate
 - Exposure good – highlights and shadows in balance
 - Noise controlled (via low ISO or post-processing)
 - Good color balance
 - Horizon line straight

- First thing a judge evaluates is the technical aspects of the image. Technical problems will kill a fabulous subject matter.

Ed McGuirk:

Competition should be about fun. Different judges have different tastes. A lot of judging is subjective even though not meant to be. A good judge should teach – what is good in your image, what can you do to improve it. Try to get as much right in the original shot as you can, but there is a lot more latitude today with what you can improve via post-processing

Examples of things judges tend to pick on:

- Technical aspects of image not well-executed
- Bald skies – crop them out when possible – puts more emphasis on the color, shape and foreground – the viewer’s eye is attracted to the brightest part of the image – make it interesting
- Macro shots must be sharp requiring higher aperture to get more depth of field. Want subject sharp but not background (so not too much depth of field) so subject pops out. Try to make sure subject is not too close to background – 4-5 ft. away from subject will throw background out of focus for macro so you can shoot subject at f8 or f11
- Lack of leading lines, diagonals. Diagonals should not emerge from corner of image
- Record shots or no obvious subject – do something to them to enhance them – apply filters of various kinds – add something artistically to it
- Pattern shots with no center of interest – Add something to it to break up the pattern and give your eye something to focus on
- Shooting gorgeous locations that have been overdone (e.g., Antelope Slot Canyon, Monument Valley totem pole). Icons or “tripod hole” locations. Even if an image is great, judges may have seen it hundreds of times and have image-fatigue. You need to find a way to make your interpretation unique.
 - Try putting people (or shadow of person) in the shot or do something creative to it
- Dead center placement of the subject
- For wildlife, don’t crop too tightly. Leave some breathing room, room for the wildlife to move into. Use wider focal length.
- Bright elements in the background – crop out or tone down
- Too much negative space (areas that don’t add anything to the image)
- No eye contact for wildlife may decrease impact. Need both eyes open, not in shadow, and in the image for full eye contact
- Watch for mergers in sports shots (e.g., lacrosse stick overlapping other player’s legs) and extraneous things/people/players in the image that can be eliminated
- Poor lighting quality. For landscape photography, time of day is everything. Light is better right after sunrise than an hour later. Can get rays coming out of the sun if you stop way down to f22.
- Horizon lines right in the middle of the image

- Horizontal images are often stronger than vertical ones of the same thing because it gives more of a sense of depth
- Landscapes that don't have interesting foreground, middleground and background.
- Image too static – no element of motion where there should be.

Mike Roman:

Every judge has their own experiences that they bring to the competition. Judging is a difficult and often thankless job. You can't please everyone. Judges should approach judging objectively, but their experiences and biases always creep in. You have to look at your images critically before putting them into competition and make it as good as it can be. What do judges look for? They want to be captivated by your image.

- Technical mastery is the first thing I look for. Technical problems will cause an image to be dropped right away
- Composition is the next thing judges look for if no technical problems. Does it help tell the story of the image?
- Technical aspects:
 - Good/proper focus
 - Proper exposure
 - Appropriate shutter speed – do you need to stop the action or show motion?
 - Straight horizon – easy to correct in post-processing
 - Fill the frame –eliminate negative space, distractions – when you shoot a vertical image, you are losing half the screen when it is projected for competition. You may be able to crop it into a horizontal
 - Minimize bald skies and bright spots or highlights in the background that will compete with the viewer's interest in the main subject
- Composition
 - Balance –put heavy objects on the bottom
 - Diagonal lines provide visual tension/interest; c- and s-curves. Horizontal lines give a sense of peace/tranquility. Vertical lines give a sense of drama.
 - Shapes – triangles seem to be pleasing shapes. Multiple elements can be placed to produce a sense of a triangle
 - Rule of thirds – where to place subjects in the image
 - Rule of odds – odd number of subjects are more pleasing to the eye
 - Framing – can be used to hide a bald sky, block out distracting backgrounds, give context to an image
 - Mergers of objects in the image should be avoided
 - Obvious center of interest helps
 - Symmetry may be pleasing – mirror image may give balance to the image
 - Perspective – where to place your camera – walk around before you take the picture to look at it from different perspectives

- Impact
 - Color – the science of complementary colors
 - Harmony
 - Contrast gives impact – color, subject contrast
 - Repetition, patterns – Break it up with something
 - Story telling – what is the image saying?
 - Creativity – painting with light, step outside the box
 - Motion or emotion can add impact to engage viewer
 - Lighting effects can engage the viewer’s imagination
 - Humor can also engage the viewer
 - Mystery – user has to use imagination to fill in the missing parts
 - Exposure latitude – HDR can help deal with wide range of stops of light
 - Breaking the rules can add impact

View your own work objectively when preparing for competition

- Get a second opinion
- Get into the digital darkroom – post-processing
 - Correct color balance, white balance
 - Remove distracting elements
 - Use cloning, vibrancy, and saturation
 - Make the image simple
 - Crop and resize for competition