

Adding Points to Your Competitive Images

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Competing more successfully as a way to improve your photographic skills

Introduction

I have been competing in camera clubs and international salons actively for well over thirty years now. I have also judged at clubs throughout New England for the last 20+ years as well as at international exhibitions such as the Greater Lynn International and the Glennie International. I suspect I have seen tens of thousands of images during this time. This process has allowed me to grow and develop as a photographer in ways that I don't believe would have been possible otherwise. The judges (mostly good but occasionally not) along the way have all contributed to my evolution as a photographer.

I have done pretty well in both the club competitions and internationals I am proud to say. I am so ever grateful for the camera clubs that I have been part of (Waltham, Boston, Boston West and Gateway) that have enabled my interest and skills to grow and flourish. I have learned a lot and want to share some of my reflections and learnings with people who may be relatively new to competitions as well as veterans who are looking to move up a level or two in their mastery.

Please recognize that these are not absolutes but mainly my subjective observations that at least seemed to have served me well in my own photographic journey.



Some High Scoring Images

Image A

Why Compete?

When I first started competing I was fairly confident that I was already a good photographer. It didn't take many competitions that first year to realize I had so much to learn. I was happy just to get a ribbon or two in the beginners class. When I saw the masters class my eyes popped out. Seeing those images made me realize not only what was possible but also was possible for me to achieve and how to get there thanks to the critical comments from the judges. The competitions inspired and challenged me. I remember thinking - I want to take pictures like that. I have been competing in clubs nonstop ever since.

While its fun to get the ribbons (especially the blue ones), it was for me and for most of my fellow club members not really about the ribbons or "winning". It was to learn and get feedback from someone who could help me get "better" and to see things differently. My most formidable competitor was not my peers but myself. Could I challenge myself to improve and get "unstuck" from bad habits and patterns of thinking... like one of the first "ash hahs" I had "You mean it's generally better to take people portraits vertically than horizontally?"

What I have come to realize more recently is that competitions are really a place to share with people who have a deep interest in photography as a serious art form what they are learning, what they excited about and what they are discovering or experimenting with. We all benefit from that because it generates all sorts of new ideas and possibilities. When I first started competing, I mainly only did travel photography. Today while I continue to love travel I do landscape, sports, underwater and lots of wildlife photography that I wouldn't have even dreamed of twenty years ago. And I got good at these by trying things out that I learned at the club and getting feedback from competing. All due to my participation in the clubs and club competitions.



I Learned a Lot by Actively Competing

Image B

Reflections on Judges and Judging

One thing you can count on is that judges will not always be consistent. Judges like all of us have biases that sometimes can be quite strong. There is a large subjective component to judging even if we wish that weren't true. But the best judges in my humble experience are able to keep their biases in check and can appreciate a given image on its own terms. They appreciate the challenges of the full range of photographic subject matter and are accomplished themselves in multiple areas such as studio, sports, travel, architecture, landscape, macro, photo journalism and nature. They look for what works and what doesn't in the image and offer the maker suggestions or insights that can be of service. They are focused on how the image could be improved from their perspective. They are teachers more than just judges.

Having 8-10 competitions with all different judges over the year is one important way subjectivity (bias) in judging is mitigated or "balanced" out. This is one reason why beginners need to "stick" with it over the season and not get discouraged by the judging from just one or two competitions. When there are three (or more judges) then judging biases can be even better balanced out. This is why opportunities to participate in juried competitions or international salons are so important and should be a priority. You are getting feedback from a group of "experts" not just one.

Speaking as a judge - something I love doing - I have to tell you that by far the most difficult part of judging for me at least is when judging a club's advanced/master classes. Here there will be few if any technical issues with the images so pretty much I am left with trying to sort out the best among the best. How do you do that? Now it is almost entirely subjective based on how the subject matter, the treatment or perspective appeals to me. More on this later.

What is Your Intent When you Enter Competitions?

I believe there are a variety of different personal motivations when we enter competitions that ranges from just being curious to being quite serious. This is how I would characterize people along that continuum:

- I'm curious to see how the judge will respond to my image(s)
- I really want to get some feedback from an expert so I can get better
- I'm really excited about this image and want to see what the judge as well as other club members think about it
- I think I have a winner on my hands - let's see what the judge has to say.

As a judge and competitor I think all these motivations are legitimate.

Picking Winning Images

Whether I am picking my own images or judging I look for images that move me emotionally, catch my attention or “stop me in my tracks”. I am looking for that sometimes elusive quality called IMPACT! Does the image have impact on others? Does it amaze or delight the viewer? More impact equals more points.

Impact happens when an image is technically excellent, shows outstanding attention to detail and contains great or unusual subject matter, lighting, composition, approach and/or treatment. I'll explore each of these components in more detail below but first I want to introduce my Impact Formula (I'm an engineer so forgive my need to be somewhat analytical). I believe that the relationship between these elements goes something like this:

$$\text{IMPACT} = \text{Basic Technical Stuff (B)} \times \text{Composition (C)} \times \text{Lighting (L)} \times \text{Approach (A)} \times \text{Subject Matter (S)}$$

What I'm getting at here is that the relationship between all of these is multiplicative. As long as each element is strong, the impact will be high. But if even one is weak it impacts the overall score a lot. Here are two examples.

Example #1: Higher Impact Image

In the image below each of the five elements are strong. If we were to rate each element using a simple point scale that goes from Poor (1 pt) to OK (2 pts.) to Average (3 pts.) to Good (4 pts.) to Great (5 pts.), we might get something like this:

Basic Technical Stuff = 5

Composition = 5

Lighting = 4

Approach = 4

Subject Matter = 5

So IMPACT would be = $5 \times 5 \times 4 \times 4 \times 5 = \text{High Number}$ (2000 to be exact) The image would score very high on IMPACT.



Higher Impact Image

Image C

Example #2: Lower Impact Image

In the image below four of the five elements are strong. But the image doesn't have the best lighting. If we were to rate each element using the same simple point scale that goes from Poor (1 pt) to OK (2 pts.) to Average (3 pts.) to Good (4 pts.) to Great (5 pts.), we might get something like

Basic Technical Stuff = 5

Composition = 5

Lighting = 2

Approach = 4

Subject Matter = 5

So IMPACT would be = $5 \times 5 \times 2 \times 4 \times 5 = \text{Low Number (800 to be exact)}$

The image would not score as high on IMPACT because the lighting element brought the image's overall wow factor way down.



Lower Impact Image

Image D

My takeaway from all this is that for the most impact **all** of the elements need to be in play. If any one is at or below average then IMPACT will suffer. The principle I'm trying to get at is even if you have a great subject well executed technically and a unique point of view etc. for example, if the lighting was poor or weak for example due to weather conditions, there was a lot of smog or the light was quite harsh, IMPACT would be compromised.

Impact Components

Basic Technical Stuff

Below is my checklist for the technical fundamentals:

- Sharpness - Is it sharp where it should be?
- Depth of field - Is there enough? Too much?
- Exposure - Within the comfortable range when projected on the LCD? How about highlights? Shadows?
- Horizon - Not tilting?
- Noise level - Is image "noisy"? Pixilated?
- Color balance - Too cold? Too warm?
- Color saturation - Real? Too strong?

When I judge or evaluate my own image these are the very first things I look for. If any of these are off then as a judge I am already discounting points.

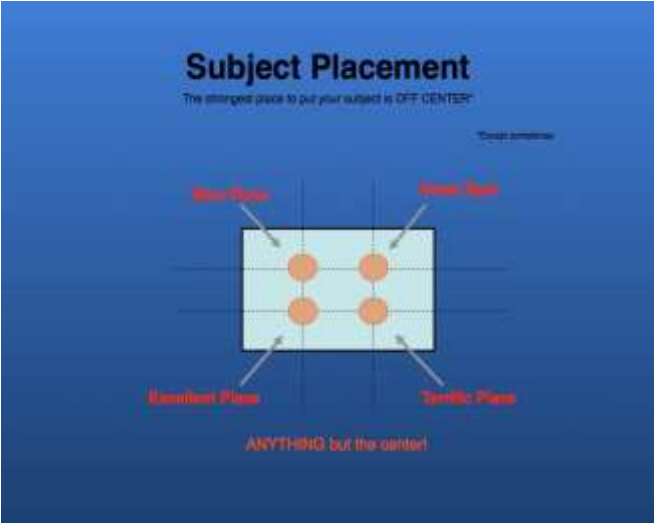
Composition

When I think about composition I consider these elements:

- Center of interest - Is there a clear center of interest?
- Subject placement - Where is the main subject placed?
- Cropping - Have distracting elements been eliminated as much as possible?
- Depth - Does the image convey a sense of depth?

When I think about composition I ask myself what is it exactly that captures my interest? What do I want my viewer to particularly focus on in this image? The answer should be simple, obvious and clear to YOUR VIEWER (i.e. the judge) even though it might be obvious to you when they see your image. No explanation or commentary should be required. The image should contain the full story.

Subject placement can make or break the impact from composition. The strongest place to put your subject generally is OFF CENTER. There are exceptions to this of course but thinking off center when you're capturing or cropping your image is the best place to start. The figure below shows the classic Rule of Thirds template for placing your main subject. It really works.



Subject Placement Matters



Stay Away from the Center

Image F

Photographic images are two dimensional but the world we inhabit is three dimensional. How do we create that third dimension in our photographs? Probably the best way is to consider how to use diagonals in your image to lead the reader to your main subject. This technique focuses on the use of leading lines. Leading lines create dynamics in an image. Below are the classic leading lines.

Creating Depth in Images

Select images with leading lines or leading curves (or the illusion) especially if they are diagonal

This adds dynamics or a sense of depth to the composition



Diagonal



C curve



S curve



Leading Lines Have Impact

Image G



Use Lines to Create Depth

Image H

Lighting

When I consider lighting I am focusing on the quality of lighting (e.g. soft, warm, harsh, mixed), the type of lighting (e.g. side lit, backlit) and how dynamic (e.g. dramatic) the lighting is.

Here are some of my lighting watch outs:

Lighting Watch Outs

Some kinds of lighting are much better than others for creating IMPACT.

- Avoid images with distracting elements (e.g. bright objects, busy foregrounds with highlights, etc)**
- Pick images where the lighting enhances the image. Often this means early morning or late afternoon light.**
- Avoid or at least minimize mixed lighting (a.k.a. high contrast where there are deep shadows & strong sunlight).**
- Strong sunlight (contrasty lighting) is not usually the best for portraits of any kind.**



Lighting Makes a Real Difference

Image I



Dramatic Lighting Adds Points

Image J

Approach

We all approach subjects differently. In some cases the wide angle shot may be more effective than the tight telephoto of a given subject. What I am looking for here in both my own and other's images is their perspective (very wide angle vs. normal; shot low to

the ground or from some height). How unusual is their approach? This is where framing can come into play. I'm looking for a unique perspective.

For me a very critical dimension of approach has to do with how well the image maker has controlled not only what's included but mostly what has been excluded. Photography unlike its sister arts such as painting and drawing is a subtractive process. This means that the skill required is in cleverly figuring out how to minimize all distracting elements and isolate the subject. The challenge is to bring coherence, order and harmony to what's contained within the image frame out of the chaos and fragmentation of the real world. Our tendency is to include way more than is needed in our photographs. I am a strong minimalist in this area - less is always better. Isolate, isolate, isolate!



Less Often Generates Higher Impact

Image K

Subject Matter

Finally we are at the last of the impact components and for me perhaps one of the most critical to ultimately determining impact and score. What the subject is does matter. (Maybe I should rename this Subject Matters.) As I look at my own images or judging at the competition I am asking myself is this a particularly inviting or interesting subject? Is the subject of the image commonplace or is it something more extra-ordinary? Do I want to see more? How long could I keep looking at the image and not lose interest? Is there a whole story here that I want to know more about? Am I thinking wow? Is this an image I wish I had made? Maybe it's about the moment in time that has been captured that we don't see often or sometimes can't see at all because it happens in the blink of an eye. Timing does play a big role when it comes to making subject matter special. Judges can be more forgiving about some of the other impact elements if you have caught or done a reasonable job try to catch something that is exceptional.



Timing Makes the Difference

Image L



Unusual Subject Matter Helps a Lot

Image M

Here are some of my general observations about what subject matter seems to do better in competitions than others:

Nature - Wildlife in action will generally do better than straight portraits. A strong “nature story” is always a big plus. Increasingly I notice “fur and feathers” seem to end up at the top in open (mixed) competitions.

Landscapes - The ones that seem to do the best have a lot of depth to them. There is a strong foreground as well as background. Outstanding landscapes are not easy. You need great conditions like dramatic lighting. HDR now makes these more fun but watch out for “over-doing” it. (Insider tip: dramatic interesting skies matter)



Watch for Dramatic Skies in Landscapes

Image N

Sports - Action, action, action counts. The best sports shot are usually able to isolate the action or capture a peak moment.



Peak Moment

Image O

Still Life - Somehow for reasons I can't explain always seem to struggle in competition as great as many are.

Portraits - Somewhat like still life's, if they are up against nature or sports etc, they seem to not do as well. Studio set up portraits typically will do better than informal candid.

Macro - Can do very well but often succeed or die on the technical side due to focus, depth of field or lighting challenges. They are really difficult to execute well.

Patterns/Reflections - I don't see many pattern shots (nature or man-made) making it to the top of heap in competition. The same seems to be true of reflections (e.g. foliage reflecting on a lake) as well.

I am a firm believer in having subject matter categories (e.g. nature, portraits, travel, sports) so you aren't comparing apples with oranges. This also allows for deeper learning since as a judge you are able to compare how similar subject matter can be handled differently. This also levels the playing field so subjects like portraits or travel can get their full due.

For beginners new to competition what I notice is that very often they are choosing images to put into competition based on what is meaningful to them personally. Think grandchildren, tulips in their garden or a pleasant sunset on the lake. Nothing at all wrong with this. But if you want to progress beyond these and add points to your

competitive images (and get better as a photographer) then the subject matter chosen has to appeal to a wider audience (represented by the judge) and be meaningful and attractive to the viewers. The focus expands from what mainly captures my own interest to what will capture other people's interest.

On the other end of the spectrum is judging the work of highly accomplished photographers. If I am judging two perfectly executed images that both score high on all the above impact dimensions but the subject matter of one is more common and the other is something more rarely seen or a great moment in time, which will have the higher impact? As a judge I am faced with this choice all the time and as mentioned above particularly when I am judging the advanced competitors at the clubs. My emotional reaction is to usually go with the uncommon or unusual/different subject matter. This may be unique to me but what I have noticed over the years is that my images that are of rarely seen subjects or that have caught a special moment almost always do better than what I would consider the more "usual" stuff.

Where things get really tricky as a judge is when the images are technically right on, with super lighting, great composition and approach AND have equally attractive or inviting (though different) subject matter. What do you do then? These are the moments when you realize that casting judgment on the images at this level is now pretty much subjective if not arbitrary.

Post-Processing to Bring Out the Best

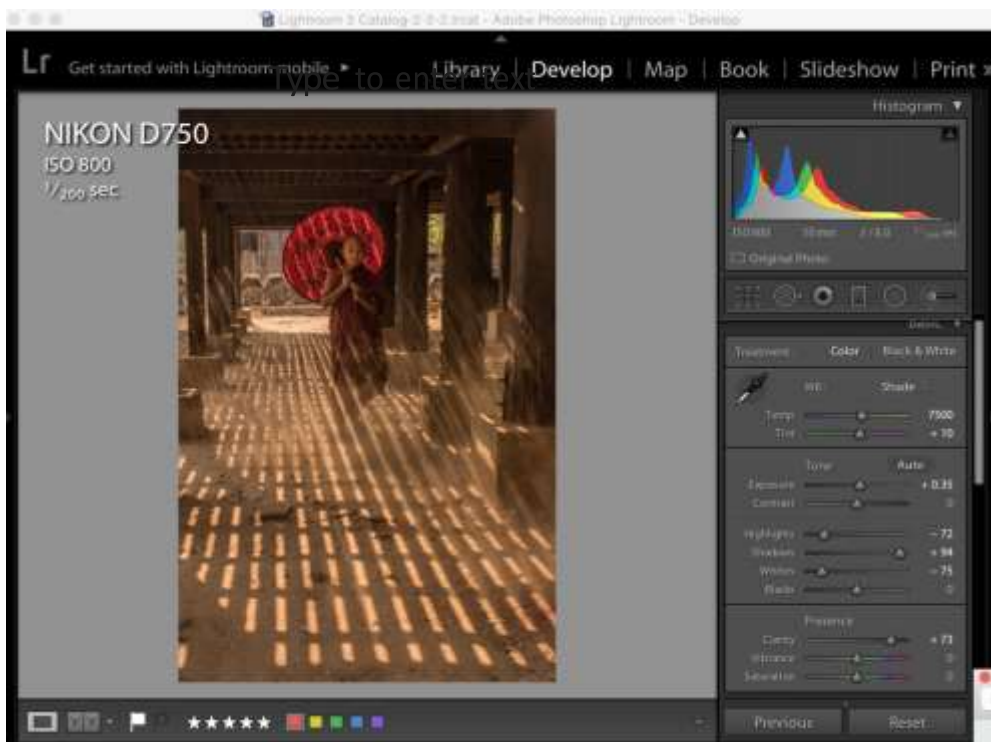
Back in the day of yellow Kodak and green Fuji boxes, once the shutter was released you were pretty much done. In the digital era pressing the release is often just the beginning. Now we can do things with our images that were unimaginable just 10 or even 5 years ago. In fact our cameras can now even see in the dark and track movements with focus accuracy impossible just a few years ago. The range of possibilities with digital photography boggles the mind. I am taking pictures in conditions not possible with film or even digi-cameras a few years ago. I don't blink taking an image at ISO 5000 now. Amazing for us old-timers.

But while the cameras and software are getting smarter and smarter, there is still need to do some image "development" to bring out all the details and richness in our captures and take advantage of all that data that you captured in those images. Post-processing is a critical tool to making great images and putting more points on your impact scoreboard. Images right of the camera especially in Raw need some work and tuning. For me this means

- Bringing out the details in the shadows
- Reducing or controlling the highlights
- Getting the color balance right

- Cropping
- Reducing noise as necessary
- Sharpening as little as needed
- Eliminating any sensor dust or artifacts
- Making the colors “pop” a bit more as needed
- Healing any “wounds” or removing distractions (not allowed with nature shots) as needed

Ninety percent of my post-processing is done with Lightroom (LR). I go right down the LR Develop panel (upper right). Typically I start with cropping then do my white balance, adjust my whites, shadows and highlights. Add some presence and a touch of vibrance. That’s pretty much it other than sharpening, noise and re-sizing for competition which I do in Photoshop.



Lightroom Develop Panel

A Final Word

I love competing. It is always full of surprises. Sometimes I am disappointed. Even after all the years I’ve been competing, I get outraged by the judging. Since I also judge I suspect people are outraged by my own judging. I love it when my images get great scores and I get discouraged when what I thought was a real “winner” gets a poor

score. But through it all it has made me a much better photographer, opened up whole new worlds for me and helped me reach the point where people now say to me “I want to take pictures like that”.

My final two pieces of advice on adding points to your images:

1. It's all in the details
2. All these things above are meant to help you select images or maybe work on existing ones for competitions but the real secret is to keep them in mind when you are **making the mages to begin with!** That's what I do.



Add the Points When You Are Making the Image
Image P



Go for Impact While in the Field

Image Q