

TIPS FOR CRITIQUES

Culled from various sources...

If you like a photo, 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.

If you see something that you don't like about a photo, then say that. You can't be wrong. If you don't like something about a photo 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 the photo 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.

Some things that you may want to consider:

Effort: Has the photographer made full use of the facilities at their disposal? Or, are there things that 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?

Color: Was the photographer's choice to use or not use color sound? If they used color, does the color contribute to the image, or would it have been more effective in b&w? If its b&w, does that help to focus on the essentials of the image, or are we missing something important? This will always be a subjective judgment, of course, but hearing other people's opinions on this is often useful.

Spatial positioning and composition: Please do NOT just spout standard photographic guidelines as if they were the law! The rule of thirds, for example, is not an instruction handed down from the gods - it is a handy guideline to what will *often* work well. For some photos, a centered composition will be perfect and using the rule of thirds would ruin it. So think about what works in this case. Does anything look squeezed up against the side of the frame? Are there big open spaces around the edges that could be cropped out? Is there a clear subject that occupies the majority of the frame, or is the subject unclear or small and surrounded by irrelevant material?

Direction of attention: What do you see first in the photo? Is it the right thing? Do you have to hunt for the subject or does it stand out? Is your eye drawn to objects in the background, rather than the subject, or do you look to the edge of the frame, expecting to find something that isn't there?

Focus: 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.

Exposure: Is the photo properly exposed? 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?

Step1

First look at the composition or content in the photograph. What is the center of interest in the picture? Where did the photographer place it in the frame? Did the photographer get close enough to the subject to include only what is important, or are there wasted parts of the picture with elements that do not add to the message of the photo?

Step2

Next, observe the background in the photograph. How did the photographer represent the background in regards to focus and depth of field? How does the background add or distract from the message of the photo?

Step3

Now take a look at the technical camera work involved in the photograph. Is the subjects sharp and clearly in focus? Is the photo exposed properly? A properly exposed photo will have some texture in the shadows. Are details missing because of over or under exposure?

Step4

Then look at the craftsmanship the photographer exhibits. Does the physical photo have spots, stains, or scratches? Is it placed nicely in a frame or elaborately displayed? Is there evidence that the photograph was made with care in the process?

Step5

Finally, offer your own personal feelings on the photograph. What do you like about the selected subject? Is it an emotional shot, a story, a statement, a humorous photo? What would you do differently if you had the chance to take the same photograph?

Giving feed-back on something is really easy. Giving *useful* feedback on a subjective matter — such as photography — is, in fact, extremely difficult. That's why I've created sort of a check-list with some tips as to how I like to do critiques.

"I like this photo, the contrast is cool" means nothing to the photographer, it only means that you like this particular photo, and that you feel that contrast is a good thing. "I like this photo, because it shows you've thought about the lighting, and the increased contrast adds to the overall impression of the amount of time you've put into lighting this item", for example, would encourage the photographer to continue putting more work into their lighting. They're on the right track.

Also remember that there's no right or wrong in photography. Gross technical errors (vast exposure problems, for example) can be universally wrong, but artistic considerations are not universal.

Finally, if you're the photographer getting critique, don't get defensive. In fact, **just shut up**. Getting people to talk to you about your photos is a rare opportunity, so don't waste it. Let people talk (even if you think they're wrong), it's their opinion, and your target audience should be important to you.

Right, so how can you do a photo critique?

1) Look

First of all, take a close look at the photograph. Let your eyes scan it closely: Make sure that you've caught every possible detail of the photo. If something jumps out at you as being really good or really bad, note it, but don't say anything

2) Interpretation

Now, talk about the photo for a little bit. This is the thing that is most frequently overlooked when doing critiques, but is actually one of the most useful things you can do to a photographer. For the interpretation, start off by saying "When I look at this photo, I feel...". Explain what sort of emotional response the photo raises in you. Follow up with "I think this photo is about...". Any symbolism you spot, tell the photographer. If you aren't sure, let them know that.

3) Technical points

The next thing to take care of is the technical points. Is the photograph technically okay? Did you spot dust, is the exposure okay, is there any unwanted blur (wrong focus, motion blur, zoom blur etc)? Are the colors accurately represented? What's the contrast like? Could the photographer have used lighting differently? Would a bigger or smaller aperture have been beneficial?

4) Artistic points

What do you think about the crop and [aspect ratio](#)? If the photo is in black and white, should it have been in color and vice-versa? Is there a good balance between the foreground and the background? Would the photo have worked better with a different prop / model?

5) Good points

This is where you point out what you like about the photograph, and why. The why bit is most important: If you can't tell why you like X, Y, or Z, there's no point in mentioning it. "I like the sky" is useless. "I like the color of the sky" is better. "I like the deep blue color of the sky because it contrasts nicely with the yellows and reds in the photo" is perfect. Put some thought into this.

6) Points worth improving

This point is saved for last, because you've made the photographer more confident about their photograph by now. It is still important to remember that the photo has been taken, and that this photo can't really be changed anymore. Tell them one or two specific points that could be improved on this particular photo ('clean up dust' and 'turn into black and white' are useful suggestions, as they can be done in the darkroom), and perhaps one or two points that you would have done differently, if you were the one taking the photograph.

This article will go into some detail about how you can analyze a photo. Primarily it's meant to be a guide to people what they can consider when giving critique.

Artistic side to analyze

Subject, concept and mood

First thing you can always ask is that is the subject interesting enough to photograph and publish it in art gallery. Is it really a well-thought photo of interesting subject or a random snapshot of a random object?

One thing to consider is that does the photo try to portray any concept? If it does, how good job it does in it? Quite often I see random snapshot in the gallery for conceptual photography. In these cases, the concept doesn't arise from the image and touch the viewer. There even might be some concept behind the image, but if the viewer can't see the concept, then usually the photographer has failed.

Also sometimes the concept might be clear but the technical execution of the image is lacking. In these cases the idea might be good but the general mood of the photograph doesn't portray or support the idea behind the image. For example, the photo might be about love, but the lighting is dull and flat and not really bring out any emotions that would help portraying the original concept (though again, there might be exceptions, like where the photographer wants to get a clinical look in the image).

Background, surroundings and the overall scene

One thing that can easily disturb the image is bad choice of background. Quite common mistake is to use too detailed background with image where you want the subject stand out. Naturally a narrow DoF might help here, but more about that later. In general, you want the background to be something that supports the overall image but doesn't get the viewers attention. Is the background too busy? Is it proper for the mood of the image?

Composition and placement of the objects / posing the model

You should also broaden your view about the subject. Anything that is "heavy" enough element in the image (that clearly draws viewer's attention) could be viewed as a subject. Perhaps it's the sun in sunset photo or some other strong enough element in landscape. Or perhaps there's a sign that contains writing (it contains information so usually people read it automatically). So placement of these subjects should be considered carefully.

Then there's also the balance in image. Should there be balance or some tension in the image? How does it go along with the mood the photo tries to convey? For example if all the heavy elements are on one side of the image, usually it's not that well balanced. Or if the one subject (like person in portrait) is facing "outside" of the image (for example is on right side of the image and facing to right), that usually creates more tension than more traditional view (for example the person is on right side of the frame and facing left, towards the photo).

Exposure

The exposure can be wrong in the sense that the image is under or over exposed by accident. That's good to mention while commenting (for example if there's badly burned out areas) since sometimes the person might not even thought about the fact that he/she can control the exposure somehow.

Then there's the artistic side of the image. Basically "correctly" exposed (according to cameras meter) image of this concept might look rather clinical and not really work with the mood again. Perhaps that's not the best way to convey the feeling you want to. So "correctly" exposed image might not always be the best option for the image. Dimly lit photo might go well with the concept.

Lighting

Lighting goes hand-to-hand with exposure, but here I'll cover different types of things that person should keep in mind about the lighting (outside of the camera) versus exposure (something you'll control with camera).

First of all you could consider if the artificial lighting possibly used would be good. Common mistake with still-life and portrait is that you'll just shoot with what light you have in the room. This usually creates a dull lighting that doesn't bring the subject out. So perhaps the person could have used some kind of lighting there. Quite often this kind type approach also leads to use of high ISO or too long shutter speed since there isn't enough light available.

And what about lighting outside? Perhaps the image was taken exactly at midday and the lighting is really harsh and flat. Would there be better time of day, time of year or weather to take that particular photo?

Depth-of-field

Should the depth-of-field be shallow or wide? If you only have one subject in the image, you most likely want it to stand out and want to get narrow DoF to get blurred background. If you don't, there's a chance that the subject actually "drowns" into background, drawing viewers attention off the subject. Or perhaps the DoF is too narrow? There are important areas out-of-focus?

Colors

First of all you can think of the colors in general in the image. Do the different colors work together? Or should they? You can again create peaceful scene with right colors but also you can bring some dynamics into image with them. Also different colors symbolize different things. So in this sense, you can also think if the colors support the mood of the image.

But you can also think about the saturation. Is the image saturated enough? Quite often, for example, I've seen nice sunset images that could be clearly more striking with a bit more saturation. Or perhaps the image is over saturated?

Here you have it, few basic tips that might help you to analyze photos better than before. At least these things are something I quite often try to analyze while giving constructive critique.

1) Technical

Is it in focus?

No one likes an out of focused picture, it's something everyone tries to avoid (with a few exceptions). Ask yourself if it's sharp or soft focus and if that is appropriate for the photograph?

Notice the depth of field and see if more or less would add to the photograph.

Is it exposed properly?

In some situations you just can't avoid underexposing or overexposing some parts of the picture, but what you always want is for the main subject to be exposed properly. Avoid making the subject very dark/light in comparison with the background (unless you're doing a silhouette). Is there anything in the photograph that is too distracting because it was overexposed?

Is the lighting and white balance appropriate?

Is the lighting too hard or soft and would changing it enhance the photograph? Avoid taking pictures with direct sunlight, especially when taking pictures of people, because it creates harsh unwanted shadows on the subject.

Is there a green/orange tint to the photograph created by fluorescent lights, street lamps or other poor light sources? This can be fixed by using your camera's white balance features.

2) Composition

Should anything be cropped?

Is there anything in the picture that should be cropped out? Is there too much wasted space that doesn't add to the photo?

Does it follow the "Rule of Thirds"?

If it doesn't, should it? Does the composition work to focus the attention on the subject or would something else be better? The Rule of Thirds is just like any other rule, it can be broken.

Are there any leading lines?

Are there any lines in the picture that draws your attention deeper into the photograph?

There are a lot of situations where this just isn't possible, so don't sweat if you can't answer this question with a "yes."

Is the photo balanced?

Are color, light, and subjects arranged in the photograph such that there is balance? Is the picture dominated by one color, light, or subject and if so, would changing that help improve the image?

3) Appeal

What were your intentions and can it be easily seen?

If you had a message or theme you originally wanted to portray when taking the photograph, is it obvious? This can make your picture thought provoking and show a lot of planning went into it.

What do you feel?

Does it make you feel sad, mad, or happy? Is that what you wanted? What techniques do you think could be used to change the mood of the photograph to what you want?

Is it interesting and appealing?

If this is a picture of something that belongs to you or someone you know, it might only be appealing to a few people. What about it do you think would make others interested in it?