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# APPRAISING YOUR PHOTOGRAPHS

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You have probably joined our club to learn how to make better photographs. Entering images for appraisal is daunting the first time you do it. The judge should provide useful feedback about the image, highlighting where it is successful and pointing out what could have been done to make it better. It's a real thrill when you get encouraging comments or an award, but we all learn from our mistakes.

## CONTENT AND MASTERY OF MEDIUM

The first step the novice needs to master is making an image that is technically correct, which shows mastery of the medium. The next is to control what the image contains, which is composition and handling light. Those that achieve these should be awarded a Merit.

### EXPOSURE

A correctly exposed images will have a full range of tones from black to white in the image, displaying the main subject. The colours will be balanced. Most of the time the automatic exposure meter in your camera will make a correct exposure, but for some images the photographer has to take control. For more on controlling exposure, refer to my article *Exposure* on the website.

### SHARPNESS

In most cases the subject photographed needs to be pin sharp, particularly the eye's pupil, especially in a large print. The photographer needs to display skill in choosing which parts are sharp, and which are unsharp, particularly if the subject is moving. Avoiding camera shake may be necessary. Blur can evoke depth or movement in the image. Out-of-focus bright objects can give the background **bokeh**. You will find my article on *Auto-focusing Tips* on the website.



### LIGHTING

Clever choice and arrangement of lighting shows skill. Flat lighting is required for some subjects. Directional lighting can give shape to an image, highlight the subject's edges, or express mood.

### TIMING

The choice of time of day is often the only control of lighting. But picking the **decisive moment** can capture that fleeting expression, or the peek of the action.

### CAMERA AND SUBJECT POSITIONING

Changing your shooting position, and sometimes your subject, as you take the photograph is essential to composing and framing your image. Avoiding mergers between two or more objects is to be considered. Shooting from an unusual position can lift your subject, making it expressive or unusual. Try low down.

Looking upward or downward gives an unusual view of your subject. Looking down on a person or animal makes them subservient. Looking up to them gives them power.

#### IMAGE DEVELOPMENT

Learning how to process your image files gives you immense creative control of your picture, and is a lot of fun. Few straight-out-of camera images attract judges.

#### DISTRACTIONS

Avoiding distractions keeps the focus on the subject, message or meaning. This may be tidying up litter, or framing to avoid it. Photoshopping distractions out is easy these days.

#### FINAL PRESENTATION

Adding a frame to a digital image can help express its message. Prints are always more rewarding than digital files. Photographic paper choice and matboard colour can affect how the print is seen. Dirty, dog-eared, badly cut or damaged matboards degrade your print.

## COMMUNICATING MESSAGE AND MEANING

Showing your photograph is communicating with those you are showing it to. When asked why there are no people in his landscapes, Ansel Adams replied there are always two people, the photographer and the viewer of the image. Your image must interest the viewer, and not just you. To be awarded highly the image must convey a strong message.

The best images reward the viewer the more they are looked at. They are the ones to hang on your wall. The judge is looking for emotion from your images and considers the following factors.

#### ABSTRACTION

Most images (photograph, drawing or painting) are an abstraction; representation of 3-dimensional space as a flat image within a border. Reality is represented by lines and shapes in varying tone and colour. We often forget that, having been looking at pictures since infancy. Usually your aim is to make your image represent 3 - dimensions. Aspects such as separation of objects in the image and lighting help give shape to your image. In landscapes and street scenes, the illusion of perspective is created with converging lines and variation of object size. Atmospheric haze gives landscapes depth. A narrow depth of focus can give the illusion of depth where your subject is pin sharp and the foreground and background are unsharp.

The depiction of texture is abstraction of our sense of touch. The control of lighting during capture, and the careful use of sharpening, texture and clarity can be used to create a feeling of the wetness of water, the cold touch of ice, or the softness of feathers, fur or skin.

Abstraction to remove nearly all reality may be deliberate, but in this case the image needs real art in its creation to be rewarding to the viewer. It is a real joy to view an attractive abstract image and to find a hidden message within it.

Recognising that photography creates illusions can be used to create images with altered reality and forced perspective. Think the tourist holding up the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

#### NARRATIVE OR STORY

Many successful photographs have an emotive narrative. Journalism relies on this, as do many people and animal studies. Emotions vary from fear and horror in war images, through anger and pain to humour, love and beauty. In a strongly emotional image, distractions become less significant – the story holds the attention. It is only when choosing the winner of a major competition from the best images that the judge will find distractions.

Images of people or animals need to either express some emotion or an interaction with the environment. Environmental portraits tell about the person's place in the world. Lighting can bring out emotion in portraits. Photographs of birds and animals need to show them doing something, feeding, or carrying prey for example. Remember photographic judges at our club cover all genre and are not bird experts. How rare the species is, or how much effort you put in to capture it is not considered. Be aware that Nature competitions have specific rules and the judges should be experts in the subject.

Abstract images are often lacking in a narrative, or it may be hidden. In this case the judge is looking for beauty.

## COMPOSITION

Harmonious arrangement of lines and shapes within the border really is the key to great images. It is essential for abstract images. Even record images should show compositional skill. Learn the rules of composition – the rule of thirds is NOT only one. Practice them often, then learn when you can successfully break these rules. Landscape and still life particularly require a deep understanding of composition. The key rules are:

- Keep it simple
- Make sure your subject is recognisable, and is saying something.
- Don't include anything in your image that distracts from your subject



## TONE AND COLOUR

All images need to have a full range of tones from black through to white. High key ones have a lot of light tones, and very little that is black. Conversely low key images have mostly dark shades and very little white. Care is required when exposing predominantly light or dark images, that the subject has the correct tone. Snow should be nearly white. Dark skin, or a dark coloured animal should be shown dark. Large areas of deep black or pure white lacking detail in your subject can be a fault, but can also be used artistically.

Being able to present the correct colour balance in your image should be your first aim. Using colour creatively should be your goal.

Many images have few colours, specially chosen for effect. Selecting colours from the opposite sides of the colour wheel for contrast is one technique. The use of warm reds and browns can evoke a feeling of cosiness. Cooler blue ones a chill. Unsaturated pastel colours can be used to create a sense of lightness and delicacy. Desaturation can be used to reduce distraction. Oversaturation leads to loss of detail in the brightest areas, a fault referred to as clipping, or out of gamut colour.

Large areas of light or dark shades with pastel colours (negative space) will emphasise size of the subject in relation to the space it occupies.

## WHERE TO GO NEXT

Look at as much visual art as you can. Find artists you like and study their work. Analyse why you like this work. Visit art exhibitions at AGWA and PICA, and at Terrace Art Framers and the Mandurah Performing Arts Centre. Read books and magazines on photography. Our local library is a great resource. Use Wikipedia to explore concepts you don't understand. Look at the WA Photographic Judges (WAPJA) website. There are extensive resources on how images are judged.

## APPRAISAL AND AWARDS

Appraisal evenings showing each other's photographs, are the foundation of camera clubs, and are where photographers really learn the skill. We all learn from the appraisal of not just our own images, but those of our fellow club members.

The best appraisals point out the strong points and how images can be improved. They are entertaining as well as educational. Judging that is derogatory is rare, provided the club chooses good judges, and we strive to do that. The best photographers do not necessarily provide the best appraisal, and those from supply houses may be over generous. A knowledge of art and technique of photography is essential. Remember the judge is doing this anonymously.

Appraisal of the image is the most instructive part of the evening. Awarding the image should be secondary. However there is a competitive spirit in many of us. Our club along with most other clubs has moved away from the judge comparing the evening's images with each other, and choosing best, second-best and third-best images. These days it is only in competitions that images are scored and ranked. At our club images are compared to a standard, carefully created to award Gold to those images considered to be suitable for entry in a major competition at state, national or international level. Silver and Bronze awarded images are showing increasing levels of artistic intent. Images that took skill to produce, but lack artistic intent should be awarded a Merit.

The WA Association of Photographic Judges has created the scale of judging awards, based upon international systems. We usually engage judges registered by WAPJA, because they have been trained and assessed in both appraisal and ranking of photographs to the WAPJA standards. They also undertake continuous retraining to improve their skills. Club members John Taylor and Steph Gibson are WAPJA registered judges.

The WAPJA 8-level award scheme is essential for competition, but is not used for our club nights to avoid embarrassment. The club's modification of the WAPJA scheme only defines Gold Distinction, Gold, Silver, Bronze and Merit.

WAPJA arranges several judge training sessions each year, including with professional photographers and artists, such as Nick Melidonis and Tony Hewitt. These workshops usually involve judges rating a group of images independently, and the scores are then compared. A variation in scores from different judges for the same image is common, and sometimes over a wide range. At a club evening we only have one judge, and they may miss your message. Don't be dismayed with the lack of an award, next time you enter it could be different. However do listen to the judge's remarks – they should encourage you by saying what they liked, as well as advising what you could have done differently to create a better image. Tony Hewitt (WAPJA life member) is an international judge. He tells WAPJA judges their score is never wrong, but must they must be able to explain why they gave it.

If you are unhappy about your image's appraisal PLEASE bring this to my attention. I want to ensure our club members are not discouraged.

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