

# Week 1 – A Basic Guide to Taking and Critiquing your Photos

## A note on presentations

Reading a presentation will give you the information just once, and you do not learn it that way. You learn by doing, seeing, using, and thinking about the information.

## Elements of a good photo

Making a good photo can be both really easy and really hard. Sometimes you just get lucky and you press the shutter on the right time, other times it's the result of months of planning and preparation, but the results will always share some basic elements that make it a good photo.

- **Subject:** A photo must have a subject, a point of interest that makes you look at the photo for longer than a blink of the eye. When there are people, they become the subject by default unless they are really small, animals have the same effect when there are no people. The subject must be clear, in focus, lit clearly.
- **Composition:** This is the way the photo is framed, how the elements in a photo are arranged, how colours are used and so on. We understand the effect of a lot of these elements and call them "the rules of composition". They must be used correctly, intentional or not.
- **Exposure:** The subject, and the important elements in the photo, must be illuminated to show it in a pleasing way.
- **Focus:** The subject (or important parts of that subject) must be in focus, meaning the maximum amount of detail must be visible. With people and animals, the eyes must be that point.
- **Background:** The background can be part of the story, or must be made to not attract attention by making it one colour, dark, blurred out or otherwise pull attention to the subject.
- **Story:** When the scene or person on itself isn't really, really beautiful, you'll want a story in your photo, and that story has to make sense. That's what makes a lot of photos bad, the stories don't match up, they make no sense, and the viewers notice that.

## When is a photo a good photo or a snapshot?

First of all, a big part of liking a photo or not is personal. It's about taste and you cannot impose taste on others, so I won't try to do that.

That being said, all good photos do have a fixed set of things right one way or another, so that's the place we'll start.

Any good photo attracts your attention and holds it. There are multiple ways to do that so what attracts and what keeps your attention can be different things, but they are present.

This can be 100% luck. That is why some snapshots are good photos. But a good photographer can manipulate the camera, subject or light in such a way that he or she gets a good photo in any situation.

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### How do I make a good photo?

To learn making a good photo you start with a bad one, you look at the viewfinder and critique it...each time improving on the last photo until you have no idea what to improve anymore.

Those you show to others, and they will show you what could be improved beyond what you can see.

In the beginning it will be hard to find what is wrong, but you'll learn. Once you start doing this, you will start to do it without having to take the photo so your starting photo will become better and better right to the point when you know that you have got it right!

### Which photos to show and hide!

Comment from 'Pieter Osaer Fotografie' Professional Photographer:

*"Besides your close relatives, no one wants to see those 420 photos you made during your 5 day trip, trust me. When I see a big album on Facebook, I look at the few first ones, and if they don't make me want to see a lot more, that's it. Selecting the photos you show is one of the most important things that could make you a better photographer."*

*During a portrait shoot, I generally make about 200 photos. Of those 200 I edit about 40, and my customer gets about 40. On Facebook, I show 1 - 5, on my website, I show 1, maybe, if it's worth deleting another photo.*

*When people see only my absolute best work, their perception of me as a photographer will be better than when I also show work that is less good than my absolute best, so why show it?"*

The same applies with work you enter in the competitions. Show the best you can do, the work you don't think you know how to improve, you think is perfect.

The improvements you get proposed on those will actually teach you something. If you show work you know how to improve yourself, why show it?

A short note on how to handle critique. If you don't agree with it, thank the person anyway, ask for more information or tips on how to improve. Don't defend your work, if you don't agree with the critique, just take in the information and move on.

If people keep telling you the same thing, consider the possibility that your view on things might not be popular!

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## How to critique:

Look at the photo and think about:

- what could be improved to make the photo better.
- what elements make you like the photo, add to the quality.
- what elements make you dislike the photo or ruin it for you.

## Critiquing photos (a bit more detail).

Looking at photos, your own or other photographers' work, will help you get better. This is why entering the competitions and getting feedback from other members is so important to progress.

The long term, reason is so you will eventually start critiquing the photos you have yet to take!

The first step to learn this is to look at photos of good photographers. Look at them and think about what makes you like them as a photo. It can be that it has a good it can be the subject or it can be the light, the use of colour.

Now try to go over the list...

- Is the photo exposed correctly?
- Can you see what you need to see, is it too bright or dark, or just right?
- Are the shadows pleasing? or harsh?
- Is there a lot of noise?
- Is the subject clear? Pleasing?
- Does it make me want to look at the photo? or move on to the next one?
- Is the background nice? Does it look fitting to the photo? Does it add to the photo?
- • How are the elements arranged? Are there cut off feet or hands?
- • Elements that could have been hidden?
- • Is there a story? Does it fit with all the elements you can see? Does it make sense?

## Critiquing your own work

A second step is learning to critique your own photos. After a session you go through your photos one by one and select the best for editing (if you do that). But that is not the only goal.

You will also try to figure out what made the photos you did not select end up that way, what could be improved on them, how to do better next time.

When you find a great looking portrait in your selection but the focus is off, you'll remember to check on the focus next time you make headshots. When the reason you don't end up using those great looking sunsets is that there is too much clutter in the photo, you'll look harder for that clean spot and so on. The goal of really analysing your own work is to find out how you can improve yourself as a photographer.

## Critiquing your viewfinder

When you get good at critiquing your own work, you'll start doing it while looking through the viewfinder. You will start not making photos you know won't work out, you will start not making photos that you won't select any way, and that will improve the quality of your work a lot; so work towards that.

*Parts of this article were taken from (<https://www.reddit.com/r/photoclass2020/>) with thanks*