Using the Elements of an Excellent Photo

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Presentation – ccullens.com/elements

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Agenda

1. The Elements of an Excellent Photo

2. Using the Elements in Judging

3. Scoring Tips

4. Judging Group Activity

Agenda

"Any art piece or photograph will reveal some measure of all elements, while a visually superior example will reveal obvious consideration of each one."

The Elements

1. Impact
2. Technical Excellence
3. Creativity
4. Style

5. Composition
6. Presentation
7. Color Harmony
8. Center of Interest

9. Lighting
10. Subject Matter
11. Technique
12. Storytelling
13. *Bonus - Title*

Impact

The sense one gets upon viewing a photo for the first time

- Impactful photos evoke laughter, sadness, anger, pride, wonder or another intense emotion
- There can be impact in any of these 12 elements
- This is the eye candy, the wow factor. It is the reason we love the photo. It moves us. We look inwards.

Technical Excellence

The quality of the photo itself as it is presented for viewing
- Lighting, focus, exposure, camera motion, printing, mounting, color, retouching, manipulation ...
- The nuts and bolts of photography. Be wary of going too far with adjustments
- It's what makes you a pro

Kat Jane

Creativity

Fresh expression of imagination to convey an idea, message or thought
- It's looking at an ordinary subject and finding an extraordinary way to portray it
- In photographic competitions, you may get bonus points for creativity and originality
- There are classic photos we have all seen, use creativity to differentiate yourself

Style

Rhonda Cullens

A specific genre or recognizable characteristic to showcase an artist
- Has a positive impact when the subject matter and the style are appropriate for each other
- Your work can be anything from traditional to surreal, candid to abstract, hard or soft light
- Use light or color in a special way, a blue tone in monochrome, high saturation, consistent angle

Composition

Bringing all the visual elements together to express the photo's purpose
- Holds the viewer in the photo and prompts the viewer to look where the creator intends
- Do you follow the standard rules of composition? When do you break them to enhance the photo?
- Don't break the rules just to be cool, only use it if it enhances the image

Presentation

Affects a photo by giving it a finished look
- The mats and borders used should support and enhance the photo, not distract from it
- Applying digital borders, customized for each photo, can either make or break your photo
- Making sure there is no dust (digital or analog) or scratches showing on the photo

Color Harmony

Color tones working together enhance the emotional appeal
- Color harmony is not always harmonious and can be used to evoke diverse feelings for effect
- Are your colors and corrections pleasing to the eye? Do they look like they belong together?
- Color harmony can be used to supply a structure to a photo

Color Harmony Monochrome

Monochrome tones working to remove harsh colors
- Color harmony in monochrome is the range from fully saturated (black, sepia) to unsaturated (white)
- Do they look "bland" or "muddy" due to no areas on the left and right edges of the histogram?
- Add structure by altering the individual colors, for example should blue be light or dark

Center of Interest

The point or points where the viewer should stop as they view the photo

- Can be subtle or strong, regardless, they allow the eyes to pause in preconceived areas
- Occasionally there will be no specific center of interest (scene is the center)
- Or there may be two, primary and secondary. Avoid two primary centers of interests.

Lighting

Defines dimension, shape and roundness in a photo

- The strength of your subjects should be portrayed by the strong lighting choices you utilize
- Whether the light applied is artificial, natural or added in post-processing, proper use enhances a photo
- Light also impacts the color of a photo because in low light human perception switches to monochrome

Subject Matter

Should always be appropriate to the story being told in a photo

- Keep it interesting and appropriate. Pretty doesn't mean it's right.
- Subject matter is sometimes linked to the competition category or photo title
- Not everyone will inherently understand your subject, use additional elements to help the viewer

Technique

The approach or perspective used to create the photo
- Focus, posing, angle, capture … are part of the technique applied to a photo
- Including filters, lens choice, a certain style such as forced perspective
- Move, change your perspective, learn new ways to control what you capture

Storytelling

Rhonda Cullens

The photo's ability to evoke imagination
- Take a step back to see what kind of stories your photos can create
- One beautiful thing about art is that each viewer might create their own message or story
- Take a step back and look at the photo as if it is your first time, find the story and make it noticeable

One More Thing

Title

I Can See You Too

Use the title to provide the judges an emotional connection to the photo

- At a minimum, use the title to tell the judges where to look when titles are announced before scoring
- It's always good to try many titles, the best might be the first or the last
- Don't waste the title to name the location (Niagara Falls) or obvious object (Gorilla)

The Elements of an Excellent Photo

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1. **Each Element is important on its own**

2. **Remember, they may overlap**
   - Subject matter directly relates to your storytelling
   - Technique and color harmony are intertwined

3. **The more Elements you use, the stronger your photo becomes**

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Using the Elements in Judging

It's important to use the Elements. How and when to use them is up to you.

- **Wondering how to score a photo?**
  - Consistently evaluate a set of Elements throughout a category
  - Generally, there is insufficient time to consider all elements
- **Wondering how to comment on a photo?**
  - Highlight a well-used Element to indicate how it helps the photo
  - Mention an underused Element as a suggestion for improvement
- **Wondering what not to say?**
  - Avoid "I've been there … I've seen it before …"
  - Don't start a sentence with "I don't like "
  - A negative thought should not be spoken, instead transform it into a suggestion on how to improve in a specific Element are

How to comment

Minimizing assumptions about the photographers in the audience

- **Leverage the photo lifecycle - vision, capture, post-processing & presentation**
  - Many Elements apply to many parts of the photo lifecycle
  - Impact, Composition, Lighting … have a strong role before the photo is captured
- **Quickly envision the best photo possible from the scene**
  - Move up, down, left or right, angle - Technique
  - Time of day, weather, flash - Lighting
  - Changing shutter speed or aperture to better direct viewers - Center of Interest
- **Avoid assumptions**
  - Most of the audience does not use Photoshop, avoid saying "In Photoshop… "
  - Use generic terms instead of specialized words & acronyms
- **Summary - It's easier for photographers to improve from comments that relate to before the photo was taken**
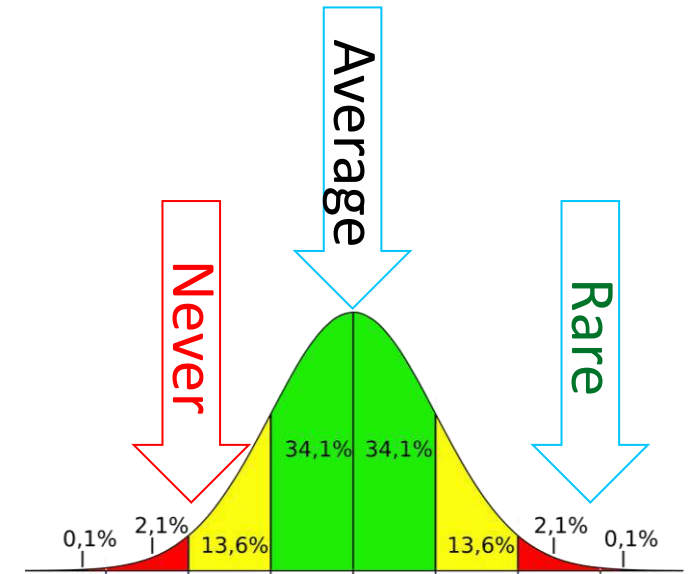
Agenda

Scoring Tips - Only for ranking the specific competitors

- A score is only relevant to the photos in this single category

- "Class - A, B, Expert" does not matter

- Right now, not last year or next year

- Use the run-through to determine the range of your scores
  - Leaving room for the top photos

Average

Never

Rare

34,1% 34,1%

0,1% 2,1% 13,6% 13,6% 2,1% 0,1%

Which Range of Scores?

Scoring Tips - Match assigned subject, topic, style, bias

- If it doesn't appear to match the category, reduce the score

- For example – color in a monochrome category, or no "bridge" in a "bridge" assigned subject

- Try to leave your personal bias at home. For example, even if you hate cats, a cat photo might be the best in the category.

Scoring Tips - Special categories, Nature, Photojournalism ...

Which ones are nature?

- At the start, ask what rules should be followed

- Nature, Wildlife, Photojournalism ... often have club-specific rules

- When in doubt, choose for the photographer
  - That flower may be a native plant in Singapore

- Disqualification vs reduced score. Generally, providing the lowest allowed score moves photo to the bottom

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Judging Group Activity

For each photo find included and missing elements

Impact

Technical Excellence

Creativity

Style

Composition

Presentation

Color Harmony

Center of Interest

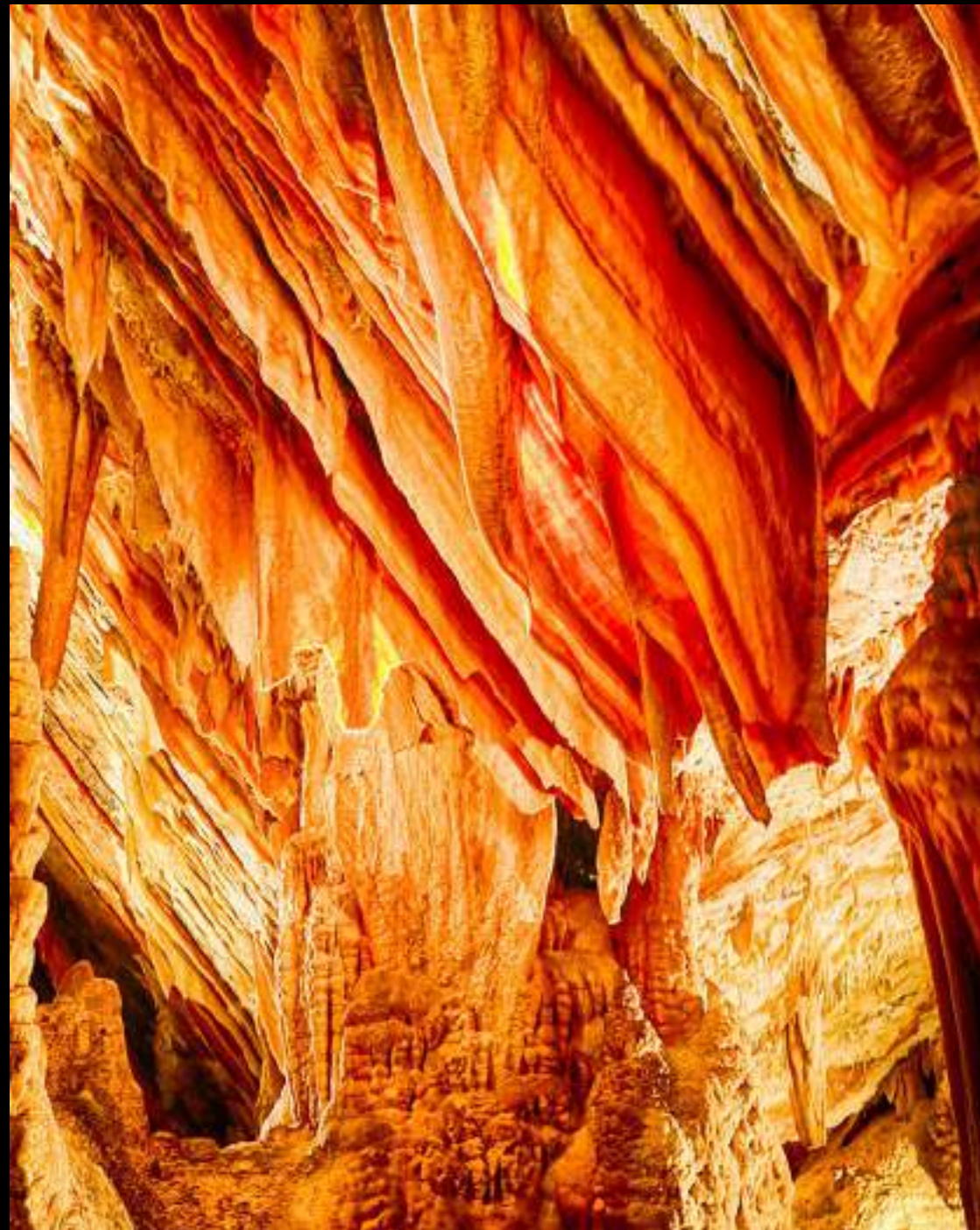Lighting

Subject Matter

Technique

Storytelling

Title

Staring into Wisdom

Impact

Technical Excellence

Creativity

Style

Composition

Presentation

Color Harmony

Center of Interest

Lighting

Subject Matter

Technique

Storytelling

Title

Impact

Technical Excellence

Creativity

Style

Composition

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Impact
Technical Excellence
Creativity
Style
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Color Harmony
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Lighting
Subject Matter
Technique
Storytelling
Title

Approaching Storm

Impact

Technical Excellence

Creativity

Style

Composition

Presentation

Color Harmony

Center of Interest

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Subject Matter

Technique

Storytelling

Title

Impact

Technical Excellence

Creativity

Style

Composition

Presentation

Color Harmony

Center of Interest

Lighting

Subject Matter

Technique

Storytelling

Title

Impact

Technical Excellence

Creativity

Style

Composition

Presentation

Color Harmony

Center of Interest

Lighting

Subject Matter

Technique

Storytelling

Title

Prydon Falls

Impact
Technical Excellence
Creativity
Style
Composition
Presentation
Color Harmony
Center of Interest
Lighting
Subject Matter
Technique
Storytelling
Title

I'll Take You Where You Want to Go

Impact
Technical Excellence
Creativity
Style
Composition
Presentation
Color Harmony
Center of Interest
Lighting
Subject Matter
Technique
Storytelling
Title

Alert

Impact
Technical Excellence
Creativity
Style
Composition
Presentation
Color Harmony
Center of Interest
Lighting
Subject Matter
Technique
Storytelling
Title

Alert

Impact
Technical Excellence
Creativity
Style
Composition
Presentation
Color Harmony
Center of Interest
Lighting
Subject Matter
Technique
Storytelling
Title

Pepper and Salt

Impact

Technical Excellence

Creativity

Style

Composition

Presentation

Color Harmony

Center of Interest

Lighting

Subject Matter

Technique

Storytelling

Title

Pepper and Salt

Impact

Technical Excellence

Creativity

Style

Composition

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Vanderbilt Summer Cottage

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Questions?

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