
Thinking about Critiquing Photographs

Nancy Matheson, 7 January 2020

There are as many opinions on why, when and how to critique photographs as there are bloggers on the subject. This handout isn't intended to be in any way "conclusive" on the issue, rather to stimulate thought and discussion, and hopefully, to contribute to the growth of a "culture of supportive critique" in our Club.

"When dealing with people, let us remember we are not dealing with creatures of logic. We are dealing with creatures of emotion, creatures bristling with prejudices and motivated by pride and vanity."

– Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*

Why Bother to Comment / Offer Critique?

We are all busy people. Commenting, especially commenting thoughtfully takes time and effort. Why should we bother? The following quote summarized the *raison d'être* of photographic critique better than anything else I've read.

"Critique is a strange beast. Given properly, it can facilitate both technical and artistic growth, but given improperly, it can derail development, damage self-esteem, and undermine the strong sense of community that makes photography such a group pursuit. Taking time to understand a photograph from all angles: technical, artistic, motivational, contextual, environmental, etc. can facilitate a full and deep critique, one that truly addresses an image in a way that is beneficial to both the critic and the requester. You might find that practicing articulating full critiques also helps you to examine your own images in an increasingly beneficial manner."

– Alan Cooke

When to Offer Critique

In short, at least in the Club setting, it is probably best to comment only when invited to do so. On our Club website, comments can be made on any photograph posted, whether to themes, outings, or individual galleries. However, I don't think we can assume that everyone posting in an Outings gallery or

a personal gallery wants a significant critique. That is not to say that you shouldn't offer some feedback, but perhaps not a full critique.

When someone posts an image to a Theme, it is understood that this is a competitive setting, and it is implied that the photographer is looking for comments. So, there is no need to be reluctant to post comments on Theme entries.



In a recent upgrade, our Webmaster added the ability for photographers posting to their own galleries or to outings to specifically ask for feedback by checking the RFC (request for comment) box. The request for comment will appear on the image as an exclamation mark. This is a clear invitation, and indicates that the artist will receive thoughtful critique with an open mind.

In this example you can see that Geoff is seeking some feedback, and Bill is not.

Before You Start Your Critique

The critique is not about you. It is about someone else's work. The goal is not to demonstrate your knowledge of photography. The goal is to help another photographer improve his or her work. Resolve to be helpful.

Another goal, and one that might be even more important to your growth as a photographer, is to learn to look deeply and really understand what about the image works or doesn't not. So, as well as being helpful, resolve to learn something from your analysis of the image.

It doesn't matter whether the image is to your taste, or not. It is perfectly possible to offer a constructive critique of an image that you wouldn't choose for your collection. Taste is subjective. Try to focus on the objective, and *keep your thoughts about whether you like the image, or not, to yourself*. Be civil. Be kind. Being kind doesn't mean not being critical, it means being concrete and constructive.

Things to Think About When Making Your Critique

Regardless of whether you are commenting on the Club website, or some other venue, the first thing to think about before putting fingers to keys is "*what was the intention of the artist in making this image?*"

Of course, without asking, you can't know, but that question provides a framework for your analysis and critique.

We all find it easier to say "nice" things than to offer criticism. Often we don't feel competent to make critical comments. But, it isn't helpful to just tell someone an image is good, without taking time to think about 1) what made it good and 2) how it could be better. On our website the comments field is broken into two parts:

1. What are the strengths of this image?
2. What are your suggestions to improve this image?

While the website doesn't "insist" that you fill in both fields, it is more helpful to the artist if you take some time to really examine what works well, AND **really consider what might make it stronger**. That doesn't mean looking for picky, technical flaws that don't really affect the impact of the image. **What is important is what changes will impact the effectiveness or impact of the image given what you guess to be the artist's intention.**

Here are a few things to think about when critiquing an image. This is NOT a comprehensive list. Browse the readings below, and search online, and you will find list upon list of things to consider. Eventually, you will have your own mental list of things to look for.

Don't panic! No critique or comment needs to cover all of these topics. This is simply a list to prompt critical thinking about the image.

- What is the subject of the image?
- Speculate about the artist's intention in creating this image. Why do you think so?
- What strikes you as the primary visual impact? What is the 1st thing you notice? Is that what the artist intended?
- What composition / design features affect the visual impact, positively and negatively?
 - Camera angle / Point of view
 - Edges, lines, shapes, volumes ...
 - Tones, contrast, colours ...
 - Framing / cropping
 - Placement of elements, repetition, relationships ...
 - What other composition features strengthen or weaken the image?
- Creativity, uniqueness, innovation ...
- Emotional impact; WOW factor
- Technique - What are your thoughts about:
 - Quality of light
 - Exposure
 - Depth of field
 - Focus
 - Contrast
 - Tones (lighter / darker)

- Post production – basic
- Post production – creative
- Blemishes (sensor dust, etc)
- Other technical thoughts

How to Receive Critique

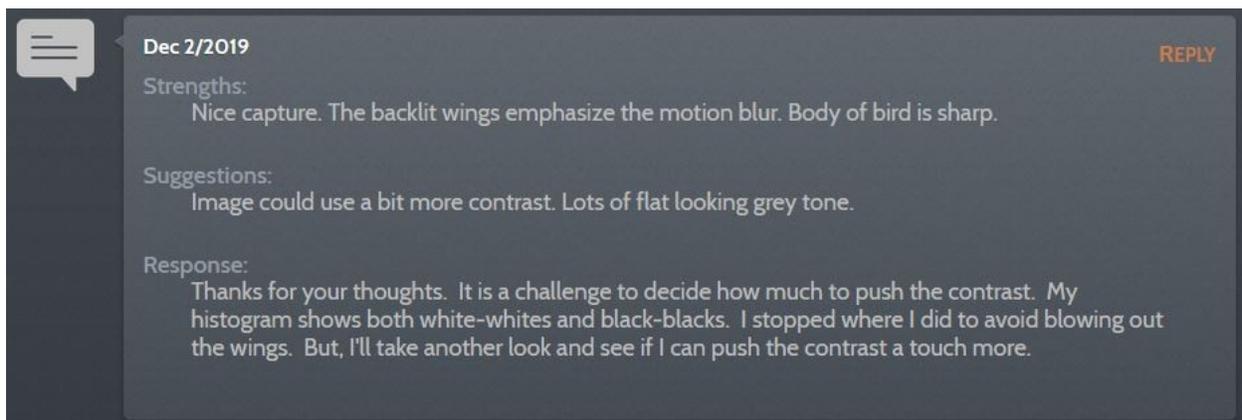
Asking for critique can feel risky. But here's the thing: **every critique, even poorly worded ones, can be mined for gold.** Very few of us are so confident that we can receive criticism, even well-meant, constructive critique, without a little ego tweak. That's OK. But don't let that initial "ouch" stop you from learning from the feedback: from mining the gold. When we learn the art of receiving feedback, honestly digging through the comment, taking what *has value to us at this time*, and discarding the rest, without the need to defend or deny, we end up making better images, with less stress and more joy.

Tips for Receiving / Responding to Critique

1. Do not expect everyone to love your image.
2. Do not accept criticism blindly, but
3. Take some time to consider the comments and let them sink in.
4. Try not to feel defensive, and do not argue. There is no point. See #1.
5. Don't disregard positive comments
6. MOVE ON

Admitting that you have done something less than perfectly doesn't make you a bad person, or a lousy photographer. It simply means you are learning. That has to be good, right?

When someone comments on one of your photos on the Club website, you have the option of replying to that comment. Try not to use it to "defend" your image, but as an opportunity to share your intention or challenges with the image. It isn't a vehicle for debate, much less argument, but a chance to share ideas and learning with the commentator, and anyone else who reads the comments.



Dec 2/2019 REPLY

Strengths:
Nice capture. The backlit wings emphasize the motion blur. Body of bird is sharp.

Suggestions:
Image could use a bit more contrast. Lots of flat looking grey tone.

Response:
Thanks for your thoughts. It is a challenge to decide how much to push the contrast. My histogram shows both white-whites and black-blacks. I stopped where I did to avoid blowing out the wings. But, I'll take another look and see if I can push the contrast a touch more.

Some Reading

There are thousands upon thousands of articles online about critiquing photographs, and, of course, they range in value. I found each of the following useful. They cover a range of perspectives.

Jenika, *5 Things You Should Know About Receiving Photography Critique*,

<https://psychologyforphotographers.com/5-things-you-should-know-about-receiving-photography-critique>

A brief article on how to receive critique. “Sometimes truly constructive critique is met with stubbornness, arrogance, and an unwillingness to learn on the part of the recipient. Mistaking kind critique for attack, they failed to jump on the learning opportunity and instead chose to turn nasty.”

Jenika, *A Crash Course in The Art of Constructive Critique*,

<https://psychologyforphotographers.com/a-crash-course-in-the-art-of-constructive-critique>

This article offers an example of how to move from criticism to useful critique. “Keep in mind that someone seeking honest critique isn’t always seeking bluntness. There’s a big difference.”

Jenika, *Why Photographers Behave Badly Online (And How To Make Sure You Don’t)*

<https://psychologyforphotographers.com/why-photographers-behave-badly-online>

Some thoughts about why / how photographers act badly online, and how not to. My favourite quote: “Never say anything to another photographer that you wouldn’t say to your grandmother (or insert other beloved elderly relative here). Sometimes it doesn’t matter what is “true” – “truth” can be reframed and told in a kinder way. Take the time to look for it.

Peter West Carey, *How To Deliver A Useful Photo Critique*,

<http://digital-photography-school.com/how-to-deliver-a-useful-photo-critique/>

This short article highlights some of the softer, more subjective issues in making a critique. It also has some links to other articles discussing critique. My favourite quote: “The ‘Why’ is at the heart of the critique. It will help the photographer more than anything.”

Alan Cooke, *How to Properly Critique a Photograph*,

<https://fstoppers.com/critiques/how-properly-critique-photograph-82407>

This short article speaks to the mindset and focus of the person giving the critique. A useful quote, “It’s rare that a photograph is so mind-blowingly spectacular or so jaw-droppingly bad that it truly deserves an unequivocally positive or negative critique.”

Michael Henson, *Beginner’s Guide to Photo Critique*,

<https://www.slrlounge.com/beginners-guide-to-photo-critique-checklist/>

This short article offers a short list of basic and fairly concrete things to consider when making a critique. It also suggests that we might run through that list ourselves, when selecting an image to submit for critique. A thought-provoking quote, “Regardless of your creative style, the subject of your photo is the most important element.”

Alain Briot, *Vision 11 - Critiquing photographs,*

<https://luminous-landscape.com/vision-11-critiquing-photographs/>

This is a longer and somewhat “higher level” article, offered from the perspective of a teacher, and is written from the perspective of evaluating print. However, most of the subjects covered and points made are entirely pertinent to critique at our Club level. The article also offers thoughts on how to receive critique, and a useful tool for self-evaluation. A worthy quote: “Critiquing is not criticizing. ... critiquing means looking at the work for the purpose of finding out the strong and weak points of the work. On the other hand, criticizing means taking a critical look at the work for the purpose of expressing a personal opinion. ... I view the former as constructive and the later as destructive.”

Jenika, *5 Things You Should Know About Receiving Photography Critique*,

<https://psychologyforphotographers.com/5-things-you-should-know-about-receiving-photography-critique>

A brief article on how to receive critique. “Sometimes truly constructive critique is met with stubbornness, arrogance, and an unwillingness to learn on the part of the recipient. Mistaking kind critique for attack, they failed to jump on the learning opportunity and instead chose to turn nasty.”

Jenika, *A Crash Course in The Art of Constructive Critique*,

<https://psychologyforphotographers.com/a-crash-course-in-the-art-of-constructive-critique>

This article offers an example of how to move from criticism to useful critique. “Keep in mind that someone seeking honest critique isn’t always seeking bluntness. There’s a big difference.”

Jenika, *Why Photographers Behave Badly Online (And How To Make Sure You Don’t)*

<https://psychologyforphotographers.com/why-photographers-behave-badly-online>

Some thoughts about why / how photographers act badly online, and how not to. My favourite quote: “Never say anything to another photographer that you wouldn’t say to your grandmother (or insert other beloved elderly relative here). Sometimes it doesn’t matter what is “true” – “truth” can be reframed and told in a kinder way. Take the time to look for it.