

Club Judging Guidelines

Photographic Judging always seems to arouse strong emotions and not a little controversy within Clubs. Judges are almost invariably the object of criticism and the knocking of judges is a favourite pastime of many members and lecturers and yet club competitions, inter-club battles and exhibitions are the bread and butter of the vast majority of club programmes.

We are all Judges really. Each club night we sit and watch someone else's work, be it a visiting lecturer, a competition, a folio or whatever and we subconsciously are assessing the images as they appear. Our ability to do this grows with experience but we do not have to back up our decisions as a Judge does. We might herald a good image with "Oooh, I like that", or a poor one with a dismissive "Rubbish!"- The whole lot in between you may choose to keep quiet about or reserve your judgement.¹

There is a huge difference between sitting in the audience and passing comments (or silently predicting the score the judge will give) and standing up and commenting on every image. I know that when I started judging I was very conscious that I was given no formal training and found it a very daunting experience to stand up and make constructive comments on pictures (some taken by well known and highly regarded photographers).

The following are guidelines that may assist potential and current judges:

- Preparation
- Presentation and Delivery
- Judging
- Marking

Preparation

Within N&EMPF the tendency is to have "cold" judging. In other words the judge does not see the images until the night of the competition. In such circumstances it is critical to arrive in time to go through the images. If they are prints I try to go through twice (once to determine the overall standard and therefore to fix my average mark and the second time to mentally select my top few images). For slides/projected images it is not practical to go through twice but once is critical.

Before looking at the images it is essential to know what it is you're judging. If it is a set theme clarify with the committee their understanding/definition of the theme. Be sure you also understand the marking or placing criteria required by the Club.

¹ Extract from "Some Thoughts on Club Judging" by Bob Dennis (L&CPU)

Presentation and Delivery

When invited to judge you are in a position of authority with some degree of influence especially over new club members. To the club members you are the focal point of the evening and therefore you should **appear smart and casual** (not in dirty, tatty jeans or shorts).

After you have been introduced always say a few words, this helps allay your nerves and gives the opportunity to judge your **voice level**. If the audience cannot hear you they will quickly turn off.

Eye contact is hard but essential. This is certainly more difficult with projected images but with prints is a lot easier. **Do not spend all your time looking at the print**, by all means glance at the image but also look at the audience (front and back) as this helps with communication and maintains their interest in what is being said and it enables you to see their reaction to your comments. Remember to also stand back from the print to allow all of the audience to see the image, ideally after you have assessed it but before you have marked it.

Speak clearly and in your natural voice and don't mumble. Also try and vary the tone – a voice that moves up and down is psychologically much more pleasing to the ear. Try smiling as this creates a feeling of empathy with the audience and also helps the voice sound more interesting.

The **length** of comments should be timely. There is nothing worse than someone droning on. Say what is appropriate or necessary using concise phrases.

Don't be afraid of **pausing**. This can be effective when the image is first shown to give the audience chance to appreciate the image and you the time to gather your thoughts. Also pausing before marking adds a degree of suspense.

Judging

Judges will develop their own style and approach to judging, this comes with experience. It would be wrong to provide a prescriptive method of judging however, the following are points that have been raised by a number of Federations as useful guidelines:-

Eddie Sethna, in a detailed research into Judging, identified three key elements that **good judges** take into account:-

1. What the picture communicates – the “message” – with a weighting of 50-60%
2. The content of the picture – the “medium” – with a weighting of 30-35%
3. The technical aspects of the picture – with a weighting of 10-15%

Good judging is done more by the heart than the head and the major emphasis should be on the **message** of the image – the mood and emotions conveyed by the image. Besides the feelings, emotions and mood recognition should also be given to

the story, the idea/inventiveness and the interpretation of the beauty the image conveys.

As a judge we should recognise the photographer's ability to recognise the potential of the subject. What appears to be good to the eye does not always make a good photograph. As well as the subject and **content of the picture** there are a number of other key factors which include:

- Choice and Control of lighting
- What is included or has been excluded
- Choice of background and overall setting
- Interpretation of movement
- Use of tones and colours
- Has the right moment been chosen well
- Is the composition good and does the choice of format (landscape or vertical) enhance the image.

Judging **technical aspects** should also be considered such technical aspects include:-

- Handling of tonal range
- Correct/Appropriate Exposure
- Quality of processing
- Presentation of image (including mounts, cropping etc.)

Over many years of judging, images lacking technical ability often also lack artistic interpretation. Although technical aspects have a suggested lower weighting than the message or picture content the good judge will be flexible in their approach.

Remember you are judging each image in relationship to the others in this competition. You are not judging against a perfect image you have seen before but you may comment on an alternative presentation but that should not influence your marking.

It is paramount to evaluate, compare, provide constructive comments and encourage the photographer through your own enthusiasm. It is critical when evaluating a picture to identify **positive attributes**.

Things to avoid when Judging

When presented with a number of images to judge it is very easy to focus on the negative aspects of the picture leaving the picture with the least negative aspects as the winner.

Some of the regular pitfalls when judging are:

- Having an overvalued idea and evaluating each image against that idea e.g. the subject matter must always be on the thirds, there must be a diagonal in the picture etc.

- Stating that you do not like studio portraits or sunsets or boats.
- Failure to see the whole picture
- Avoid an over critical and destructive approach to judging
- Higher consideration is given to the technical difficulty getting the picture
- Second guessing how a picture was taken will result in most audiences being rankled and if you guess wrong you will lose credibility with the audience.
- Do not admit you are not an expert on any specific subject

Marking

Marking is one of the most controversial areas of judging it certainly arouses the most discussion post competition. I have experienced competitions where 58 out of 64 images were marked between 16 and 18; on another occasion half points were used to try and separate the marking when the lowest mark was 15 and on another occasion 8 joint first places were awarded which illustrates the judge's indecision.

The weighting of pictures has already been mentioned and this can help when giving marks. A lot of clubs request marks out of 20, I can never see any benefit in giving an image 1 out of 20. My personal method is to assign ranges for example:-

- **8-12** these images are those where the "message", picture content and technical ability are below average.
- **13-16** these are good technical pictures with strong picture content value but perhaps misses out slightly on the "message"
- **17-20** these are the images that on the night are the best images that work for me.

I always hold back any images that will score 17 or more, this enables me to look at the images again, compare against the other images held back and it also keeps the audience in suspense.

In conclusion, try to develop your own style of judging but don't be afraid to emulate judges who you have found informative, enthusiastic and entertaining. Speak to the audience and not the picture and most importantly judge the picture as you see it.

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Acknowledgements

Bob Dennis (Lancashire and Cheshire Photographic Union)

Dr Eddy Sethna

Alan Ford (Yorkshire Photographic Union)

Stan Miller (Glasgow District Photographic Union)

Dave Coates (Northern Counties Photographic Federation)