

How to Critique a Photo

Some people think they don't know enough about photography to write critiques. This isn't true. To write a useful critique, you need only three things:

- a reasonably decent monitor to view the photos
- at least one functioning eye
- a desire to help by writing honestly and constructively

If you like a photo, then say so. Tell the photographer what you like about it. Tell them how it made you feel, or what it made you think about. Very often, the most technically-proficient photographers are the least able to express their feelings about a photo, so people who can do that are particularly valuable critiquers.

If you see something that you don't like about a photo, then say that. You can't be wrong. If you don't like something about a photo then either the photographer intended it to be that way (in which case you simply have a difference of opinion) or the photographer didn't notice it (in which case your critique will be enlightening). If the photo looks dark then say so. Maybe the photographer intended it to be dark, but so what? If you don't like the darkness of it, then probably other people don't as well, and the photographer should be aware of that.

Some things that you may want to consider:

- Critique the technicals.

Exposure.

Is any area overexposed or underexposed? If so, can you say why you think that happened? How could the photographer prevent this problem in the future? Are there details both in the highlights and in the shadows, or are there large "blown-out" highlight areas or "blocked-up" shadow areas? Again, blown highlights are not necessarily wrong. If you look at sunlight reflected in a glass window, what the eye will see is a white area, so there is no reason at all why a photo shouldn't show the same thing. Sometimes blown highlights can be used to good artistic effect. As always, don't parrot rules, think about how well things work in this photo. If the exposure is biased towards light (high key) or dark (low key), did the photographer make a good choice?

Focus.

Is the main subject in focus? Is it sharp focus, or a "soft" focus? Is the focus appropriate for the situation? Is anything in focus? Is it the subject or something else? Is the depth of field appropriate? Is the subject contained within the depth of field or are parts of the subject fuzzy? Are there distracting elements in the background that are in focus which would have been blurred out by a wider aperture? As with composition, remember that

there are no fixed rules. Think about what works or doesn't work in the case of this particular photo.

Depth of Field (DOF).

Is the DOF shallow or deep? Does the DOF work in this shot, or should more (or less) of the photo be in focus?

Lighting / White balance.

Is the light soft or harsh? Does the type of lighting enhance or detract from the things in the photo? Is the white balance set correctly? Is there a yellowish, orangish, or greenish cast to the photo?

Color.

Was the photographer's choice to use or not use color sound? If they used color, does the color contribute to the image, or would it have been more effective in b&w? If its b&w, does that help to focus on the essentials of the image, or are we missing something important? This will always be a subjective judgment, of course, but hearing other people's opinions on this is often useful.

Effort.

Has the photographer made full use of the facilities at their disposal? Or, are there things that the photographer could have improved with a little more work? Does it look like the photographer made an extra effort to capture the best possible image under the circumstances, or did they just go with what was in front of them?

● Critique the composition.

Centered vs. "Rule of Thirds."

Is the main subject in the center of the frame? Is it on a third? Somewhere else? Does the chosen composition work, or would you have done something differently?

Fore, Middle, and Backgrounds.

(Most applicable to landscape photos) Does the photo contain all three? If not, do you think it would be better if it did?

Cropping/Framing.

Is there wasted empty space in the photo? Should the crop have been tighter? Is it cropped so tightly that important parts of the photo have been cutoff?

Tonal Range.

What type of colors do you see? Did the photographer use a lot of primary colors? Secondary? Complementary? Are the colors too vivid? Not vivid enough? If you are looking at a B&W photo, is there a true black, true white, with a large tonal range in between, or is the photo too "gray"?

Diagonals, S-Curves, etc.

Did the photographer make use of any visually-interesting elements, such as diagonal lines or S-curves?

Leading lines.

Do the lines and overall composition make you want to look deeper into the photo? Is your eye drawn into the photo, or out of it?

Dark vs. Light areas.

Are there too many bright areas? Too many dark areas?

Balance.

Is the photo balanced? Would it be better if there were other objects or other light/dark areas in the frame to improve the balance? If the photo is off balance, is there a reason for it?

Spatial positioning and composition.

Please, please, please do NOT just spout standard photographic guidelines as if they were the law! The rule of thirds, for example, is not an instruction handed down from the gods - it is a handy guideline to what will often work well. For some photos, a centered composition will be perfect and using the rule of thirds would ruin it. So think about what works in this case. Does anything look squeezed up against the side of the frame? Are there big open spaces around the edges that could be cropped out? Is there a clear subject that occupies the majority of the frame, or is the subject unclear or small and surrounded by irrelevant material?

Direction of attention.

What do you see first in the photo? Is it the right thing? Do you have to hunt for the subject or does it stand out? Is your eye drawn to objects in the background, rather than the subject, or do you look to the edge of the frame, expecting to find something that isn't there?

● How does it make you feel?

Even if you are a beginner, you are certainly qualified to critique based on these questions:

What mood do you see in the photo?

Do you think this mood is what the photographer intended?

Does it make you happy? Sad? Angry?

Did the photographer succeed in telling his/her story with the photograph? Why or why not?

Do you like the photo? And, more importantly, say WHY you like the photo, or why you don't.

Would you hang this photo on your wall? Why or why not?