

# **Judging Poor Pictures**

**by Chris Forster *EFIAP FBPE***

We all enjoy looking at interesting, well-executed photographs. However, it is a fact that judges at camera club competitions will spend much of their time considering average or poor pictures. What advice can we give in this situation?

Firstly, we should agree on a standard for “good” photographs. Any photograph that is technically adequate has some merits, but since the camera does most of the work for us these days, we should try to move beyond “point and shoot”. I believe that club photographers should be aiming to achieve photos that would be likely to be accepted at national exhibitions. A judge who is asked to compare a photograph to exhibition standards obviously has to have some personal experience of national exhibitions. This is not always the case and is, in my opinion, a major cause of poor judging at camera clubs.

So, let us assume that we know what a good picture contains, how do we judge pictures that fall short of this standard? Judges are required to give useful, honest assessments in order to separate good pictures from bad pictures and to be able to explain their decisions to an audience. Judges are not required to make friends or to maintain egos.

On seeing a picture, all people will have an instant feeling or gut reaction. This is very important and a judge must consider why the picture caused such a reaction. You must not hide your emotions, a picture might:

Delight	What exquisite lighting. What lovely colours.
Intrigue	What is this person doing? How did you set this up?
Confuse	I don't understand this. Why did you take this?
Bore	No centre of interest. Seen it all before.
Disgust	Environmental damage. Starving beggars.
Astonish	What an amazing event. How did you capture this?
Dismay	Ordinary picture. Poor quality.
Etc.	

Strong emotions may be positive or negative, but both may add to the strength of a photo when combined with a strong story telling content. A judge must recognise the emotive content or story telling aspect of the picture, but note that emotions will vary from person to person because of their own personal life experiences.

Next a judge should consider how well the story has been told by considering composition and content. Lastly the judge should consider technical quality. I consider the emotive content to be most important, the layout of the picture next and the technical quality after that. Unfortunately, it is much easier for a judge to talk about the technical aspects and I believe that this is the second major cause of poor judging.

Let's consider a couple of examples. You are presented with a small print of a cute child eating an ice cream. The background is cluttered with slightly out of focus people and what looks like fairground equipment. The bright sunlight has burnt out the child's white hat and left the eyes in deep shadow. There is a small patch of light sky in the top left hand corner. What would you say?

Your heart sinks when you see the picture, because you know it is miles away from exhibition standard, but you don't want to upset anyone's feelings especially if the parent is in the room!

Consider emotive content and story telling. For many people, the picture will remind them of their own children and fun days out during the Summer. In other words, the emotive content is strong. However, most people will not know this particular child and, unless the ice cream is about to drop onto someone's bare tummy, the story telling aspect of the picture is weak.

Next consider composition and content. The child eating the ice cream is the focal point of the picture. Has the child been visually isolated or placed correctly relative to other objects in the picture (maybe another jealous child looking on)? The background is distracting and weakens the composition. Could a different viewpoint have been chosen? Could the bright patch of sky have been excluded?

Lastly consider technical quality. There are obvious exposure problems with both the highlights and shadows. A judge can offer advice (maybe move the subject into shadow, possibly use fill-in flash to reduce the shadow). A larger aperture could have been used to simplify the background by putting it more out of focus.

Sadly, many judges would have mentioned the bright patch of sky first and then probably have kept coming back to it. They may even hold up bits of card to try to crop the area out. They may mention the messy background, but that's it. They know it is not a good picture, but because they can't really explain why, they give it 15 out of 20. No-one has gained.

Lets consider another example. A print of a pleasant landscape comes up on the easel. It was taken with a wide angle lens and the weather was rather dull. The top third of the picture is filled with quite interesting looking clouds, but the foreground is rather dark. There are a couple of people wearing red anoraks in the lower left hand corner walking out of the picture. The whole image is not very sharp. What would you say?

Again you know that this picture is not up to exhibition standard. Consider emotive content and story telling. Most of us enjoy walking in the countryside, or at least enjoy the idea of freedom to roam. We can identify with the disappointing lighting (been there, done that!). Again the emotive content of the picture is quite strong. However, the story telling aspect is completely lacking (Why were you there on that day? Which path were you taking? Did you go to look at lovely Spring flowers or Autumn colours?).

Next consider composition and content. The composition is rather poor. There is no strong focal point and no lead in lines. The lack of suitable lighting has made it impossible to get any feeling of depth, drama or contour. Maybe by using a longer focal length lens to concentrate on just part of the landscape would have strengthened the composition. The size of the figures would determine if they are a distraction or if they give a useful sense of scale. Who cares which way they are walking? Really the best advice is to find a good viewpoint and return to it when the lighting is more photogenic.

Now consider technical quality. Even on the obviously dull day, the exposure range between the sky and ground was too great. Advice may be given to overcome this (use of graduated filters, concentrate on the ground or the sky, mix different exposures in post processing). The dull day has probably led to the use of a slow shutter speed and, without a tripod, could easily have lead to camera shake and hence the lack of sharpness.

Most judges would have mentioned the figures first (should they be there, does the red distract, should they be walking into the picture?). They would then have inspected the print from two inches away and pronounced “it’s not as sharp as it could be but it doesn’t really matter”. They would then finish by saying that it was a nice enough landscape, but “there are better pictures here tonight, 15 out of 20”. Utter drivel and of little help to anyone!

Having had lots of experience at national exhibition level, I am perhaps guilty of applying a Selector’s eye and judging a picture too much by gut reaction. I am probably also guilty of upsetting lots of people by giving low marks. Why mark out of 20 and give no lower than 14? I don’t apologise for giving low marks if I feel I can explain my reasoning. I do also give high marks to good pictures!

A judge may be asked to judge a “beginners” section and, in this case, the standard for a good picture may be lower. I think that the same judging process as for advanced workers should still be used. The scoring may also be a bit more generous, but is less important than the advice given.

In conclusion, I recommend that you judge all pictures by considering emotive content and story telling first, then consider composition and content and finally consider technical quality. If you do not have experience of national exhibitions, then get some (either by entering or by attending presentation nights). When an average or poor picture comes before you, judge it as you would a good picture. You do not need to start off with praise and then damn it with details. Express what you see and what you feel. Judge it and then mark it appropriately. Don’t shirk your responsibility.

If you judge poor pictures badly, then you will help no-one, you will annoy both good and bad photographers by giving inappropriate marks and you will lose respect. You will also probably not enjoy judging as much as you could. It needs some practice, but it’s not difficult to judge correctly.

**Chris Forster** *EFIAP FBPE*

May 2010