Critiquing Photographs

A Tutorial Guide

courtesy www.photosig.com

Introduction

Many people, when first joining a photo critique site, may not know where to begin when writing a critique. Some amateur photographers may even feel that they are not "worthy" to critique a another's work. The fact is, it doesn't matter whether you are just starting out or are a seasoned professional--there are many different aspects of a photo that you can comment on. If you don't feel that you have a handle on the technical aspects of photography, then just comment on the composition, the story, or the emotional feeling behind the photo.

Remember, writing critiques is beneficial not only for the photographer whose work you are critiquing, but it is tremendously helpful to you, the critique writer. By thinking about all the different aspects of what makes a photo "good" or "poor", you are adding

to your own knowledge base to be used when it is you clicking the shutter!

The purpose of this basic guide is to point you in the general direction of how to write a critique, and give you some things that you can look for when writing your critiques. It is not meant to be an all-inclusive list of every aspect of photography. You don't have to touch on all of these categories. Even writing a sentence or 2 covering just one of these categories can be tremendously helpful to both you and the photographer seeking feedback.

1. 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?

Focus.
Is the main subject in focus? Is it sharp focus, or a "soft" focus? Is the focus appropriate for the situation?

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?

2. 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 is the photo? Should the crop have been tighter? Is it cropped so tightly that important parts of the photo have been cutoff?

Color / 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?

3. 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?

We'll close this tutorial with some words of wisdom:

"There seems to be a general perception that "critique" means "to find fault with." It doesn't mean that at all. It means to critically analyze and respond to something, either positively or negatively, or both. Even when someone holds a camera in their hands for the first time, they have a lifetime of experience processing visual imagery. The success of an image in someone's eyes is how is works for them!" ~Rick Moore