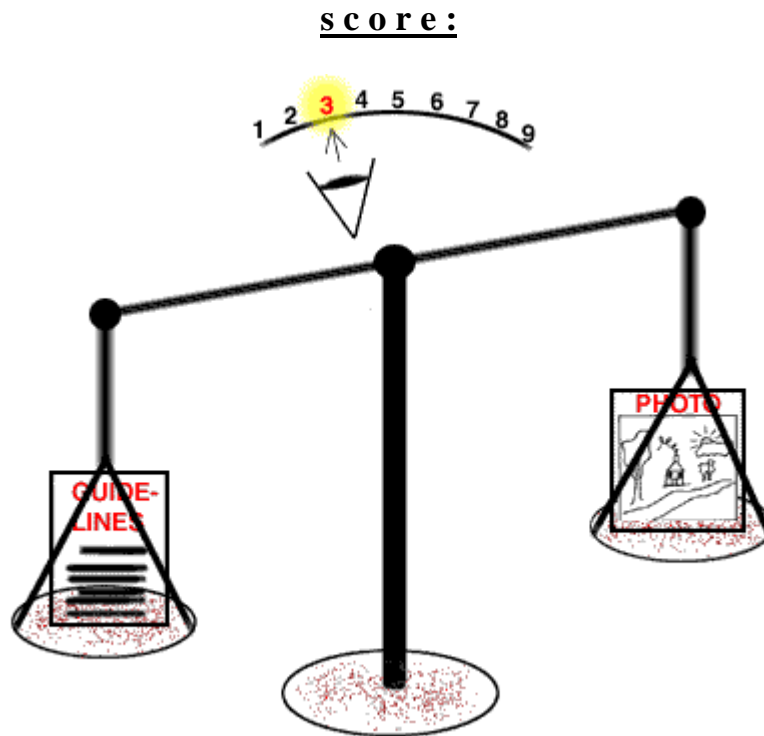


## Zen of Good Photojudging

Mark Aksoy

### 1) Have a set of criteria or guidelines for judging **BEFORE** you start

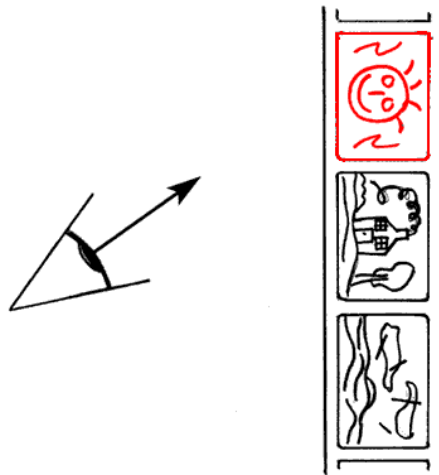


These may be given to you by the organization for which you are judging. If not, you need to develop your own. Though most people agree on the general elements that comprise a winning photo, everybody has their own precise recipe for exactly how much each element contributes to a winning score. Without a set of such guidelines, your scoring will be erratic, overly subjective and unfair to at least some of the people being judged.

That said, if you've attended any number of photo critiques, competitions, or read books on "making good photographs", you have at least the beginnings of a set of criteria to use for judging. Typical criteria can include proper exposure, sharpness, composition, impact, and originality. Pitfalls to avoid in applying these criteria are discussed in the steps that follow.

To reach the following step, click on "next step" button below. To return to the first page, click on "intro".

## 2) *Be aware of the range of quality in the photos to be judged BEFORE you start*



In other words, insist on previewing all photographs (or at least a subset) before judging to get an idea of the quality of material submitted. This enables you to successfully tailor the range of your scoring to the actual range of quality. This does not mean that you change your criteria for scoring, only the strictness of their application.

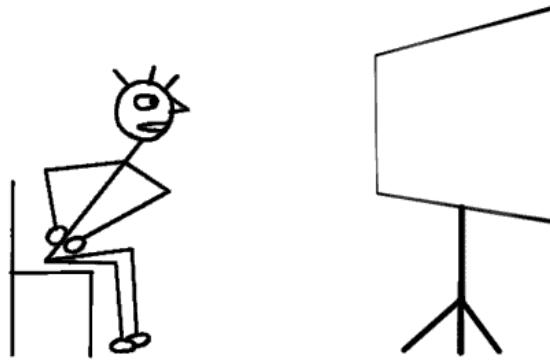
Lack of any preview can lead to messy, unfortunate situations, especially with numerical scores. If you do start judging blind, everything will depend on the first several slide/prints. You may award them 7's and 8's (out of 10) thinking they are representative of the group. But if they are worse than most of the photos that follow, you will then be stuck at the high end giving out strings of 9's and 10's when the better photos appear. The reverse can happen if the first photos are among the best in the group, the result being that you are eventually "trapped" at the bottom giving out 4's and 5's.

## 3) *Clear your mind of subject matter prejudice*



This is most important for photographic categories (such as General or Pictorial) where many different subjects are judged together. If you don't like sailboats, abstract patterns, or sunsets (heaven forbid!), remember that meaningful images can still be made with these subjects, and that you are a "photo judge" not a "subject judge". The idea here is to avoid letting the likes and dislikes in your personal world color your objective judgment of someone else's artistic vision. With this mental attitude, your photojudging may even allow you to better appreciate the visual diversity of our outside world!

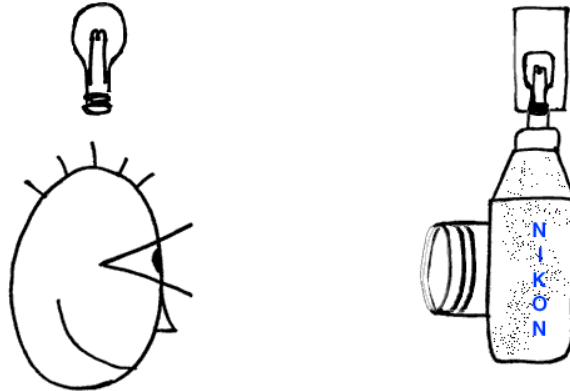
#### ***4) Avoid "snap" judging caused by initial sensory overload***



Over the first 5 seconds of viewing, there are some photos that assault the eyes with beautiful bold colors, spectacular vistas, or captivating close-up views. The mind wants to say "WOW!!" and the mouth wants to blurt out "DEFINITELY A 10!" (or whatever maximum your scoring scheme allows).

**Try to resist this urge and regain mental composure!** Photos of this sort are sometimes like a mediocre wine - they engage the palette but have no meaningful aftertaste. A great photograph should linger in the mind and soul, and needs more than just technical flashiness or pretty scenery to do so. Previewing photos helps one adjust to sensory overload, but I still recommend spending at least 10 seconds examining and commenting on a given image before rendering a numerical verdict!

**5) Avoid judging that favors "technical proficiency" over "creativity"**



*CREATIVITY*

*TECHNICAL PROFICIENCY*

In my mind, judging should revolve around 2 major considerations - what the photographer is trying to say and how well this is portrayed in the photograph. The first consideration can be called **creativity**, the second, **technical proficiency** - exposure, focus, etc.

However, in most judging, technical proficiency looms large, while creativity tends to take a back seat. Ideally, they should figure more-or-less equally. Creativity is hard to quantify and judging it can be difficult, but it is the soul of photography. In addition to original subject matter, it can include new ways of approaching everyday subjects. And the photo that takes a fresh look at our world, either at the previously unseen or at the familiar from a new angle, merits a higher score for just these reasons.

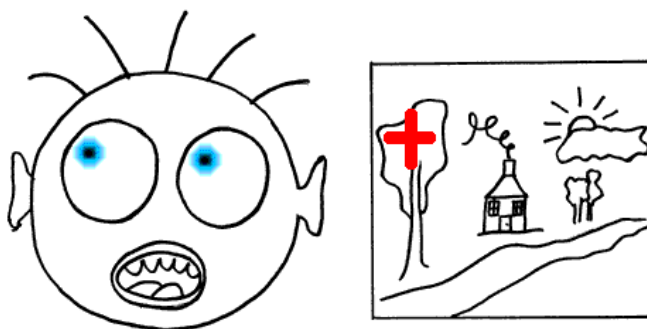
I remember a visiting judge who always announced that he would not give any photo more than a 7 (out of 10) if it did not show creativity. He gave one of my entries "a very competent 7", but it was the one "8" I got from him that makes me especially proud!

**6) Consider "pluses" as well as "minuses" in commenting and scoring**



In the process of objectively judging photos, one should mentally tally up the **pluses** as well as **minuses** of a given image. This approach is also the friendliest way to comment on the entries. In particular, comments on what the photographer did right cushions the impact if you have to follow up with negative comments and a low score!

**7) Avoid overadherence to one arbitrary "rule of composition" or "theory of seeing"**



***ANALYSIS OF "EYE MOVEMENTS" CAN BE OVERDONE IN PHOTOJUDGING!***

It may be that one's background has included exposure to an all-encompassing theory of how "good" visual art should look and/or how one should "look" at visual art. Or one may come to believe that a given rule of composition, say the rule of thirds, is far more important aesthetically than anything else in an image. Any judge who zealously applies such a simplistic perspective will be immediately recognizable. Suddenly, everything seems to revolve around 1 or 2 arbitrary specifics - leading lines, some obscure rule of composition, color combinations, etc., and everything else is a minor consideration. Needless to say, such an approach does not come off as good judging to the "uninitiated" audience.

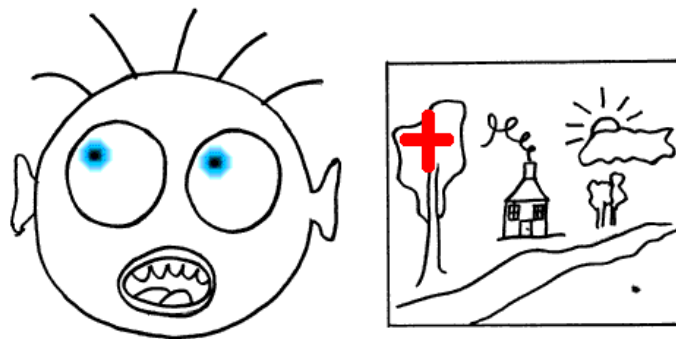
One major example I've encountered in this category are judges who are **preoccupied** with analyzing eye movements. With every photo, they appear to go into a trance and let the image take control of their eyes. Every entry is evaluated in terms of "...where my eyes started..." and "...where they

ended up." Hence, I call them "lazy eye" judges.

Now, I agree that certain photographic elements such as a person's face will attract the eye and therefore can be used to improve the composition of the scene. But consider what happens when you see a really beautiful photo. You will probably be on the edge of your seat, eagerly and **willfully** moving your eyes over **every** part of that image before awarding it a "10". In other words, analysis of eye movements has its place in photojudging, but it's best not to overdo it.

And in general, it is best to realize that photographic quality can be influenced by **many** different aesthetic elements, all of which deserve consideration in photojudging.

### ***8) Avoid obsession with minor imperfections***



The "obsessive" judge has **<very>** different eye movements from the "lazy eye" judge in step 7. This judge appears to scan an image methodically, like the cathode ray tube in a TV. He or she is searching for any hot spot, dust particle or other tiny irregularity that might " hopelessly mar" the photo. Suddenly that little bright spot in the lower right becomes the center of attention, while an otherwise great main subject gets ignored. Needless to say, the final score is obsessively lower as a result. What usually strikes me with this approach is that if the judge hadn't pointed out such imperfections, I (and many others in the audience) would never have noticed them! Or, at least, they wouldn't be such a nagging distraction.

The moral here is: **A minor imperfection should not mean a major reduction in your final score**

### ***9) Be careful with photos that evoke a strong emotional response***



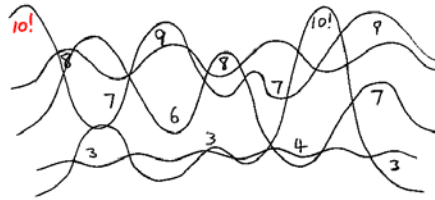
Every once in a while you may be hit with a photo that summons up strong

emotions. Admittedly, judging such an image in the context of all the others may not be an easy task. Yet, I do believe that an emotional response can be a part of the photographic experience, and may be exactly what the photographer intended. So, let your feelings respond to the image and be a factor in your overall evaluation of the scene.

However, there are 2 issues to consider. First, ask yourself whether your emotional response is representative of the typical observer or a uniquely personal reaction. Photographs producing the latter might include scenes that evoke personal tragedies in your life or faces that strongly resemble loved ones. Such overtly personal reactions on your part can potentially bias your score, and controlling them can be a tough task. It is a judgment call - but then, you are the judge!

Second, **images that elicit anger, shock, grief, melancholy, frustration, etc., should not be scored less than images yielding good emotions, if they are of otherwise similar photographic quality!** Many well known, great photographs, such as photojournalism shots of wartime scenes, fall into the "bad emotions" category. In the end, good or bad, emotions are emotions, and your task is not to judge the "happiness level" of the emotions produced but how well the photographer succeeds in bringing them forth from the viewer.

## 10) Stick consistently to your guidelines for judging throughout the ENTIRE judging process



Only by being consistent in your judging can you be fair to all those being judged. To do this, you must keep your aesthetic guidelines in mind for every picture you review from start to finish. This is easier said than done, especially in competitions with large numbers of entries. As your senses are engaged with a seemingly endless succession of possibly very different photos, your criteria or their strictness of application may gradually drift, such that what got a 7 (out of 10) at the beginning is getting a 5 or a 9 at the end.

So don't let those ethereal clouds on that mountaintop in entry #38 distract you! **Thoroughly** evaluate the picture for exposure, composition, etc., the **same** way you (hopefully) have judged all previous photos in the competition.