

Judging Method - What the Judge Thinks

What goes through a judge's mind when critically assessing a photographic image?

A photographic judge will assess an image based on three essential criteria:

1. The **message** and **meaning** the image conveys,
2. the **content** of the image, and
3. how well the **medium** has been handled.

Message, content and medium are inter-related, broad descriptors that hide a lot of detail.

Assessment of **message** measures the success the photographer has achieved in **visual communication** and is the most important part of a judge's critique. Message and meaning relates to the response evoked in the viewer. It goes beyond the initial impact, or "WOW" factor, which may be merely graphical. It may include the viewer's emotional response (e.g. excitement, sadness, intrigue, perplexity, anger, and happiness, wonder); how well the image transmits an idea or thought, makes a statement or tells a story. Highly ranked images tend to be those that have used creativity and imagination to produce a strong message.

In the mind of the judge, message carries more weight than content and medium combined when analysing an image.

The judge's ability to assess the *message* of an image is a function of his/her experience in art appreciation in general, art photography in particular and those world experiences that shape his/her tastes. Most judges are seasoned photographers with a special interest in the art and have studied countless photographs and photographers (both iconic and contemporary), are aware of the history of photography and have an appreciation of where photography sits in the broader world of visual art. While a judge can identify the genre of an image, its aesthetic interpretation will depend largely on how well the image communicates the photographer's intention.

Since each judge necessarily has a unique life experience, each may interpret the message of an image in a different way. This may or may not be the message the photographer intended, but the judge has no way of knowing exactly what was in the mind of the photographer during the creation of the image. The judge will identify the message he/she receives from an image, but this can only be achieved from what is in the image itself. Good images invariably convey a strong message.

Successful visual communication will strongly influence the score awarded to an image.

Content involves a host of factors including but not limited to the following elements: the choice and control of lighting; framing and composition (what is included and excluded in the frame and how the components relate to the centre of interest); background (the environment and its relationship to the subject); the choice of where to set the focus (global or selective focus, creative sharpening and depth of field); juxtaposition of tone and/or colour; the exploitation of perspective; the intimation of movement; critical timing (the "decisive moment"); time of day; size, shape, form and proportion; and the use of texture or pattern.

Composition and the handling of light, in particular, can be critical to the success of any competition or exhibition image.

Mastery of medium concerns the skills and knowledge required for capture, post-processing and presentation of an image, whether it be for projection or for printing. This aspect of judging looks at the exposure/density of output; choice of tonal range; avoidance of clipping, white balance, colour casts and unwanted evidence of post-production; and correct output sharpening. It also evaluates the photographer's choice of colour rendition (colour palette, monochrome, split tone and the effective use of saturation, clarity and vibrance) and paper, as well as the quality of printing, matting and mounting. When these skills are mastered and flaws are eliminated, the other two criteria will be more effectively expressed.

The primary aim of mastering medium is to eliminate technical flaws that may otherwise compromise content and message.

The Language of Judging

In addition to these criteria, the judge may refer to a number of “elements” when explaining the assessment of an image. These often include: colour, balance, contrast, composition, centre of interest, emphasis, framing and lighting. Addressing these and other elements allows the judge to explain the perceived strengths or weaknesses in message, content and medium that contribute to the decision about where in the scale of excellence the image lies, using context-specific and exact words and phrases. It is recommended that competitors and exhibitors become familiar with the language of these elements that are used by judges.

Judging is a holistic exercise

It is important to note that judges assess images holistically rather than by evaluation of message, content and medium as separate criteria. The elements within the criteria are used as tools to help the judge explain the overall rating applied to an image.

Note that errors (flaws, distractions) in content and medium can significantly degrade the value of an image. Hence, even an image with an otherwise strong message will be downgraded by one or more levels if flaws are detected that impinge upon the successful communication of the message.



WAPJA Exhibition Scoring System

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Level	Description
<p>Level 8 Gold distinction</p>	<p>All judging criteria are strong. Combined elements have produced a supreme example of art photography. The image displays the highest level of excellence in art photography.</p>
<p>Level 7 Gold</p>	<p>Most judging criteria are expertly handled. A very strong image displaying a high level of excellence in art photography. Technical standard is very high.</p>
<p>Level 6 Silver</p>	<p>Some elements are very good and the technical standard is high. A strong image with good evidence for classification as art photography. Successful visual communication has been achieved.</p>
<p>Level 5 Bronze</p>	<p>Sound image with at least one strong element. Approaches art photography - message present but not strong. Any flaws are minor or compensated by other successful elements. Evidence of intent to combine skill and artistry.</p>
<p>Level 4</p>	<p>Possibly no flaws but no significant strengths. Content and medium may be acceptable but message is not clear or strong. Centre of interest usually obvious. Usually technically good - often called a record shot.</p>
<p>Level 3</p>	<p>Some attempt has been made to control content and medium. Needs more effort to convey message and meaning. Centre of interest may not be clear. Flaws and/or distractions may be evident.</p>
<p>Level 2</p>	<p>Quality of content and medium is not adequate. Improvement required in the craft of photography. Little attempt at deliberate composition or light handling. Flaws and distractions may be present. Snapshot quality</p>
<p>Level 1</p>	<p>Little evidence of good camera skills An unacceptable image for a photographic exhibition No indication of the centre of interest. Flaws and distractions usually present.</p>
<p><i>Note: the presence of flaws or distractions will devalue any image, even those</i></p>	
<p><i>with a strong message</i></p>	

WAPJA Judging Criteria and Elements

Message (Visual communication)

Evokes feelings, emotion, mood. Conveys a statement or story.

Transmits an idea or thought.

Content

Lighting, framing, composition, background, focus, juxtaposition of tone and/or colours.

Exploitation of perspective. Intimation of movement. Critical timing.

Time of day. Size, shape, form and proportion.

Use of texture or pattern.

Medium (technical skill or craft)

Appropriate exposure/density of output.

Contrast - tones - clipping? Colour cast? Image sharpness.

Evidence of retouching. Quality of post-production.

Appropriate choice of colour rendition (mono, split-tone, saturation, vibrance, chroma).

Presentation - choice of paper, matting, mounting.