

KPAC – Critique Night- A Process worth considering

How to Properly Critique a Photograph

Photographers love to critique. Or is it criticize? Or comment? Complain? Postulate? Pontificate? We seem to witness quite the gamut of behavior in response to one simple request: "CC, please."

It's easy to become annoyed or even disillusioned by the online critique community. Much like the rest of the Internet, the relative anonymity seems to be the great enabler of arrogance and vitriol.

However, if you can see past the noise, there are a lot of dedicated and knowledgeable photographers who will kindly lend you their expertise. Following these tips can help you be a better critic yourself.

1. Sometimes, Artistic Vision Exceeds Technical Ability

There are some really original creative thinkers out there who might not yet have the tools to achieve their creative vision. It's important to always critique the artistic aspects of a photograph separately from the technical.

Someone's ability to properly expose a shot is not indicative of their creative vision or vice versa. Don't dismiss one by virtue of the other.

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3. A Critique Is Not an Opinion

Art is full of subjective quantities. It's also full of objective quantities. Focus on the latter. There's nothing wrong with expressing a personal preference, so long as it's framed as a preference and not a critique.

Critiques should focus on factually based characteristics. If someone chose to color tone a photograph a certain way, you can certainly express your preference for another color palette, but you can't argue the superiority of one or another.

If someone presents a blurry shot, there are objective, measurable quantities such as shutter speed, aperture, and ISO that can be invoked to discuss why the shot was blurry and how it can be remedied.

4. Have a Purpose

Blanket criticism without justification or suggestions for improvement is extremely off-putting (see tip 10). If you truly want to help someone improve, don't just tell them what's wrong, tell them how to improve it.

5. Speak to Your Audience

You wouldn't put a new student driver in a race car, would you? If someone is new to photography, don't lecture them on frequency separation or dodging and burning. Help them with the fundamentals that have to be in place before they can even begin to think about more advanced ideas. Talking over their head will only discourage a budding photographer.

6. It's Not About You

I often see critiques that seem to be more interested in demonstrating how much the critic knows than in helping the person who asked for it, or even as a way to sneakily advertise the critic's own work. Doing this helps no one involved and does little to endear you to your colleagues. Critiques are no place for ulterior motives.

7. Remember the Context

Don't just look at the photograph, think about the environment in which it was taken. Sometimes, there are variables we simply cannot control (i.e. lighting at an event that doesn't allow flash).

Critique the photographer on how well they worked within the environment they were given; however, if they had some control over the environment, such as introducing their own lighting, you should absolutely address this.

Similarly, try to place the current critique in the context of the photographer's past work. Have you seen their work before? Comment on how they've improved or how their style has evolved over time.

It can be very hard to see how your work has improved or changed over time, simply because you're too close to it. Having an outside perspective is invaluable.

8. Be Polite

I'm generally a fan of being considerate of others all the time, but I think it's particularly important in this context. If someone has shown the requisite bravery to put their work and creative mind in front of you, reciprocate that with respect for their courage. There should be no reason a photographer walks away from a critique with lower self-esteem, even if that critique was mostly negative.

Be sensitive to how you say things and remember that we all experience the words of others differently. A little kindness can go a long way.

9. Stop, Look, Understand, Critique

So many critiques I've read were very clearly knee-jerk reactions and as such, showed a superficial understanding of the photograph and the processes involved in its making.

People often spend 5 seconds looking at an image and 10 minutes writing a critique, when really, these numbers should be much closer to one another. Look at an image, think about it, then look again. You'll see and understand things that simply won't be evident upon a cursory examination.

10. Start a Dialogue

Critiques are great opportunities to start conversations. These conversations can help you understand the photographer's intentions, further your own knowledge, or simply make a friend.

After all, when we ask for or give a critique, we are drawing on the community, so why not use that community to its fullest?

11. Too Positive? Too Negative? Ignore it.

It's rare that a photograph is so mind-blowingly spectacular or so jaw-droppingly bad that it truly deserves an unequivocally positive or negative critique. And when I say "rare," I mean "exceedingly unusual."

You should have a good general sense of the quality of execution of a photograph; if someone's critique is rather out of sync with your intuition, it's probably because they're biased. Of course, we're mostly used to the exceeding viciousness on the Internet; don't let the keyboard warriors of the world undermine your desire to learn and grow. Unfortunately, some people feel a sense of superiority by finding ways to put down others. Don't let this common schoolyard behavior demoralize you.

On the other hand, don't be taken by unfettered praise; it's certainly nice to be lavished in, but it does little for the purpose of growth.

Critique is a strange beast. Given properly, it can facilitate both technical and artistic growth, but given improperly, it can derail development, damage self-esteem, and undermine the strong sense of community that makes photography such a group pursuit.

Taking time to understand a photograph from all angles: technical, artistic, motivational, contextual, environmental, etc. can facilitate a full and deep critique, one that truly addresses an image in a way that is beneficial to both the critic and the requestor.

You might find that practicing articulating full critiques also helps you to examine your own images in an increasingly beneficial manner.