

Are You Ready to Compete?

Newcomers to camera clubs generally learn about competition by trial and error. Sometimes this can be pretty disheartening, so here is some advice to avoid the pitfalls and help you earn good scores.

What makes a competition image? A photograph may be fine as part of a slideshow or in an exhibit, but it may not do well in a competition. That's because in competition it must capture the judge's attention in only a few seconds. It will if it has impact. It also should have a center of interest, and everything in the photograph should emphasize that center of interest and not detract from it. And it must have technical excellence.

BE SURE YOUR PHOTOGRAPHS ARE TECHNICALLY CORRECT

Pictures that are underexposed, overexposed, blurry, or out of focus will be severely downgraded by most judges. Don't enter them in competition.

LOOK FOR UNIQUE WAYS TO EMPHASIZE YOUR SUBJECT

The difference between a "record" shot and an award winner is generally the result of a little extra thought or effort on the part of the photographer. : Move in closer, shoot from a high angle, kneel or lie down and shoot from a low angle, move to another spot, try a lens of a different focal length, try vertical as well as horizontal orientations. Take a lot of pictures so you can end up with one or two really great ones.

A CENTER OF INTEREST

The judge may downgrade a photograph that does not have a center of interest. Something must be dominant so his attention is drawn to it.

AVOID MERGERS

Make sure there is contrast between your subject and the background. You want the judge to see what you want him to see.

STRAIGHTEN LINES

Be sure the horizon line is straight. If your camera wasn't absolutely level, straighten the photograph in your image-editing program. Other vertical and horizontal lines should be straight. If you can't straighten the sides of a building, go up close and really exaggerate the convergence.

CONSIDER THE ORIENTATION

Hold the camera or crop the image so that the frame orientation fits the subject. Generally, tall, vertical subjects look best when the framing is vertical, and horizontal subjects fit well in a horizontal frame.

FILL THE FRAME

Move in close or try a longer focal length lens to make the subject as large as possible.

Crop out large areas of blank sky or large, empty foregrounds.

FLIP THE IMAGE

Many times a picture can be improved by reversing it in your image-editing program, so that the leading lines or action moves from left to right.

USE IMAGE-EDITING TOOLS JUDICIOUSLY

Use your editing program to enhance your image, but don't overdo it. The enhancement should not be obvious. But the sky's the limit in an "Open Mind" competition.

ACQUAINT YOURSELF WITH COMPOSITION PRINCIPLES

Read our article on [composition](#) for guidelines for composing compelling images. Some judges regard these guidelines as rules carved in stone. Although the so-called rules can often be broken, in a competition, it's best to play it safe and adhere to the guidelines and not do such things as placing the subject in the center of the frame.

BE AWARE THAT EVALUATING A PHOTOGRAPH CAN BE SUBJECTIVE

Judges try to be objective, but "beauty is in the eye of the beholder." Don't be discouraged if a judge gives you a low grade because he hates cats or is tired of seeing flower pictures. Another judge might give you a high score for the same photograph.

PRESENTATION

Digital images: If a picture has a dark or black background, add a thin light-colored border so it doesn't merge with the surrounding screen.

Try to submit your images well in advance of the deadline, just in case the hosting website is down.

Prints: Make sure they are securely mounted to the mount board and that your ID label is in the upper left corner on the back. Do not include your signature on the front.

PHOTOGRAPHS MUST BE TECHNICALLY CORRECT

Oh, we said that before, but it's worth repeating: Pictures that are underexposed, overexposed, blurry, or out of focus should not be entered in a competition.

It's nice to get a high score and be rewarded with applause. But the main objective of a competition is to provide a learning experience for everyone. Pay attention to the judge's critiques and observe what other members have created, and you will find your photography will get better and better. Good luck and have fun!