

The Art of Image Critique

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The NPN image critique galleries offer a dynamic means of having your nature images viewed and commented on by other nature photographers. Used effectively, this process can be a powerful educational tool, allowing the determined photographer to quickly and effectively improve their work in a relatively short period of time. The purpose of this article is to provide some guidance on how best to utilize this unique learning opportunity.

So what exactly is a critique? The Random House College Dictionary offers the following definition -

1. An article or essay criticizing a literary, architectural, or some other work; review.
2. a criticism or critical comment on some problem, subject, etc.

The Poster's Responsibility

From the definition above, it's obvious that an image posted in a NPN image critique gallery becomes the subject of critical evaluation and review. By understanding that a critique is based on the viewer's personal opinion, posting an image for critique amounts to nothing more than taking a poll of everyone's opinion. Most assuredly, some will find the image pleasing "as is" while others will object to certain technical or aesthetic aspects of the image.

One of the worst mistakes that can be made by the person posting an image is to *debate a critique*. After all, the viewer offering the critique has taken the time *at the poster's request* to share their thoughts on what pleases or displeases them about the image, and to offer their advice on what they believe can be done to improve it. The nature of the process almost guarantees that there will be comments made about the image that the poster (or other viewers) will whole-heartedly disagree with. But to debate the validity of a specific critique is ludicrous; if the person who posts the image is not prepared to accept the results (both good and bad) of the "poll," they should not post it in the first place! However, it is appropriate to ask a viewer to clarify his or her comments if those comments are not entirely clear, providing the viewer is asked for their additional time and effort in a congenial, non-argumentative manner. In all cases, critique should not be taken personally, but rather at face value, nor should the critique of a photographic image be misconstrued as an indictment of one's lack of ability.

When an image is posted for critique, the person who posts it should be prepared to take all comments, both good and bad, and to do so in a respectful and appreciative manner.

Writing an Effective Critique

While the person who posts the image bears the brunt of the responsibility for extracting the "pearls of photographic wisdom" from this learning opportunity, it is the person writing the critique who has volunteered their time, energy and point-of-view, and has done so (indirectly, at least) at the request of the person posting the image. On top of this, writing a useful critique that gets to the point without being offensive is truly an art unto itself.

The goal of any image critique is to share with the person who posted the image the viewer's impressions of it, and any useful advice that can be offered in regards to improving the image. Since the persons writing and reading the critique are not privy to the facial expressions, gestures and voice inflections of a face-to-face conversation, great care must be taken to avoid misunderstanding. Photography is very much a personal endeavor, and poorly written comments can be easily misconstrued as an assessment of the photographer's ability (or lack thereof), as opposed to an honest evaluation of the specific image. With this in mind, here are some suggestions on writing an effective critique -

- Start off by taking some time to truly *study* the image and form an opinion of what appeals to you about the image, both technically and aesthetically. Sometimes coming back to study the image again a short time later is helpful.
- After forming an overall impression of the image, begin to identify the specific *technical qualities* of the image (lighting, color, contrast, composition, depth-of-field, background, etc.) that appeal or don't appeal to you. In just about any image, you can find both. Do the same with the *aesthetic qualities* of the image by describing any emotional response the image imparts. It's

not uncommon to find images that are technically deficient, but yet impart a strong emotional response from the viewer, and *visa versa*. Feedback to the photographer on both the technical and aesthetic aspects of an image is useful.

- Search for the words and phrases that most effectively convey your thoughts about these specific qualities.
- Begin the written critique with what you *like* about the image. It is a mistaken belief that a photo critique should only point out what is wrong. In fact, as much can be gained by pointing out what it is that appeals to the viewer.
- Out of the image qualities that you feel need improvement, pick those qualities that you can most effectively communicate *why* you think they need improvement, and *how* an improvement of those qualities would help improve the image.
- Whenever possible, offer suggestions based on first-hand experience on how to improve those image qualities that you found lacking.

Other Considerations

For everyone involved in this creative/educational process, here are a few more points to keep in mind -

- For those posting an image, it's helpful state what your intended goal or purpose was for taking the image (environmental portrait, artistic rendering of subject, documentation, etc.). It's also helpful if you briefly describe what it is that *you* like and/or dislike about the image. By providing this information up front, it gives those who are writing the critiques some indication of any specific feedback you're looking for. In essence, writing your own "mini-critique" (just a few lines) as part of the original post gets the thread off on the right foot.
- Many times, the technical quality of the images posted in the NPN galleries is so high that some feel as though they have nothing constructive to offer. In this case, simply commenting on the aesthetic qualities and/or the image's emotional impact makes for a worthy response.
- As a viewer offering your own critique, *do not* argue the validity of another viewer's comments (see the second paragraph under "The Poster's Responsibility" above)! Instead, offer your own point-of-view on the issue in an objective manner.
- While much has been made of the "wow" responses that offer nothing more than superlatives, there is no reason not to post such comments! Whether it's a photographic image, a new lens or a gorgeous sunset, sometimes "wow" is all that comes to mind! A little ego stroking is not such a bad thing either...
- Learning to write an effective critique is a terrific way to learn as well. Study those critiques that you feel are most effective, and use them as an example to follow when writing your own. Additionally, in a community-like atmosphere such as the NPN forums, those who post critiques are more likely to receive them on their own images.
- Simply studying the images on display, and reading the comments posted is an incredible learning experience in itself.

By following these simple guidelines and avoiding some of the common mistakes, image critique can be an effective learning tool for all involved. If conducted with care, objectivity and sensibility, it is a rewarding experience that is unmatched by any other organized learning opportunity in the world of nature photography.

See you in the NPN image critique galleries!

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