

Photo Critiquing Group Activity

Goals of Photo Critiquing

- 1. Develop Visual Skills** – noticing composition, lighting, color and storytelling.
- 2. Learn Constructive Feedback**-how to point out strengths and weaknesses respectfully.
- 3. Build a shared vocabulary**-of photographic elements and techniques.
- 4. Understand intention vs. interpretation**-what the photographer meant vs. what the viewer perceives.

Round 1

“First Impressions”

Purpose: Build intuition and confidence in sharing reactions

We will display a photo for 5-10 seconds.

Directions: Each person should write down **one word** or a **short phrase** describing your first impression.





The **first impression** is an important part of the critique process because it captures the immediate, genuine emotional impact and communication of the image, to the person looking at it. However, this should not be the only factor considered. The image should be critiqued thoroughly to include technical and artistic elements.

Why is the “First Impression” so important?

- 1. Reflects Audience Reception:** Most viewers form an immediate opinion and move on. The first impression provide a realistic gauge on how effective the photo communicates its story or emotion to the viewer.
- 2. Captures Emotional Impact:** The primary goal of photography is to evoke emotion. The immediate emotional reaction shows that the photograph connects with the viewer and is a key to success.
- 3. Identifies Immediate Strengths/Weaknesses:** A strong initial reaction either positive or negative, can highlight obvious issues or success that stand out right away, such as distracting elements or a compelling subject.

Why the “First Impression” is NOT the only factor.

1. **Personal Bias:** An initial impression is heavily influenced by the viewer’s personal experiences, tastes and background, which are **not** universal. A critique based only on a first impression will not be helpful to the photographer’s growth.
2. **Hides Technical/Artistic Touches:** Evaluation based only on a first impression may prevent the critic from noticing the artistic or technical aspects such as use of light, composition or post processing choices, that become more apparent with a more careful observation.
3. **Can Be Misleading:** A strong positive emotional reaction may cause the viewer to overlook technical or compositional shortcomings.

Round 2

“Spot the Strengths”

Purpose: Encourage positive critique habits.

Directions: As a group, pretend the photographer is sitting at your table. Make a list of elements that work really well in the image (composition, emotion, timing etc.) and discuss.





Strong elements in photography, like composition (lines, shapes, balance), light, color, texture and subject focus, are crucial because they guide the viewers eye, convey emotion, create depth, add interest and clarify the photographer's message.

Strong elements can transform the image from a snapshot to powerful, impactful image that tells a story and evokes a feeling.

Key Strong Elements and Their Importance

Composition:

Guides the Eye – Directs viewer through the frame, creates flow.

Adds Depth-Foreground, midground and background elements create a three dimensional feel.

Creates Harmony/Tension-Balance visual weight, using symmetry, leading lines or rules of thirds.

Light:

Shapes Subject-Highlights form and texture, creating mood (soft light) or drama (harsh light)

Draws Attention-Guides focus to important areas

Provides Focus-Clearly communicates what the photo is about.

Captures a Moment-Freezes action, emotion or a unique interaction.

Color:

Sets Mood-Evokes feelings (calm blues) or demands attention (vibrant orange)

Creates Impact-Complimentary colors make images “hum” with energy.

Texture:

Adds Dimension-Roughness or smoothness adds feeling and realism.

Increases Interest-Draws attention to details.

Contrast: (Light/Dark)

Adds Drama-High contrast can be powerful; balance contrast prevents blandness.

Separates Subjects-Helps the subject stand out.

Round 3

“The 3-Stage Critique”

Purpose: To present your observations in an organized manner.

Directions:

1. Describe: What do you literally see? (Objects, colors, light direction etc.)
2. Analyze: How are the elements arranged? (Rule of thirds, leading lines, framing, contrast)
3. Interpret: What mood, story or message do you get?





1. Describing what you see:

Forces you to slow down and notice the visual facts before jumping to opinions. This step helps you identify:

- The subject and objects in the frame
- Colors, lighting, time of day, and other observable details

Why it matters:

You can't critique what you haven't truly looked at. Description builds the foundation for everything else.

2. Analyze:

Analysis is how the photograph is put together and the photographer's choices—composition, exposure, focus, depth of field, color, and visual flow. It answers questions like:

- Where does your eye go first?
- Is the composition balanced?
- Are technical choices helping or hurting the image?

Why it matters:

This step reveals how the image works. It connects the visual facts to the craft behind them.

3. Interpretation:

Interpretation explores the message, mood, or story the photographer intended. Photographs aren't neutral—they're constructed to communicate something. Interpretation looks at:

- The emotions the image evokes
- The story or idea being suggested
- What the photographer wants the viewer to understand

Putting it all together

When you describe, analyze, and interpret, you're doing more than judging a picture—you're uncovering:

- What the photographer did
- How they did it
- Why it matters

This process makes you a stronger critic and a better photographer, because you start to see the intentional decisions behind every image and it deepens your understanding of a photograph. Without them, critique is just opinion; with them, you can clearly explain why an image succeeds or fails and what it conveys.