

# What The Judges Look For

## Six Strategies for Success in Photo Competitions

by Kas Stone



### ***The Competition Environment***

Photo judging is **not** objective; there is no right/wrong image or mathematically correct score. Scoring is based partly on (semi-objective) technical elements, partly on (largely-subjective) artistic and emotional elements, and partly on the judges' experience and personal responses to an image. Scores can also be influenced by the competition environment – the necessary wow-factor in fast-paced, high-pressure live judging vs more considerate online judging with opportunity for comments. A good judge has made, viewed and critiqued thousands of images and is motivated by a desire to teach and encourage other photographers – to be artistically appreciative rather than photographically critical. A successful *competitor* recognizes that other factors besides image quality can influence scoring, and thinks strategically when preparing images for competition. A successful *photographer* uses competitions as means to learn, sharpen skills and stretch horizons. Ultimately a judge's score is only an (educated) opinion; the only thing that really matters is whether *you* are happy with your image and believe you have done your best to communicate your intended message to potential viewers.

### **#1 – Follow Competition Rules**

**Competition category:** does your image fit?

**Category restrictions:** permissible image content (image manipulation? human elements? expansiveness of scene?)

**Category traditions:**

Nature – highlight in eyes, leave space in front, closeup birds & animals usually do best

Landscapes – expansive scenery, sharp front to back

Architecture – vertical lines are vertical, portrait of a building's character

**Submission Instructions:** image size, format, method of submission, deadline

**Read the BPS Competition Definitions:** [www.bridgewaterphotoclub.ca](http://www.bridgewaterphotoclub.ca) under Documents tab

## #2 – Technical Excellence

**Focus:** appropriate Depth of Field (maximum, selected, minimal); suitable placement of Point of Focus; avoid camera shake; deliberate motion blur must be convincing; Is everything sharp that should be sharp?

**Exposure:** solid understanding of the exposure variables (ISO, aperture, shutter speed, light conditions); overall tonality and dynamic range appropriate for subject/scene (high-key, low-key, high-contrast, HDR); important details visible (not lost in shadows or blown-out highlights).

**Distractions:** avoid during capture (re-compose, change DOF) or remove during post-processing; sensor dust spots, litter, wires, twigs, hotspots, cluttered backgrounds, intruding elements, tilted horizon, colour cast, digital artifacts (chromatic aberration, colour banding, lens flare, over-sharpening halos/crunchiness), distracting borders, random special effects.

## #3 – Strong Visual Design

**Define the Picture Space:** size, shape and orientation → rectangle, square, panorama, H vs V (caution: be aware of limited 'real estate' for projected vertical images).

**Effective Organization of Visual Elements:** main subject and supporting elements positioned to create tension & balance, three-dimensional illusion; leading lines to direct attention; natural frames to keep eye inside; appropriate use of shape, pattern (repeated shape), rhythm (dynamic pattern), colour, texture, negative space.

## #4 – Communicate & Evoke

**Communicate Meaning and Purpose:** make viewer interested in the subject/scene; tell a visual story; have subject doing something; create interaction between visual elements; ask yourself What am I looking at, Why am I making this picture, What is this picture About? (be sure the answers are clear to potential viewers).

**Evoke Emotion:** make viewer *feel* something (curious, amused, angry, disturbed, envious); Nature/Portrait/Photojournalism images create **empathy** with the subject; Landscape/Travel images invite viewer into the image ("picture yourself here"); Abstract/Impressionistic images create aesthetic pleasure with lines, shapes, colour, texture, pattern, etc.

**Strive for Originality:** present a unique point of view; offer an unusual portrayal of a familiar subject; be cautious about over-photographed subjects; avoid cliché treatments and overused/badly-executed special effects filters (HDR, poster edges, oil paint); imagine what other competitors will do, then do something different; use striking visual elements to create strong initial impact → the WOW factor.

## #5 – Keep It Simple

**Photography is the Art of Elimination:** identify and try to capture the *essence* of the scene; create an image that is simple and uncluttered, but *not* simplistic and boring; don't try to say everything in one picture.

**At the Scene:** re-compose, zoom in, walk closer, use shallower Depth of Field.

**During Post-Processing:** crop or clone to remove unnecessary elements.

**Tip:** the biggest difference between beginners and experienced photographers is the amount of 'stuff' in their pictures.

## #6 – Observe, Listen, Practice... and Learn

**View Excellent Images:** winners from BPS previous years, other camera clubs, CAPA national competitions, International salons, online/magazine competitions; other favourite photographers & painters; participate in image evaluation groups; learn to evaluate your own images objectively, constructively and generously; concentrate on making notes for improving your next shoot.

**Links to Photographers & Groups:** browse their galleries for inspiration

**Bridgewater Photo Club:** <https://bridgewaterphotographicsociety.wordpress.com/honor-awards>

**Photo Guild of Nova Scotia:** [www.photoguild.ns.ca/galleries](http://www.photoguild.ns.ca/galleries)

**CAPA:** <http://capacanada.ca/galleries/competitions>

**Toronto Focal Forum:** [www.focalforum.ca/gallery](http://www.focalforum.ca/gallery)

**Toronto Digital Photo Club:** <http://tdpc.ca/galleries>

**Richmond Hill Camera Club:** [www.rhcameraclub.ca/general/#](http://www.rhcameraclub.ca/general/#)

**Etobicoke Camera Club:** <http://linux.etobicokecameraclub.org/wordpress/gallery>

**Latow Photographers Guild:** <http://latow.com>

**Don Mills Camera Club:** [www.donmillscameraclub.org/04\\_gallery/gallery.htm](http://www.donmillscameraclub.org/04_gallery/gallery.htm)

**Hamilton Camera Club:** <http://hamiltoncameraclub.com/wordpress/gallery>

**Freeman Patterson:** [www.freemanpatterson.com/giclee\\_prints.htm](http://www.freemanpatterson.com/giclee_prints.htm)

**Katherine Keates:** [www.katherinekeatesphotography.com/collections](http://www.katherinekeatesphotography.com/collections)

**Avi Cohen:** [www.avicohenphotography.com/collections](http://www.avicohenphotography.com/collections)

**Barbara Bender:** <http://barbarabenderphoto.photium.com/portfolio229705.html>

**Larry Monczka & Kathleen Pickard:** [www.raraavisphotos.com](http://www.raraavisphotos.com)

**Guy Tal:** <http://guytal.com/gtp/gallery/index.jsp>

**Ian Plant:** <http://ianplant.photoshelter.com/#!/index>

## What BPS Scores Mean

**2 - Needs Improvement:** image not in category, significant technical and/or artistic flaws.

**3 - Average:** technically/artistically competent, minor flaws.

**4 - Very Good:** above-average, no obvious technical/artistic flaws.

**5 - Excellent:** technically/artistically effective, interesting/unusual, powerful emotional impact, wow!

**½ Permits scoring flexibility:** 8 possible scores from 2 to 5 ½