WHAT JUDGES
Look For

A DIY guide on the Content, Composition and Technical features of winning photographs

Federation of Camera Clubs (NSW) Inc.

NSW Federation of Camera Clubs

This guide was developed for educational purposes by the Federation of Camera Clubs (FCC) for use only by clubs which are members of the FCC

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Don Munro thanks the clubs who assisted in the development of this guide

INTRODUCTION

When I visit photographic clubs across NSW and the ACT, I am often asked "What are judges looking for?"

The short answer is good Content (such as a story, mood or meaning), good Composition (that is eye-catching) and good Technique.
These qualities are in almost all the best photos in the world.

But it is not always clear what is "good" content, composition and technique.

That's why the FCC developed this guide. It gives practical examples you can use or adapt to make the types of photos you want to make.

Like all the FCC's recent resources, this guide is not about simplistic rules or trendy techniques – it's about helping you develop your creativity.

It aims to help you create beautiful and meaningful images with impact.
That is what photographic judges are looking for.

Michelle Kennedy
President, FCC

WHY MOST PEOPLE MAKE PHOTOS

Memories
to capture special people, places and occasions as a reminder of the good times, and to share with family and friends

Beauty
to create something beautiful

Self-expression
to tell stories, evoke moods or convey ideas

Social change
to capture social issues and influence hearts and minds

Fun
to enjoy the process of creating images only you could have made

Photographer: Sylwia Bartyzel

WHAT JUDGES LOOK FOR

When judges look at your photos they are looking for:

1. **CONTENT** – a powerful story, mood, meaning or other subject matter

2. **COMPOSITION** – a complex, pleasing design which appears simple

3. **TECHNIQUE** – technical excellence which appears effortless and without contrivance

4. **IMPACT** – a powerful visual, visceral or emotional effect

1. WHAT IS CONTENT?

Photos can have two different types of content:

- photos **OF** something

- photos **ABOUT** something

Of the photos below, which is a photo "of something" and which is "about something"?

Photographer: Evan Vucci/Associated Press

TYPES OF CONTENT

Simple photos
are images **of** a person, place or thing

Stronger photos
tell a story about, or evoke a mood or show us something significant **about** a person, place or thing

"Photograph the flying spirit of the bird – not its feathers."
After Robert Henri

EXAMPLE – NATURE PHOTOS

Content - Low

This is a photo **OF** something –
a naturalistic photo of a pelican

It is technically well-made, but has no
particular story, idea, atmosphere,
mood, meaning, character, humour, etc

Photographer: Hayley Alexander

Content - Medium

This is a photo **ABOUT** something
– birds dancing

But the content is everyday,
not surprising

Content – High

This is a photo **ABOUT** something – it shows the "decisive moment" in this struggle of Nature symbolised by the bird and the fish

This is the most exciting moment – the bird has won. This content is unexpected, unusual or insightful

Content – Low

This is a photo **OF** something – a naturalistic photo of a cute baby

Technically, it's a well-taken photo, but there is no particular story, idea, atmosphere, mood, meaning, character, humour, etc

Content - Medium

This is a photo **ABOUT** something –
a mother cuddling her baby

There are some technical problems (such as
the distracting frame on the left) –
but in terms of its content, the subject matter
is an everyday scene and not unusual

Content - High

This is a photo **ABOUT** something – it tells a story of the tired baby and the exhausted grandfather

It has some compositional problems, but the content is strong - the story makes us laugh

Photographer: Olivia Munro

HOW JUDGES SCORE CONTENT

Low

The photo is a naturalistic image **OF** something
It shows people, places, things or events

Medium

The photo is **ABOUT** something
with a story, meaning, mood, atmosphere, character, humour etc
BUT the content is predictable, everyday, not unusual

High

The photo is **ABOUT** something
with a story, meaning, mood, atmosphere, character, humour etc
AND the content is unexpected, unusual, insightful

2. WHAT IS COMPOSITION?

Composition
is the arrangement of shapes, colours, tones textures etc within the frame to:
- create a complex, pleasing design which appears simple, and
- evoke an emotional impact

Below, one photo has a confused composition with competing points of interest. The other has a complex, pleasing design which appears simple. Which is which?

Photographer: Kiran V Garimella

Photographer: Harry Gruyaert

THE VISUAL ELEMENTS

How you arrange the seven visual elements within the frame affects what people see, think and feel when they look at your photo

Composition is the "secret sauce" that makes an ordinary photo a great photo

Tone	Colour	Line	Shape	Form	Texture	Space

A STRONG COMPOSITION

1. Draws your eyes into and around the frame

    • The leading line (the road) draws you in

2. Organises the visual elements in a complex but simple-looking design

    • Warm colours in the foreground balance cool blueish colours in the background

3. Evokes a visual, visceral or emotional effect

    • The gently curved line and balanced colours create a calm, peaceful mood, and a sense of space going into the distance

COMMON COMPOSITIONS

Four frequently-used compositions:

- One-point

- Two-point

- Movement

- Pattern

Each aims to:

1. Draw your eyes into and around the frame

2. Organise the visual elements in a complex but simple-looking design

3. Evoke a visual, visceral or emotional effect

ONE-POINT COMPOSITIONS

1. Draw your eyes into and around the frame

   - The leading line (the rail) draws your eye to the main subject, the boy

2. Organise the visual elements in a complex but simple-looking design

   - A simple design based on low-key tones – dark yellows, greens and greys

3. Evoke a visual, visceral or emotional effect

   - The tones and colours evoke a sombre mood

Photographer: Nic Walker (SMH)

TWO-POINT COMPOSITIONS

1. Draw your eyes into and around the frame
   - The light on both faces shifts your eyes back and forth between the two people – the relationship between them

2. Organise the visual elements in a complex but simple-looking design
   - The man's shape on the left half of the image is balanced by the woman's face

3. Evoke a visual, visceral or emotional effect
   - The orange colour evokes a mood of caution, even danger, in their relationship

Photographer: Nan Goldin

MOVEMENT-BASED COMPOSITIONS

1. Draw your eyes into and around the frame
   - The leading lines (the fence and the horizon) draw your eyes in and through the image

2. Organise the visual elements in a complex but simple-looking design
   - The repetition of the fence posts creates a pattern and movement through the image and into the distant space

3. Evoke a visual, visceral or emotional effect
   - The mood is one of simplicity, movement and also humour in that this minimalist image shows a snow-covered landscape
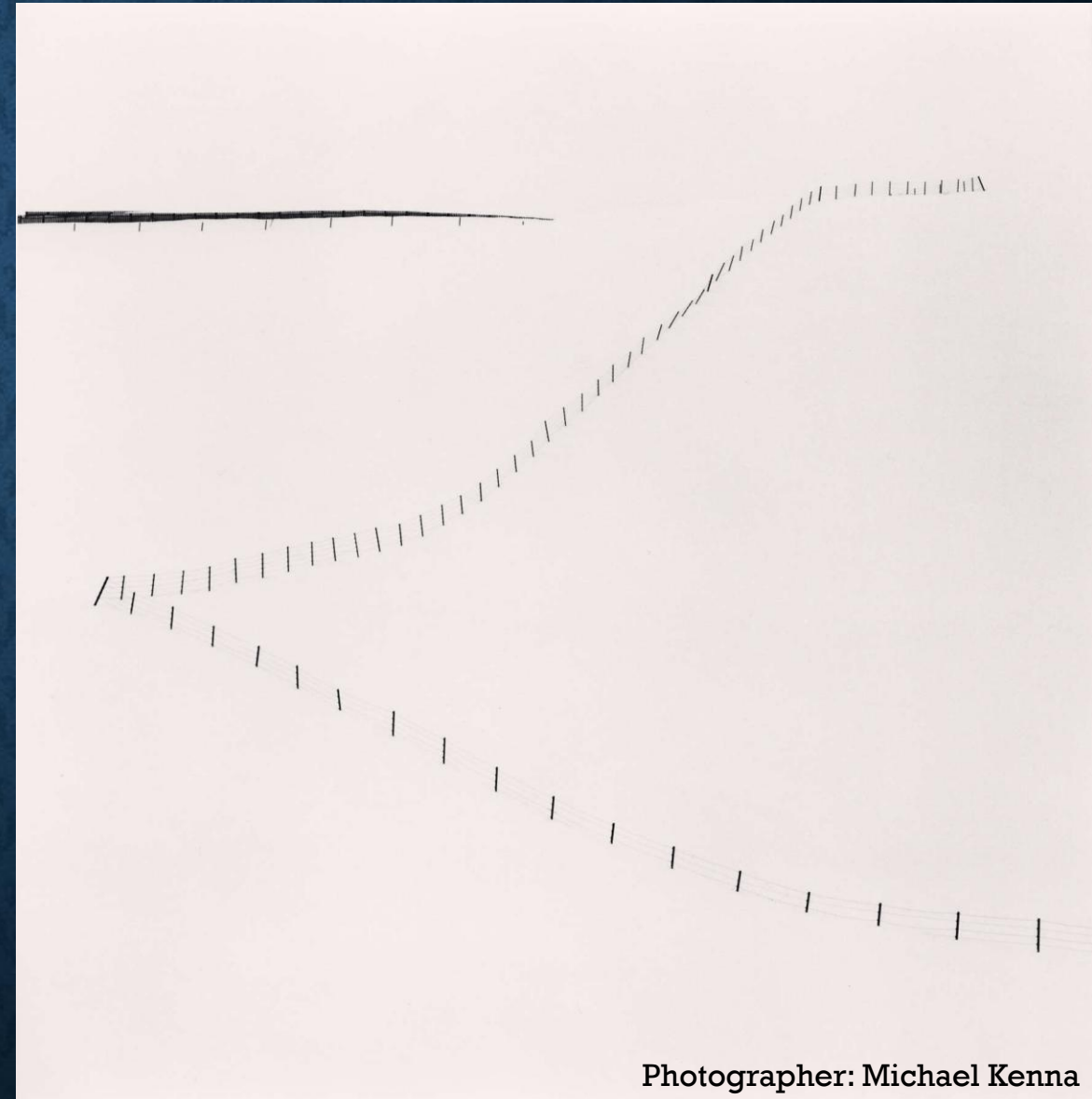
Photographer: Michael Kenna

PATTERN-BASED COMPOSITIONS

1. Draw your eyes into and around the frame

   - Your eyes move around the frame from eye to eye and person to person

2. Organise the visual elements in a complex but simple-looking design

   - The subjects fill the frame, like a window onto a busy street. They are arranged in a grid, with different subjects in each quadrant

3. Evoke a visual, visceral or emotional effect

   - The composition evokes a sense of energy and chaos. However, once you see the pattern, you get a sense of calm

Photographer: Alex Webb

SUBJECTS CAN BE COMPOSED:

"WITHIN" THE FRAME

Photographer: Jonathon Jacoby

TO "FILL" THE FRAME

Photographer: Henri Cartier-Bresson

COMMON COMPOSITION PROBLEMS

- **Leading lines that lead nowhere interesting**

- **Conflicting visual elements**
  At centre left, the leading lines point to the woman but light tones draw our eye off to the distance and out of the frame

- **Technique-based photo with no clear subject**
  Bottom left has Intentional Camera Movement without a clear Intention

- **The Rule of Thirds** makes uninteresting compositions
  Composition is not about where you put your subject – instead create balance, contrast, movement or patterns using ALL the elements in the frame

- **Uninteresting space**
  At bottom right, crop the everyday beach and sea so we see your main subject

HOW JUDGES SCORE COMPOSITION

Low

Your eye is drawn into the frame to see a simple design

Medium

Your eye is drawn into the frame to see a simple design,
and the colours, tones, textures etc evoke some emotional impact

High

Your eye is drawn into the frame to see a complex design which appears simple,
and the colours, tones, textures etc evoke a strong emotional impact

3. WHAT ARE THE TECHNICAL FACTORS?

Technical factors refers to how you:

- light your subject

- hold and operate your camera

- post-process and present your image

"There is nothing worse than a sharp image of a fuzzy concept"
(Ansel Adams)

THE 5 TECHNICAL FACTORS

1. **LIGHTING**
   • Source (natural/studio) • Direction (front/side/back) • Quality (hard/soft, direct/indirect) • Quantity (high key/low key) • Style/appropriateness for subject • Highlight/shadow (contrast) • White balance/colour control
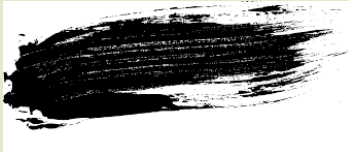
2. **CAMERA TECHNIQUE**
   • Exposure • Focus • Depth of field/use of aperture • Timing/use of shutter speed • Flash • Grain/use of ISO • Use of tripod

3. **SHOOTING TECHNIQUE**
   • Point of view (POV) • Cropping • Perspective control • Colour palette • Use of props or models • Posing • Horizon line

4. **POST-PROCESSING**
   • Dust and other distractions • Loss of detail in shadows/highlights • Over-sharpening • Distracting vignetting • Inconsistent shadows in composites • Blending images • Haloes • Dodging and Burning • Range of tones in monochrome images • Cropping
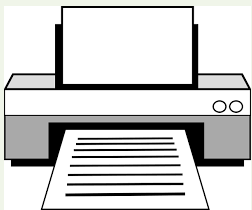
5. **PRINT & PRESENTATION**
   • Paper choice • Printing quality • Mounting and matting • File size • Title

Aim

A flattering portrait

Technical Problems

- **Lighting**

  Front-on lighting makes the faces look flat, not 3D

- **Camera technique**

  Flash has given the women "red eye"

- **Shooting technique**

  The photographer has angled the camera down at the women, making them look small

- **Post-processing**

  "Dead space" on the right - crop closer to the woman on the right. Cropping across the chest makes the women look wide - crop above or below their chests

Photo: PSDesire

COMMON TECHNICAL PROBLEMS 2

Aim

A beautiful seascape

Technical problems

- **Lighting**
  Lighting overall is flat - needs light and shadow

- **Shooting technique**
  Horizon is not level

- **Post processing**
  Level the horizon, increase contrast and texture in the foreground, and remove the spot in the sky above the building

COMMON TECHNICAL PROBLEMS - AI

All entries in a photography competition must be:

- **Photographs**

  Images made by the effect of light on a light-sensitive material

- **All your own work**

  No images, part images or pixels generated by Artificial Intelligence programs, Computer Generated Images (CGI), Computer Aided Design, text-to-image programs, etc

Make sure your camera and software do not generate and add AI-produced pixels

For example, in 2025 Topaz software

- Allowed:

  Sharpen AI and **DeNoise AI**

  - These tools adjust the <u>existing</u> pixels in your image. They don't introduce new pixels
  - BUT they often affect only selective parts of a photo. This will disqualify a photo in a competition where only global changes are allowed

- Not allowed:

  Gigapixel AI

  - This tool <u>adds</u> AI-generated pixels to your image

Image Source: Topaz Labs

TECHNIQUES CAN ADD VALUE

Techniques can help a photo express its story, meaning or mood

Here, the look and feel of the scene of the rugged tree is enhanced by

- the warm-white colour and the texture of the paper

- the soft grey mat board

Photographer: Stephen Bay

HOW JUDGES SCORE TECHNICAL

Low

Some techniques distract from the subject matter

Medium

All techniques support the story, meaning or mood of the photo

High

Techniques add value to the story, meaning or mood of the photo, **and** appear effortless and without contrivance

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER
WHAT DO JUDGES LOOK FOR?

CONTENT

Stories, meanings, moods, ideas, humour, etc, which are significant or insightful – something only you could have produced

COMPOSITION

The eye is drawn into the image, to see a complex and pleasing design which appears simple, and which evokes an emotional effect
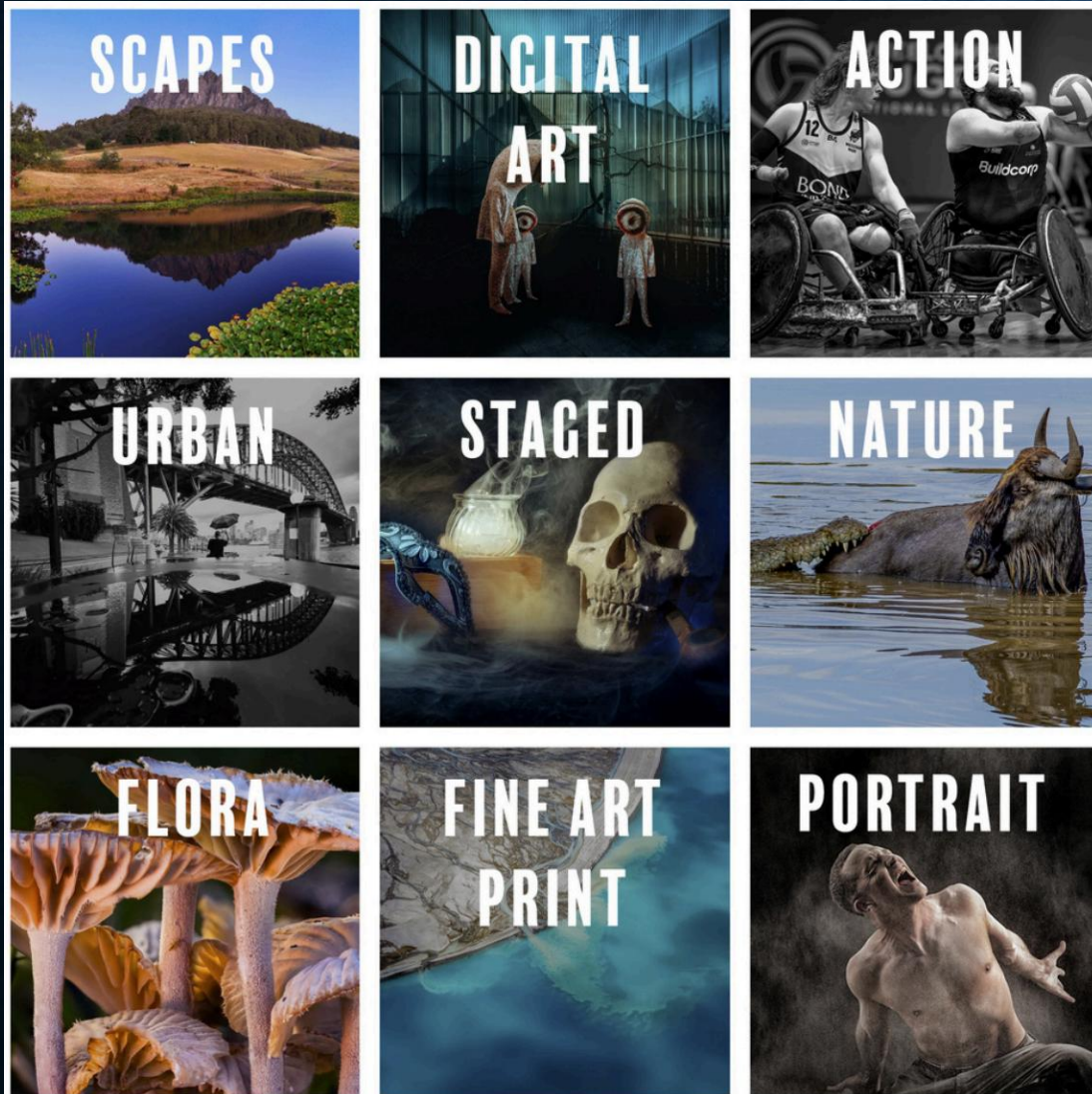
TECHNIQUES

Add to the photo's story, meaning and mood, and appear effortless and without contrivance

IMPACT

Content, Composition and Techniques elicit a strong visual, visceral or emotional effect

SPECIFIC ISSUES FOR FCC COMPETITIONS

Scapes — Must show sense of space, story or spirituality of the landscape, seascape, skyscape

Digital Art — Must show significant post-processing

Action — Must show human or non-human action

Urban — Must show buildings, streets, parks or other examples of "a built-up environment"

Staged — Must be "intentionally set up by the photographer"

Nature — Must appear naturalistic, AND have very limited, general post-processing

Flora — Must be predominantly "plant, part of a plant, or groups of plants"

Fine Art Print — Must have a story, meaning etc AND use of paper, inks/pigments etc that adds to the content

Portrait — All or part of a face must be visible AND the subject must appear to be "participating in the creation of the photo"

WANT TO ENTER A COMPETITION?

- **Have a go**

  It's a good learning experience

- **Read the Rules**

  Entries that don't meet the rules are rejected

- **No Obvious Technical Flaws**

  Entries with obvious technical flaws will get low scores

- **No Photo Copying**

  Check how other people have photographed the topic – but don't copy them

- **Show Your Best**

  Judges appreciate seeing your unique perspective on the topic

- **Have Fun**

  Enjoy the process and build your skills. If you win, even better!

END

The FCC welcomes feedback on this guide.

Send your comments to nswfccsecretary@gmail.com