

Digital ...

A monthly column by Harry

When I joined the camera club about 6 years ago, I entered the competitions but rarely had an image accepted, even though I liked the pictures myself. Gradually, I began to learn and get acceptances and, more recently, merits and honours. I still cherish some of my early rejects but what have I learnt that has finally scraped me into 'A' grade? Example images [here](#).

Getting out of B grade.

We all have different strengths and weaknesses so this will be a personal journey for each of us and my experiences will differ from yours. It's been interesting for me to reflect on what I have learnt and I hope you will find my conclusions interesting and maybe helpful, too.

Top of my list is distractions. When I look at a real scene, my brain tends to emphasize the main subject that has caught my eye and more or less ignore the rest. To some extent, the same thing happens when I look at one of my own photographs – I know what I'm supposed to be looking at – but distractions jump out in novel images. I've heard that one should spend 90% of photo-taking time looking at everything *except* the subject. My first merit (hurrah!) was marred by a distraction I hadn't realized was there. Thanks to the judge who pointed it out – it wasn't hard to remove. Now I spend time checking various angles of view and vantage points and thinking about depth of field and lighting on *everything but the subject* before I take a photo. If all else fails I'll use Photoshop, too.

Then, there is the list of "no-no"s.

Top of the banned list is a horizon that's not quite horizontal. I may not notice it but it's like the proverbial red flag to a bull (or a judge). Easy to fix in Lightroom.

Phobia #2 is blown-out highlights or whites. Blacks don't provoke the same reaction although judges do like to see some detail there. Highlights can be a real problem because under-exposing to get all the whites under control can yield a low key (dark) image and fixing it in post-production can reveal noise. I tend to try to keep very bright areas out of the picture, use a compromise exposure, and rely heavily on the Recovery slider in Lightroom. Here is a trick that, so far, I've got away with. If you have irrecoverable blown out highlights, replace them with an extremely pale grey or colour. You don't recover any detail, of course, but it doesn't stand out so much.

In the camera, I find the histogram on the camera screen helpful, as well as the "blinkies". Unfortunately, though, both seem to be based on the 8-bit processed image that is displayed and so the information is not accurate for the RAW image. In particular, some bright areas that show as "blown out" on the camera display can be recovered easily from the RAW file, in Lightroom.

Focus is #3 on my list. I've always liked my subject to be in focus but I've seen others fail for lack of sharp focus or inappropriate "softness" in an image. Be careful about

over-sharpening, though. In a recent image that got honours, the judge pointed out a region where over-sharpening bugged her. It was hard to make out, but she was right and I'll fix it before I show that image again. I guess, being in B grade, I got away with it but I still learnt the lesson. In camera, I use autofocus on my Canon 5D Mk 2 but I'm always careful to focus on the main subject before re-composing the image and taking the shot. I rely on experience to get depth of field right but sometimes I will take several images at different apertures (same exposure) and later choose the one with the best depth of field to get what I want. In extreme cases, I will combine images in Photoshop, to get more depth of field.

Apart from all this technical stuff, the biggest issue is to have a clearly defined primary subject or focal point. Two primary subjects is a "no-no"; one must be clearly dominant. But there *must* be a primary subject; otherwise "the eye wanders aimlessly around the image." Lines that lead into the subject, or frame it, help define the subject, as do contrasts in exposure (e.g. light subject on dark background) or sharpness or local contrast.

On this issue, be very careful with titles. The title can significantly influence the judge's view, sometimes negatively. I've had a couple of titles whose meaning was quite obvious to the audience but the judge simply didn't understand, with negative results. For a competition, a bland title can be safer. If the competition has a defined subject, meeting the subject requirements can be tricky. I've seen judges give wide latitude for images they like and be much stricter on subject compliance for others. Other judges are strict with everybody. For example, I submitted a shot for a "Silhouette" competition in which the silhouette was not a large part of the photograph. I felt that it "made" the photograph though. The judge liked the image but disqualified it because the silhouette was not a large enough part of the picture. She was strict with everybody so I couldn't complain.

Of course, every judge expects the *exposure* to be correct in the final print or projected image. Here, Lightroom is my friend. I've seen many "flat" images in competitions, due to poor exposure or lack of contrast. It is truly amazing how a few minutes twiddling sliders can transform many such images. There's an example on Flickr. I've learnt that, while either under- or over- exposure can be corrected, if larger changes are needed then over-exposed images provide more latitude.

Judges frequently reiterate "photograph landscapes in early morning or evening when the sun is low". This is one of the best bits of advice around, but it doesn't compensate for getting the rest right. Lighting is, of course, a big issue and one where I have many learning opportunities ahead.

Competitions and print circles have been an excellent learning tool for me, sometimes depressing, sometimes exhilarating. I would like to thank all those judges who have put time and expertise into judging, even those who upset me. Getting out of B grade can be a frustrating journey but perseverance and a desire to learn do work. Getting into A grade is a satisfying landmark for me but I suspect it is just the warm-up to really getting to grips with photography.

