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Comments: **30**

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Photography 0 user(s)
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A Beginner's Guide to Commenting on Gallery Photographs

by Gary Wisniewski
30 January 2004

Giving comments, advice, and criticism is often difficult, especially for new members. You might wonder: "Am I qualified to give advice?" or "What do I say?". If you're new to the group you might even be tempted to wait a while and see what people say about your photos.

Truth is, there are no "qualifications". PassionForPixels.com is about freely exchanging ideas and images, and everyone is welcome, whether you're new to photography or a seasoned shooter. I regularly put my foot in my mouth (it's one of my specialties) and I've found PassionForPixels.com to be one of the most open-minded, helpful online communities I've ever been a part of. Nobody will fault you for giving it a go. Being an active contributor will teach you to develop a good "visual language", and you'll learn as much by making comments as you do by receiving them.

The best comments are those which provide insight to the group, or assist the creator in making a better image, or even in understanding their own work better.

If you're new at commenting, here's a simple three-step process that I recommend for beginners and experienced users as well.

1. Start with your "first impressions"
2. What message does it send you?
3. Does the resulting photo "work" for you? If so, why? If not, why not?

After considering these three things, then make your comments. I find using a consistent and simple process helps me think about all aspects of the image, and keeps me from dwelling on technical details instead of the overall effect.

Here's a more detailed guide to the three steps:

Step 1: Start with your "first impressions"

Before thinking about any of the details of what you see, it's important to remember your first impression. Often, the first impression is the reason you chose to comment on the image to begin with. Maybe it struck you instantly because of graphic impact, perhaps it looked confusing and you wanted to know more. Maybe it even struck you as an "image with potential that needs something".

Your first impression is one of the most important things to consider because most of the best photos deliver their message almost instantly. Without even thinking, a photo may look "striking", may make you feel happy, lonely, or the photo may convey danger, power, joy or excitement. The more we look at something, the more we begin to lose this initial impact. So, I like to cement my first impression clearly in my mind and not lose sight of it as I consider the photo more critically.

You don't have to be an expert to have a first impression. In fact, good photographs inspire us all, so this step should be easy. Linger for a while and absorb what it is that the photo "tells you" or how it "makes you feel". This is a very non-verbal exercise and one problem many experienced photographers have is that their knowledge of photography is so extensive that sometimes they skip right to the technical details. This is where beginners often have an advantage.

Step 2: What message does the photo send you?

Almost every photo delivers a message. After you've gotten past the first impression, the next thing to consider is what is the message? And, is the message a clear, strong one, or one that is elusive?

The message may be very direct and intentional on the part of the photographer (such as a photo of people in a bread line with a billboard signifying prosperity behind them). Or, the message may be more of a feeling that affects you differently than the next person. Every photographer wants to say something, whether it be a flattering image of a relative, a smile of joy, or a dark desparate moment they have witnessed. Even abstract images convey feelings of symmetry, order, disorder, confusion, optimism or pessimism.

Sometimes your comments confirm to the photographer that they succeeded, and sometimes your comment surprises the photographer by making it obvious that others see a very different message than they expected. So, a message is personal, and while it is useful to wonder "what was the photographer trying to say?", it is more important to think "what **DID** the photographer say to **ME**".

Step 3: Does the photograph "work" for you? If so, why? If not, why not?

If the photo makes a lasting first impression, and the message is clear and strong and effective, chances are most of us would say the photograph "works". After considering step 1 and step 2, most of you will quickly have an opinion about whether the photo is successful.

This is where you try your hand at telling the group your opinion: How and why it "works", or why it doesn't.

If you're new at this, don't be afraid to simply be honest and straightforward about your appraisal with a simple assessment such as "I was instantly struck by the image, you can almost feel the cold." With such a simple message you're taking what you've experienced in the first two steps and simply putting it into words. It's just as reasonable to say "This took me a long time to figure out. I'm not sure if it's happy or sad, but the girl's expression is memorable."

So, for beginners, let your first impression, and your idea about the message guide your comments. If you think the photographer succeeded at creating a strong image which works, simply say so. If not, do your best to provide constructive advice or information about what you think might have "gone wrong".

Over time, you may decide to adopt a "visual language" which makes it easier to discuss and comment in more specific terms about why a photograph succeeds or fails. Many of you already know this language and can start using it immediately.

One simple place to start is to ask yourself a few questions:

- Where is the primary centre of interest?
- Do the elements and composition of the photograph work to support this centre of interest?
- Does this fit the message?
- Are there distractions which detract from the message, or affected my first impression?
- Could a change in composition make the message stronger? Eliminate distractions?
- Are there other technical issues, such as focus or colour, which add or detract from the message the photographer is conveying?

Make your comments simple and try to see both positive and negative aspects of the photo. If the photo is absolutely positive in your mind, then try to convey a bit of the "why" it struck you. If you don't care for the photo, see if you can translate your impression of the message into some comments which get across how you might have done things differently and might improve the impact or message.

Remember that photography is not simply about getting the exposure right, or having

perfect focus or composition. You don't have to be obsessed with acquiring vast technical knowledge. ANY photo which has a strong first impression, and conveys something meaningful can be a great photograph even if there are technical flaws.

CONCLUSION

Creating good discussion about photographs is something you learn. It doesn't always come naturally. Photographs instantly communicate ideas and feelings, but learning to verbalise them, discuss them, and learn from them takes practise. PassionForPixels.com is a fantastic place to do just that.

I hope my "3 step" approach can be useful as a starting point. Ultimately, developing your own method, and adopting a good visual language will give you a valuable tool for increasing your photographic skills and helping others develop theirs.

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