How to Critique Photographic Images:
Before we begin:

- I started out as an artist (painting and drawing).
- I taught secondary Art, English and Photography for 7 years.
- I have received a lot of positive feedback on my ability to critique images well.
- This presentation is designed for CLUB level.
- I will give you LOTS of examples to help you learn my method of critique (not saying it’s the best method – but it is a good one!)
First - Address Your Prejudices:

- All judges have prejudice (even me!)
- We are all attracted to different types of images more than others.
- We all have different life experiences that affect the way that we view the world and the way we respond to the images that we judge.
- Confront and address your prejudices early on – or the members will know.
- Actively seek feedback and use it to learn and grow.
Skills Helpful for Good Critique:

- Positivity
- Honesty
- Consistency
- Fairness
- Open mindedness
- Confidence with public speaking
- Art Knowledge and Vocabulary
- Technical skills in photography – both in camera and editing.
My Basic Critique Method:

1. Commend
2. Recommend
3. Commend (& sum up)
Activity #1:

1. Write a list of all the different things that you talk about when you are judging images. E.g. sharpness or composition.
Tally them up:

1. How many “things” do you have on your list? _____
2. How many are “technical”? _____
3. How many are “artistic/aesthetic”? _____
4. How many are about the “concept/subject”? _____
5. Other? ____________________________________________

- Have you noticed a gap in your critique?
- What area/s do you need to focus on learning more about? ____________________________________________
So … What should you talk about?

1. Technical Skills
2. Artistic Ability and Aesthetics
3. The Subject and Concept
4. Impact

Note: You don’t need to talk about ALL of these things in EVERY image, but make sure you vary your critique throughout the evening and talk about a wide range of areas.
Technical Skills You Can Talk About:

- Sharpness & blur
- Aperture & depth of field
- Shutter speed, motion & camera shake
- ISO/grain
- White balance & colour casts
- Lens choice
- Exposure
- Detail in shadows / highlights
- Lighting
- Time of Day
- Editing
- Printing & Mounting
- Timing of the shot
Artistic Ability & Aesthetics:

- Focal Point
- Distractions
- Creativity (in camera and post production)
- Aesthetics
- Art elements
- Design principles
- Art Concepts
- Composition
- Camera angle
Subject and Concept:

- Choice of subject
- Relevance & Audience
- Set Subject & Definitions
- Planning
- Originality
- Unique Perspective
- Purpose / Intent / Meaning
- Conceptualisation
- Influences / inspiration
- Mood and emotion
- Story-telling
- Unity and Cohesion
How To Pull It All Together:

1. Find the biggest area of strength in the image and start by commending this: “The thing I find most effective in this image is … (describe & explain)”

2. Find the MAIN area/s for improvement and make informed suggestions: “I would recommend having a go at changing …” (no more than 2-3 suggestions! Acknowledge the difficulties the maker may have experienced).

3. Summarise your critique, being positive, yet honest (remember consistency between your score and critique is crucial): “overall, a great concept, but just lacks …”
Sentence Starters: Commend (describe)

- “What I love most about this image is…”
- “Wow! This image had an instant impact!”
- “What you have done really successfully here is…”
- “What really stands out to me in this image is…”
- “You’re obviously a very skilled photographer, which I can see through your ability to capture…”
- “Congratulations on such a successful …”
- “What I find most appealing in this image is …”

-
Sentence Starters: Recommend

- “have you considered …?”
- “I would really recommend that you have a go at …”
- “If this were my work, I would try …”
- “Next time, I would recommend trying to …”
- “If you had your time over, what would really help this image is …”
- “In the future, I would think about …”
- “The one area that you really need to work on is …”
- “The main flaw in this image is …”
- “The only thing you’re missing is …”
- “It’s such a shame that …”
- “Consider using …”
- “If I was being really picky, I would say that …”
Sentence Starters: Commend & Sum up

- “Overall, this is a great image with lots of impact, but just be aware of …”
- “Overall, a lovely concept, just lacks a little …”
- “Well seen and well shot.”
- “Great work. You’re really nailing it!”
- “Overall, a sound concept, but just remember to …”
- “All up, a really effective image that shows …”
- “As I said, this is a lovely … you just need to work on …”
- “Great … but as it is, it’s a score of …”
- “It can be really hard to take these kinds of shots, so under the circumstances you have done a really great job. Next time, just make sure you …”

*Talk about IMPACT / lack of impact here*
Critiquing Technical Skills
Commending Technical Skills:

- “Well shot and well exposed”
- “Sharp where it needs to be”
- “Beautiful blurred background”
- “Perfect depth of field/choice of aperture”
- “Really effective use of lighting”
- “Perfect choice to use a …. shutter speed”
- “Great sense of movement”
- “The decision to use a … lens was really smart as it allows you to capture … ”
- “Great detail in the shadow areas / highlights, which would have been difficult to expose for”
- “Really cleverly edited”
- “Perfect editing, which accentuates the focal point”
- “You shot at the perfect time of day to capture …”
Recommending Technical Improvements

- “Lacks a little sharpness on the focal point”
- “A tad under/over exposed”
- “Hopefully you shot it in RAW, so you can pull some detail back into your shadows/highlights”
- “Try doing a selective high pass sharpen to enhance the eyes”
- “A shallower depth of field would help to blur the background and therefore emphasize the focal point more effectively”
- “This type of subject really works best with … lighting / lens / aperture / shutter speed”
- “At a different time of day, the lighting would have had much greater impact / added more mood”
- “A shame that you had a little camera shake. Next time consider … (using a tripod / decreasing your aperture / bumping up your ISO)”
- “Unfortunately, it’s a little grainy which affects the contrast and reduces the impact of the image”
Summing up Technique:

- “Overall, a technically excellent work with strong impact”
- “Technically, a very sound image, just make sure to …”
- “Well seen and well shot”
- “You clearly know what you’re doing behind the lens! Make sure you don’t forget to consider …”
Um, wait a sec … what are Aesthetics?

- **Art Elements**
  - line, colour, tone, shape, texture, space

- **Design Principles**
  - Balance, Emphasis, Contrast, Movement, Rhythm, Pattern, Repetition, Unity, Variety, Proportion, Scale

- **Art Concepts**
  - Composition, Juxtaposition, Perspective

- **Compositional Guidelines**
  - Rule of Thirds, Golden Mean, Leading Lines, Lead Room, Natural Framing, Rule of Odds, Simplify
Commending Aesthetics:

- "The focal point is really well highlighted"
- "I love the creative use of …"
- "Well considered composition"
- "Powerful leading lines have been utilised to draw the viewer into the image and maintain their attention on …"
- "A beautiful complimentary colour scheme has been used here with the contrast of the blue and orange. It really makes the … stand out"
- "What I really love here is the juxtaposition between …"
- "Putting your image in monochrome was the perfect choice"
- "… is a really effective creative technique – well done!"
- "The creative editing that you’ve applied to this image really helps to establish the mood, and suits the subject well”.
- "I love the gorgeous tonality (light and shade) in this image, which adds to the overall mood and intent.”
Recommending Aesthetic Improvements

- “This image would benefit from a subtle vignette, just to help pull the viewer’s attention back into the image”
- “There’s a few distractions in the background. I would consider … (cropping here, spot healing, selectively darkening, etc.)”
- “I may not have been possible in this location, but I feel the composition would be much stronger had you changed your camera angle, by … (stepping here, bobbing down, etc.)”
- “I feel the mood in this image would really be enhanced by a monochrome treatment.”
- “The area of this image that is most appealing to me is … so I would have a go at cropping like this (demonstrate) to enhance this area/subject”
- “Have you considered … creative editing? I think it might be worth experimenting with on this particular image”
- “Your image feels a little uncomfortable to look at, which could have been fixed by allowing your subject a bit more lead room to move into”
- “There’s a lack of harmony in this image, which might make it more suited to a … treatment?”
Summing Up Aesthetics:

“Overall, I really commend you for seeing and capturing this image – as many would walk straight past it”

“The choice to use … (creative treatment) has created a really effective/emotive image – well done!”

“You have a great understanding of composition – keep up the great work”

“You have a very artistic eye – great job!”

“Overall, a beautiful image, just lacks a little…”
Critiquing The Subject & Concept
Commending the Subject/Concept:

- “I can see why you found this subject so appealing”
- “Wow! What a spectacular …! You were lucky to capture this scene!”
- “Your choice of subject is perfect for this set topic”
- “This is a really well considered concept”
- “What I really love is that I can see the level of planning that you have gone to here”
- “Really well thought out – well done”
- “What an excellent idea! So unique”
- “The mood you have developed in this scene is really well handled”
- “You’re a real story-teller!”
Recommending Improvements to the Subject/concept:

- “There is a lack of unity in this scene, which I feel would benefit from …”
- “Great concept, just needs a bit more planning and revision to pull it all together”
- “I feel it would do better in a different competition”
- “To me, this image is just lacking a bit of mood and emotion. Consider trying … (monochrome/ texture/ lens flare/ clipping blacks/ different time of day, etc.)
- “Great shot, but unfortunately a bit of a cliched subject. Try to think about how you can shoot this subject differently (suggest ideas)”
- “I don’t really understand what’s going on. You need to make your intent really clear. Have you thought of…”
- “Think about what story you are trying to tell – I want you to move me”
Summing Up the Subject/Concept:

- “Overall, a great concept, just remember to …”
- “Really well shot, just a little more planning was needed”
- “Thankyou for showing me a really original concept!”
- “As I said, the message in your image is really well communicated. Great job!”
- “This was a really successful artwork that clearly demonstrates mood and emotion. Congratulations.”
- “Thankyou for moving us all with your imagery”
- “As I explained, I love the idea behind this – it’s just lacking a little cohesion between all the elements”.
- “To finish, it’s great to see such a unique perspective on a clichéd subject! Well done”.
Activity #2: Let’s do some together:

1. Commend
2. Recommend
3. Commend (& sum up)
Example #1
Example #1

COMMEND (concept): What I love most about this image is that I can see you’ve gone to a lot of effort to plan every detail – from the lightning, to the reflective surface under the glass. I also love the symmetrical composition and monochrome feel. Everything has been really well thought out and creates a really harmonious image.

RECOMMEND (concept): One thing I would suggest is to consider adding some droplets of water onto the beer glass just to help make it look “cold” – an old product photographers trick is to use a spray bottle! This would also provide a bit of a textural contrast between the background and the foreground, which would help to emphasise the subject, given the almost monochrome scene. Also just be mindful that there’s a little bit of banding in the background.

COMMEND (concept): Overall though, this is a great concept which has been really well shot! Congratulations!
Example #2
Example #2

COMMEND (concept): I really love the mood you have created in this piece. It was a really clever choice to desaturate the image – which helps to establish the sense of “age”.

RECOMMEND (aesthetics): This looks like quite a small room, so it may have been difficult to manoeuvre yourself around the scene, however I feel that a more central camera angle would have helped your overall composition – just by standing to the left a bit. I also probably would have shot it horizontally and given more space to the trinkets on top of the mantel and less to the floor, especially as the back of the chair is creating a bit of a distraction down on the bottom left.

COMMEND (subject): Overall though, this is a lovely subject and the editing perfectly matches the mood you were trying to create – just make sure next time to walk around the scene first to work out where the best viewpoint is.
Example #3
Example #3

COMMEND (subject): What a lovely subject – really well seen. I love the contrast here between the rough muted rocks and the vibrant, tenacious plant.

RECOMMEND (technical): The difficulty in this shot is that the subject is almost on the same focal plane as the background, which makes it hard to separate them visually - although using a wider aperture might have helped here. Also just make sure that your focus point is on the subject and that you avoid camera shake, as it’s not quite sharp.

COMMEND (aesthetics): Overall, a lovely shot that has been well seen, just try to think about how you can create more emphasis on the focal point.
Example #4
Example #4

COMMEND (technical): Wow! What a fabulous shot! Nice and sharp around the eyes with beautiful colour and detail in the feathers. Well exposed with a beautifully blurred background that isolates the bird beautifully.

RECOMMEND (aesthetics with technical fix): The only thing I would suggest is that it would be great to have a little more lead room for the bird to look into, as the composition feels a bit cramped. You could easily add this in PS (Crop larger > select area > Edit > Fill > content aware > blend if necessary). HOWEVER, just be aware that if you were intending to put this into a nature comp, then you would not be able to do this edit. You’ve also lost a little detail in the shadows on the bottom right, which is easy to pull back – especially if you shot in RAW.

COMMEND (technical): Either way, this is an excellent capture! Well done.
Activity # 3 – YOU’RE ON YOUR OWN!