

Words to use: Descriptive adjectives

- Flowing
- Delicate
- Simple
- Bold
- Subtle
- Contrasting
- Muted
- Dramatic
- Rough
- Powerful
- Moving
- ...this list will grow
- Fine
- Smooth
- Coarse
- Uneven
- Balanced
- Unbalanced
- Organic
- Geometric
- Angular
- Focal Point
- Distorted

Words/Phrases NOT to use: (without follow-up)

- Like
- Pretty
- Good
- Cool (unless it pertains to the color tone)
- Dislike
- Doesn't work
- ...this list will grow too

Comments and feedback such as “nice shot”, “nice light”, and “beautiful” help boost our ego and are generous, but are equally as useless in terms of improving ourselves as photographers such as “you suck” or “you are a horrible photographer”.

Some of the aspects to look at.

1. Critique the technical.

Exposure.

Is any area overexposed or underexposed? If so, can you say why you think that happened? How could the photographer prevent this problem in the future?

Focus.

Is the main subject in focus? Is it sharp focus, or a "soft" focus? Is the focus appropriate for the situation?

Depth of Field (DOF).

Is the DOF shallow or deep? Does the DOF work in this shot, or should more (or less) of the photo be in focus?

Lighting / White balance.

Is the light soft or harsh? Does the type of lighting enhance or detract from the things in the photo? Is the white balance set correctly? Is there a yellowish, orangish, or greenish cast to the photo?

2. Critique the composition.

Centered vs. "Rule of Thirds".

Is the main subject in the center of the frame? Is it on a third? Somewhere else? Does the chosen composition work, or would you have done something differently?

Fore, Middle, and Backgrounds.

(Most applicable to landscape photos) Does the photo contain all three? If not, do you think it would be better if it did?

Cropping/Framing.

Is there wasted empty space in the photo? Should the crop have been tighter? Is it cropped so tightly that important parts of the photo have been cutoff?

Color / Tonal Range.

What type of colors do you see? Did the photographer use a lot of primary colors? Secondary? Complementary? Are the colors too vivid? Not vivid enough? If you are looking at a B&W photo, is there a true black, true white, with a large tonal range in between, or is the photo too "gray"?

Diagonals, S-Curves, etc.

Did the photographer make use of any visually-interesting elements, such as diagonal lines or S-curves?

Leading lines.

Do the lines and overall composition make you want to look deeper into the photo? Is your eye drawn into the photo, or out of it?

Dark vs. Light areas.

Are there too many bright areas? Too many dark areas?

Balance.

Is the photo "balanced"? Would it be better if there were other objects or other light/dark areas in the frame to improve the balance? If the photo is off balance, is there a reason for it?

3. Critique the photograph(s) as they relate to the assignment given.

Do they satisfy the goals of the assignment?

Offer suggestions for a better more satisfactory product as it relates to the assignment

Why did the photographer make the image? Talk about the subject matter as it relates to the purpose behind the image making.

4. How does it make you feel?

What mood do you see in the photo?

Do you think this mood is what the photographer intended?

Does it make you happy? Sad? Angry?

Did the photographer succeed in telling his/her story with the photograph? Why or why not?

Do you like the photo? And, more importantly, say WHY you like the photo, or why you don't.

Would you hang this photo on your wall? Why or why not?

What story does this photograph tell?

Thoughts and suggestions

by Andre Hermann – San Francisco based Documentary photographer

What *TO* do

1. **Ask the person what they are hoping to get out of the critique.** Are they lost, seeking direction? Or are they only looking for insight on how to polish, or further develop the work?
2. **Inquire about their work.** The critiquing process involves asking questions. Who is the intended audience? Why did they create this image or series? What do they hope to accomplish with it? This will help you can gain a better understanding of what you're looking at, and how you might relate to it.
3. **Take your time critiquing the work.** Give the person your undivided attention. Take time to look at their work. Step aside, come back and look at it again before sharing your thoughts to make sure you are comfortable with your feedback. Treat it as if it was your own.
4. **Invite the person to ask questions as you go.** This only applies if critiquing over the phone or face-to-face. Remember, a critique is a conversation between two people. Make sure the person understands what you're saying.
5. **Relate to the work by sharing a story.** People like to hear that their heroes and peers have lived and learned the same experiences both positive and negative.
6. **Reference another photographer's work.** This is extremely valuable to the learning process. Introduce someone to another photographer's work.
7. **Look at the [objective] technical qualities:** focus, exposure, contrast, quality of light, color, DOF (depth of field,) composition, framing
8. **Look at the [subjective] emotional qualities:** Is the subject clearly defined? Is there emotional appeal? Is the story or concept well realized?
9. **Make sure your critique is clear and easily understandable.** If you're doing it by email type it out in a word processor. Sit on it overnight. Revisit in the morning before sending. Read it out loud to yourself.
10. **Suggest ways to improve or correct the issues.** I like to call it 'the take-away.' Your suggestions are what will help the person grow. Believe it, or not, they will remember you for the suggestions you give them.

What *NOT* to do

1. **Do not ignore a request to critique someone's work.** It is an awful feeling to be ignored, especially if it's from someone you admire. If you are uncomfortable, or for some reason cannot find the time, or are unknowledgeable of the content let them know that. And don't give a half-assed excuse why you can't critique their work, like "its hard to critique such a personal story." These sound like cop-outs and don't help anyone. Remember the golden rule. You know, do unto others...
2. **Do not start with the negative.** The critique is all about first impressions, and how you set the stage for the discussion. This is something that I've found a lot of students do. No one benefits from it. Find something positive to start with.
3. **Do not assume that everyone has a "thick skin."** Everyone reacts to critiques differently. Some people are very sensitive about their work and may have never had experienced a critique before. Sometimes people feel that any comment less than positive is an insult to their very soul. How you present your feedback, and knowing a little about who you're critiquing will serve you well to navigate.
4. **Don't be silent.** The person is looking to you for insight. If you can't find anything positive or negative to say tell a story, ask a question. Dig a little deeper. Take control of the situation.
5. **Don't forget there is another person on the receiving end of your critique.** Don't talk down to them or ride a high horse. You may just learn something from the person and their work.

The Critiquing Process

Now that you know the do's and don'ts lets talk about the how-to's. When critiquing I always try to start with something positive, something the person did right—something that is 'working.' Then something that needs help or is lacking, followed by suggestions of how they can potentially fix it. Remember, the 'take-away' is very important here—what you want the person to question and hopefully explore. There have been times when, for whatever reason, I was not able to find anything positive to say about someone's work. This happens. It can feel dreadful—puts us on the spot. Embrace it as a challenge. Just as there is always room for improvement, there is also always something positive to compliment, even if it's something as simple as, "your choice of working with this subject shows your dedication to addressing this issue and telling its story."

What I look for when critiquing

1. **Architecture of the frame** (elements form visual triangles in the frame, simply; all of the elements feel good and are well positioned.)
2. What's happening on the **outer edges?** (Are there any distracting elements that distract our eye from the subject?)
3. **What is the subject?** And, is it clearly in focus?
4. **Technical** [objective] qualities (see #7 above)
5. **Emotional** [subjective] qualities (see #8 above)
6. Did they show their image some love? Curve adjustments, sharpening, color corrections?
7. Can they clearly **describe their work or concept?**
8. **Color or black-and-white?** What is their rationale? "Because everyone else is doing it doesn't cut it."
9. Is the **moment** spot on or did they miss it?
10. Does the image have a **clear voice?** What is it trying to say?
11. Does it leave a **strong first impression?**
12. Does the image **have a caption?** Does it help, or distract from, the image?

Finding the right critique:

1. **Refrain from asking your mom**, partner, family members, or circle of friends. Often times these people are only trying to be nice. If you want sunshine blown up your ass ask one of these people. But be prepared to hear nothing constructive, usually. Though there are exceptions.
2. Ask a **variety of photographers** from various genres who know nothing of you or your work. This will help produce a broad spectrum of content for you to sift through for consideration.
3. Look for **photographers you admire** in your genre, or that are proven masters at what they do, who are at a level you are striving for.
4. No matter how successful, or popular a photographer, they are accessible, and most are approachable, nice people. **All you have to do is ask.** It may take a few attempts but be patient. You'll be surprised at how many pro photographers will give you a few minutes of their time.
5. If you are meeting in person, or by phone, **and ask for 15 minutes** of their time, be prepared to finish within 15 minutes, unless they offer more time. Being considerate goes a long way, especially if you want to follow-up with them.
6. If you are publicly posting your photos to IG, Flickr, etc, **be prepared for the unsolicited critique.** These can be worthless at times, and even downright hurtful, ignorant. Other times, a diamond in the rough. Be careful of these and take them with a grain of salt. Ask the person to elaborate on their comment. More often than not genuine comments will be followed by genuine discussions.

How to RECEIVE a Critique

1. **Create a series of questions** that you want to ask your reviewer. The conversation can and will go off on tangents. You want to make sure you cover all of your bases. It's easy to forget, especially when you're sitting across from your photography hero.
2. **Don't get defensive** if you hear something negative. After all, it is only photography. A good practice is to critique your own work beforehand as if it was someone else's work. What might you say about it? This will help prepare you for anything negative that might be said.
3. Please **leave the attitude at home**. Don't go in thinking your work is perfect. It's not. Be happy for that. If it was perfect you'd probably get really bored with photography and move on to something else.
4. **Don't expect only positive feedback**. Remember, we need to know what we're doing wrong in order to get better. Yet we need to hear what we're also doing right to affirm our current abilities. It's the photographer's yin & yang.
5. If a person says something that you don't agree with, **ask** what they would have done differently. This shows that you **are eager to learn**, and progress.
6. **Don't shun your reviewer's opinion**, or tell them they're wrong because you disagree. I have experienced this in the past. This is a quick way to turn people off, and close doors in your face.
7. **Thank your reviewer** when finished. Ask if you can come back, or resubmit your work for a second round review after corrections are made.
8. It's **ok to be disappointed** and sometimes feel hurt. Don't retaliate with a random negative critique of their work. This is very unprofessional and only reflects negatively on you.
9. **Takes notes** during, or write like a madman right after in a journal or notebook. You'd be surprised how fast we begin to forget details. Specifically make note of consistent comments that you continue to hear from various people. These are the points that you should really pay attention to.
10. Once you're finished receiving all the feedback you want, **act on it**, shoot, experiment with the newly acquired ideas. Don't sit on it and do nothing with it. You'll only find yourself feeling disappointed.
11. Want, need, **strive for comments beyond the ego-stroking techno gibberish** that plagues the online communities, "Wow! Nice light! Cool! Amazing!" These do nothing to help you better understand your mistakes, or your work. They are lazy, empty critiques. If you are faced with comments like this ask the person to elaborate.