

# Self-critiquing: Your own best critic is you

By Donna Russell

Photography is a visual language so the more fluent you are the better you will be. Self-critiquing is one of the most challenging but rewarding skills. Aim to improve your images all the time.

Forget about likes and pleasing others and aim to communicate what you are trying to say.

When you have come back home from a photo shoot, you might have hundreds of images to look through. Many programs like Lightroom help you sort your images more quickly. I will usually flick through and quickly give them a rating of four or five stars for the ones I think have potential. Later I can filter for the top rated ones to give me a more manageable group to work with.

You can also give these keywords at this stage to help you find them later on – when you want some images for a specific competition subject for example.

## First impression

- Does it have emotional impact? Is it Wow or meh image. As you skim through, there will be some that make you stop scrolling.
- Is there a story, a feeling or a theme to it?
- Snapshots and family records are great for your own memories. But the emotions you get may not resonate with other people.
- Why did you take the photo? What are you trying to convey? Some people plan in advance what they want to take during a photo shoot to help them keep on track.
- Does everything in the frame make it a strong image? Can any elements be left out? Can you crop? Can you clone out elements that are distractions? Can you try different angles for more drama?
- Think about what you want as the main focal point or subject of the photo?
- The main subject must be in focus.
- If everything in the frame is equal then nothing stands out.

Sometimes you can get more than one image out of a raw image. Try it to help you work on what you want the main focus to be.

## **Composition**

Horizon must be level – even a slight tilt will be picked up by your eyes. Make sure always level. The horizon shouldn't be in the centre or it splits the image. The same with verticals although there are exceptions with architectural photos.

Are your verticals upright. Sometimes your lens can distort verticals and you will need to correct in post processing.

Check for sensor dust spots and lens flare, particularly in the sky or plain areas where these will show up most. Keep your lens and camera as clean as possible and be particularly careful on windy days at the beach or where there is a lot of dust.

Any distractions taking attention away from the subject? This can be other elements which are too bright or of dominant colours. Remember fire engines are red for a reason.

Do you really need all that sky? Unless the image is about the sky, maybe crop out most of it to make it less of a distraction.

Really look around the perimeter and the background for any distractions that might take attention away from your focal point.

When you are composing the photo in your camera viewfinder, really look at what is in the background and maybe shift your subjects around to take away distractions to save yourself a lot of work later on.

Check your lighting. Is it too harsh and would it be better to take the image at a different time of the day. Sometimes you have no choice if you are out and about, but dawn or dusk make great lighting. If you want to take images into the sun for contrejour effects, try shielding the lens with even your hand to stop lens flare, unless you want it!

## **Technical aspects**

The first thing to look at is the technical quality of your image. Ask yourself:

- Is the focus spot-on or slightly off? Look at the image at 100% to really see all the details.
- Can you see detail in the shadows and highlights? Post processing can bring these out.

- Are any of the highlights blown out. There is usually not much you can do, but next time try bracketing when taking the photo to give you a range of options you can put together.
- Does your image have an “over-processed” look?
- Are horizon lines or upright objects straight or slanted?

There are many more questions you can ask, but these give you an idea of the technical flaws you need to look for. However, keep in mind that not all technical flaws are grounds for deleting an image! Sometimes a missed focus or stark blacks and bright whites are used to great artistic effect.

### **Artistic Quality**

The next step is to look at the artistic quality of your image. Did you follow the Rule of Thirds or was there a good reason to place your subject in the exact center of your image? Check for elements that distract from the overall geometry of the image. Are there objects in the frame that you wouldn't miss if they weren't there? During this portion of your critique, analyse all the details in your image and decide whether they add to or take away from the finished work.

### **Emotional Impact**

Once you've judged your image for technical and artistic quality, the final step is to evaluate the photo's emotional impact. First, ask yourself: Will other people find something of emotional value in this image? For instance, a photo of your family will always be meaningful to you. To a complete stranger, however, the image may have little or no meaning.

Another way to create emotion is to tell a story with your images. A photo of someone riding a horse will have more of an emotional impact than a horse just standing and looking at the camera. That is because the action in the first image will invite your audience to examine your image to learn more. Why is the person riding the horse? Where are they going? Guidelines from PSNZ recommend really working on this aspect of your photography.

There is also a third point to consider: Sometimes photos are created, not for emotional impact, but for beauty's sake alone. If that is the case, then make a list of the elements that make your image beautiful. The longer your list is, the more likely it is that someone else will find your image beautiful, too. Does it make you feel an emotion?

Art is a very subjective. What you have on your walls at home might not be something I would choose, and probably isn't. That subjectivity is what makes self-critique such a difficult skill to learn. Check your work against every technical, artistic and emotional guideline you know, but remember that it is perfectly acceptable to break the rules when there is a good reason.

## **The Rejects**

There are likely hundreds of photos that didn't make the cut from your initial grading. These are often the called the Mehs. You took the photo for a reason because you saw something you thought had potential. It might have been to record a memory and that's fine, but it might have been to challenge your skills.

Go back through these and ask yourself what the photo is missing, (can it be improved by cropping to bring it to the top grades) or consider what you could do next time to make a better image.

That is the challenge of a lifetime and what makes photography such an intriguing hobby!