Sedona Camera Club
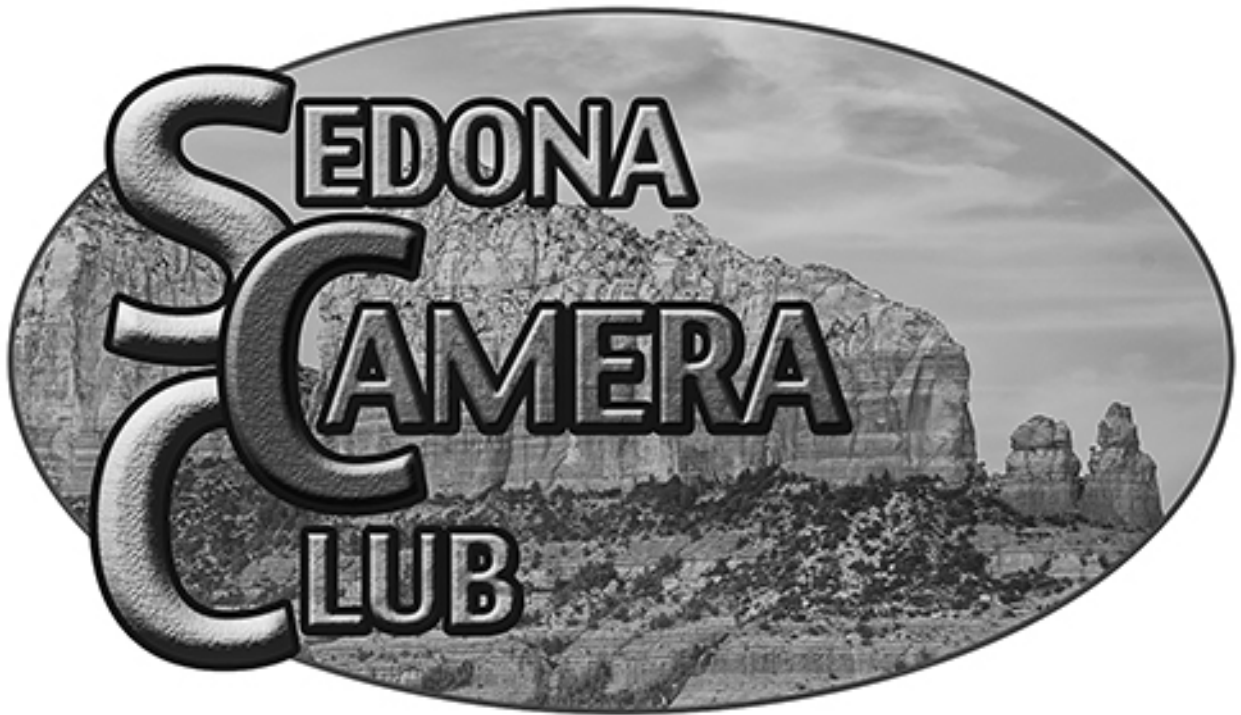

Photo Critique Handbook
2022-2023

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General Information Regarding Photo Critiques

Submitting photos into the Sedona Camera Club's Photo Critique program is an excellent way for members to obtain feedback on their photographic technique and creativity. Our experience suggests that photo assessment and direct feedback have been significant factors in improving the photographic skills of our members.

This document is primarily directed to members who have volunteered to write our photo critiques. However, some members who submit photos for critique may also be interested in reading this document.

Our critique authors have traditionally been called judges reflecting the competitions that preceded our transition to photo critiques. We have struggled to find a more suitable name for the club members who volunteer for this task. It is important to note that none of them are professional judges. Instead, they are our peers with varying levels of photographic experience. However, consistent with our educational mission, they are all dedicated to learning how to author the best possible critiques for our members who submit images. We will refer to these members as peer reviewers in this document; however, calling them judges will also be acceptable.

Here are some essential aspects of our photo critiques:

- All club members who try to follow the critique guidelines described herein are eligible to be peer reviewers. However, we will depend on our more experienced members to share their photographic knowledge to ensure that all critiques have educational value.

- Each year the club holds seven (7) Photo Critiques in September, October, November, January, February, March, and April.

- Critiques for submitted photos are done before each monthly meeting. Submitted Photos will be displayed at the monthly meeting, and detailed scores and comments will be available on our website after the meeting.

- Access to the critique tools on our website requires a username or email address and a password.

- Photo Critiques are open only to members who have paid their dues for the current year. Members cannot participate in the Photo Critiques if they have not paid their dues by October 1.

- The maker must categorize their photos using subject/genre designations in Table 1 below. Only one subject/genre can be selected, so members may decide which category is most important.

Table 1. Subject/Genre Definitions

Fauna	These are photos of domestic or non-domestic mammals, birds, reptiles, fish, or insects.
Flora	These are photos of plants, fungi, or flowers.
Landscape	These photos capture the experience of nature but can include elements from other subjects/genres.
Man-made	These are photos of buildings, vehicles, products, etc.
People	These are photos of an individual or individuals. They may be classic head-and-shoulders or full-body images. Nudity is permitted but must be handled tastefully. The Photo Critique Chairs will make the final determination of whether a photo is tasteful or not.
Monochrome	Monochrome photos may be of any single color or tone and are not limited to black and white or sepia.
Artistic	Artistic photos are photos or composites of photos originally of photographic origin but display obviously altered reality. Computer-created elements that are not intended to reflect reality and merely enhance the optically produced primary subject or subjects are allowed. The optically produced primary subject or subjects should predominate.

Photographic Origin

- All photos must be of photographic origin, created or derived from photos created optically by the maker using a camera or optical scanner.

- All image elements within a Digital or Print photo must also be of photographic origin and be those of the maker. Using an image element from another source or another photographer's work is prohibited.

- Photographs or scans of two-dimensional artwork are not acceptable as entries for either Digital or Print Photo Critiques.

- The club recommends that members submit only their recent work.

- To foster creativity and to enhance Photo Critique participation, no restrictions are placed on the extent of post-processing of any photo before submission.

- Although a member may seek guidance and advice about processing a photo from others, the actual post-processing must be done exclusively by the member.

Photo Submissions

- Ideally, members will submit two Photos in the Digital Critique and two in the Print Critique for each of our seven monthly critiques. To allow maximum participation by all members, we will allow members who cannot participate in the current critique to submit up to four

prints and four digital images in a future month. However, the total number of images submitted must not exceed 14 prints and 14 digital images for the club year.

- The submission process is usually open at least a month before our regular meetings. The deadline for submitting Digital and Print Photos is 9:00 pm on the Wednesday after the monthly meeting preceding the Photo Critique. After the submission for a monthly critique is closed, submissions for the following monthly critique are opened. Critiques will be released and displayed at the seven regular meetings occurring on the last Monday of the month from September to November and January to April.

- Prints for the print Photo Critique may be submitted at the club meeting before the Photo Critique or as directed by the Print Chair before the above deadline.

Photo Critiquing

The Sedona Camera Club makes every effort to ensure that critiques are prepared in a manner that helps members expand and improve their photographic skills. Critiquing photographs, however, is an inexact process, and members must be aware that different photos influence viewers differently, depending on individual experiences and preferences (which may be subconscious).

To improve the benefits of our Photo Critiques for our members, the club has:

- Developed a critique format that includes comments and scores that provide the best possible feedback for our members.

- Adopted a skills mastery approach from education as the foundation of our critiquing process.

- Adopted a validated set of criteria for making a successful photo.

- Provided relevant materials and experiences to improve the skills of our peer reviewers.

Mastery: In education, mastery of a subject or discipline is based on completing or satisfying various criteria that are inherent in the subject or discipline. Educators assess student progress or achievement by comparing student work to standards known to both educator and student. Our critiques follow this model.

Criteria: To apply the mastery approach to critiquing photographs, the club needed a validated set of criteria for making a successful photo. The Professional Photographers of America (PPA) have created criteria entitled "*The 12 Elements of a Merit Image*" to judge their national Photo Competitions. An updated version of this document can be found on our website's Judging Photo Critiques page. All peer reviewers should be familiar with the 12 elements and their connections. The following concept map from the article summarizes the criteria and shows how we have simplified them for our six sub-criteria detailed in our rubric in Table 3.
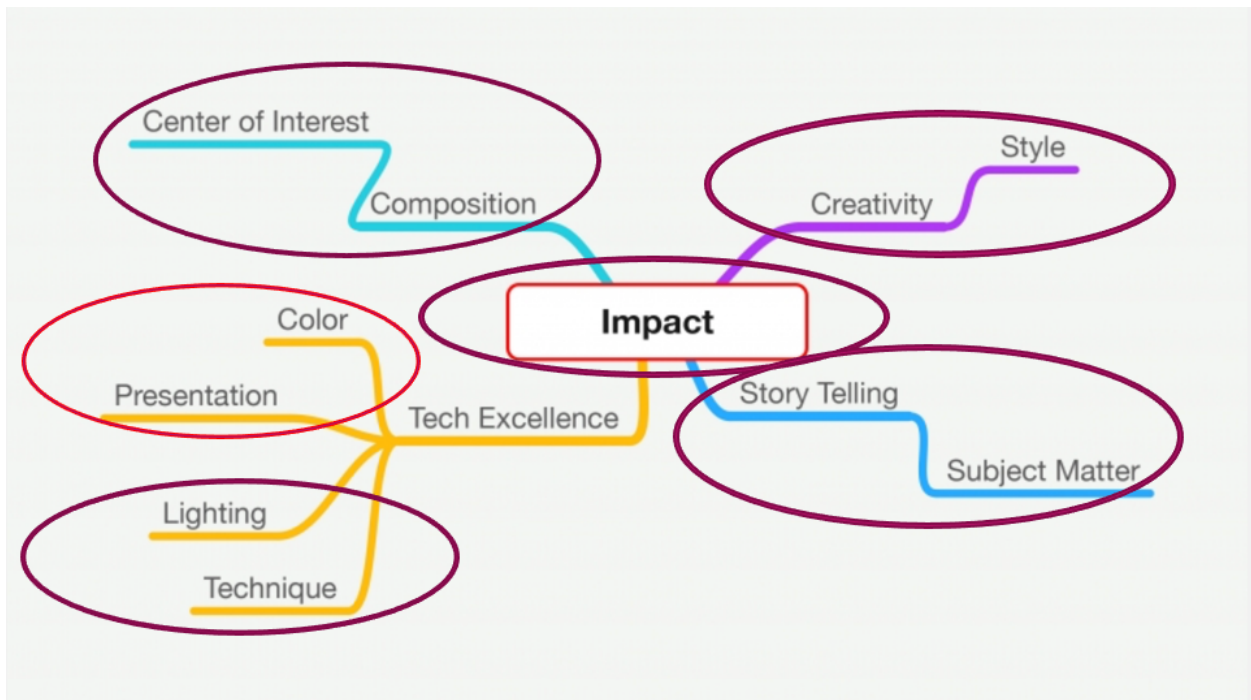
Peer Reviewer Skills: While experience and skill levels may vary among our peer reviewers, the club expects all peer reviewers to have a sense of the variation in photo quality with respect to the criteria from least successful to the most exceptional photos. Often this understanding comes from a peer reviewer's journey from being a novice photographer to their aspirations to make photos like great photographers. Furthermore, we expect that our peer reviewers and image-makers are on personal journeys toward improving their photographic skills and appreciation of what makes a successful photograph.

> *Thus, our photo critique process is unlike most other photo competitions in which awards are given based on a comparison to other competitors. Conversely, our critiques are based on evaluating photos against recognized criteria found in successful images. For us, it is not important who won the competition; instead, we focus on how well our photos achieve the photo criteria.*

Critiquing Procedures

- Every photo critique will comprise comments and scores that will discuss the merits and faults of the image and how well the image reflects the sub-criteria. Comments and scores were traditionally based on evaluating the photo's interest, composition, and technique. (See the section on Critique Criteria later in this document for further details.)
- Comments and detailed scores, including raw and averaged sub-criteria scores from all the peer reviewers, will be provided to the maker on our members-only website (See Reviewing Images and Critiques below). All critiques will be retained and archived.
- The peer reviewers will critique the photos separately by medium: Digital and Print.

- Peer reviewers must take their critique responsibilities seriously, as the quality and integrity of our Photo Critiques and our educational mission depend on them. Every peer reviewer should take every opportunity to develop their critiquing skills.
- Digital and Print Chairs will share responsibility for preparing and presenting a slideshow for each monthly critique.
- Digital and Print Chairs will share responsibility for scheduling the peer reviewers as early as possible in the club Photo Critique year.
- Digital and Print Chairs will work with the Webmaster to determine and implement the critique procedures, from submitting photos and preparing critiques to displaying photos and sharing critiques. Details of these procedures will be documented on the club website.
- If there are insufficient peer reviewers for any month, the Photo Critiques may be canceled. Cancelation requires board approval.
- Peer reviewers may see the subject/genre chosen by the maker for each photo in both Digital and Print Photo Critiques if they hover over the image on the website. Peer reviewers must not assume anything about the image except what they can see in the image.
- Digital and print photos will be peer-reviewed at a location determined by the Digital and Print Chairs.
- Because digital photos are critiqued using an online system where peer reviewers can only view the images from a computer, we assume they will have a calibrated monitor and an appropriate viewing environment.
- Print and Digital Chairs are encouraged to experiment with critiquing procedures that might improve our photo critiques.
- We are currently experimenting with a three-part critiquing process to improve our members' critiques and reduce the burden on our peer reviewers.
  - Each peer reviewer drafts critiques for assigned images.
    - Only one peer reviewer per image.
    - Peer reviewers assigned ≤ 5 images.
    - ArtsEdge framework to structure and expand comments.
    - Rubric for scoring.
  - Reviewing critiques in a 3-member critique group online or face-to-face.
    - Print critique groups must be face-to-face with actual prints.
    - Each peer reviewer presents their assigned images while the other two peer reviewers comment and suggest changes.
    - Other reviewers' comments were entered and saved.
  - Critiques edited and uploaded.
    - Chairs review the reviewer's comments and the peer reviewer's final critiques.

Criteria for Critiques

Sedona Camera Club peer reviewers are asked to use three general criteria to evaluate and score Digital and Print Photos: Interest, Composition, and Technique. Each criterion is divided into two sub-criteria, as described in Table 3. To define each sub-criterion, we have listed focus questions

from the *PPA Elements of a Successful Image* that our peer reviewers can use to assess photos for each sub-criterion. Read about the PPA elements of a successful image [here](#), [here](#), and in Table 3 below.

> *Not all the items listed under each sub-criterion are relevant or appropriate to every photo, so peer reviewers must NOT score a photo based on focus questions irrelevant to the photo. For example, many items listed under the Composition criteria do not apply to an abstract image in which the entire image is the center of interest, and the story is left to the viewer's imagination. However, at least one item for each sub-criterion should be relevant for any photo. All photos, from landscapes and wildlife to composites and abstracts, should be able to score as high as any other photo.*

Writing Comments with the *ArtsEdge* Critique Framework

Comments are the most meaningful feedback our members get from our critiques, so we must write the best comments possible. Often, we focus on technical issues, which are essential but lower in the 12 Elements hierarchy, and neglect the higher elements of creativity, feelings, and social impact.

A recent article titled *Teaching Students to Critique* by Joyce Payne described a framework to help students critique art created by their peers (based on The Feldman Method 1967, 1994). The framework includes the four aspects of art criticism, including description, analysis, interpretation, and assessment, and defines them with focus questions. This framework is a model for preparing better comments.

The sequence of the critique aspects (and the focus questions) leads us to consider the elements of the photograph generally from the bottom up in the hierarchy of the 12 elements. This bottom-up structure starts with the most objective descriptions and finishes with the most subjective assessments. Comments written using this framework can help determine scores. This benefit is especially true after you have written the final assessment aspect of the comments. You are encouraged to use the recognitions from Table 4 in your assessment: exceptional, very effective, mostly effective, somewhat effective, or minimally effective.

The four aspects of art criticism include description, analysis, interpretation, and assessment. Below they are explained in order using the focus questions and writing prompts, which have been edited to meet our needs for photo critiques.

Describe all the Visual Elements & Techniques Used:
Focus questions:
- What do the title and apparent location tell you about the image?
- What is the apparent genre of the photo?
- What are the subject and structural elements of the photo?
- Engage with the image without drawing conclusions about it.

List the visual elements of the photo objectively or factually, and do not assume anything about the image except what you can see in the picture.
- List the major and minor elements that comprise a visual inventory of the image.
- List any in-camera or post-processing effects like genre, style, focus, exposure, texture, color, highlights, shadows, or lighting that you can see in the image without drawing conclusions about them.

Analyze the Composition & Effectiveness of Techniques:
Focus questions:
- How are the visual elements (listed above) connected to create the composition?
- Are the elements balanced in the composition, or, if not, does the imbalance enhance the photo otherwise?
- Are there similarities or repeated elements in the composition?
- Are there points of emphasis or motion in the composition?
- How is the viewer drawn into an abstract image without apparent elements?

Describe how the photo is organized as a complete composition.
- Describe the merits or faults of the image composition <u>without</u> giving instructions for how they should have been composed, cropped, or otherwise fixed.
- Analyze how the visual elements, or technical effects like textures, dead space, color contrast, etc., enhance or detract from the image composition.

Interpret Viewer Feelings, Impact & Story:
Focus questions:
- What are the expressive qualities of the image like color, texture, or balance?
- Does the photo remind you of other things you might have experienced (analogies or metaphors)?
- Does the image relate to societal, environmental, or humanistic issues?

Describe the impact of the image on you.
- Discuss how the image makes you feel or what it makes you think.
- Discuss the story told by the image, the creativity of the photo, aspects of style, genre, or the image's message.

Assess the Overall Impact & Effectiveness:
Focus questions:
- What image qualities make you feel it is a success or failure?
- How does it compare to other similar photos you assessed as average, above average, or below average?
- How original is the photo? Why is it original or not original?

Describe your opinion of how well the image reflects our sub-criteria for a successful image.
- Discuss your analysis and interpretation of the photo and how they all work together to create a successful picture.
- What are the best and worst aspects of the image?
- You might also include references to sub-criteria that will likely affect your scores and the recognition level it might receive, like exceptional, very effective, mostly effective, somewhat effective, or minimally effective.

Our critique comments are not intended to be overly long essays. Only answer each critique section's most pertinent focus question(s). Several sentences for each section of the framework might be a minimum, but do not shy away from adding more. Remember how much you enjoy receiving constructive comments. You should try to write as much for all images regardless of their recognition. Meaningful commentary will benefit both exceptional and minimally effective image

makers, and others will understand what made the image more or less reflective of our critique criteria.

Assessing and Interpreting Photo Scores

Each peer reviewer will score each of the six sub-criteria in the rubric (Table 3) on a scale from 1-5 based on the assessment scale shown in Table 2 below. Thus, the maximum total score is 30 points.

Table 2. Assessment Scale for Sub-Criteria

5	Photo is an <u>exceptional</u> example of the sub-criterion
4	Photo <u>effectively</u> reflects the sub-criterion
3	Photo <u>basically</u> reflects the sub-criterion
2	Photo <u>minimally</u> reflects the sub-criterion
1	Photo <u>does not reflect</u> the sub-criterion

The club relies on our peer reviewers to score the level to which a photo reflects each sub-criterion. Admittedly, this is a subjective process, but with experience, peer reviewers can effectively assess the elements of a successful photo. The *ArtsEdge* framework above really helps peer reviewers to determine scores. A significant advantage of scoring each sub-criterion is that it provides relevant feedback to the makers and suggests areas to improve their photos. Scores also can help photographers to assess improvement in photographic skills over time.

Considering each sub-criterion, if the photo is <u>average</u> with a basic reflection of the sub-criterion, it should earn a three on the assessment scale. If the photo is <u>below average</u> (minimally effective) or <u>totally lacking</u> with respect to the sub-criterion, then it would earn a 2 or 1. Alternatively, if the photo is <u>above average</u> (effective) or <u>exceptional</u> for the sub-criterion, it would earn a 4 or 5. Continuing through the sub-criteria, peer reviewers will determine a separate score for each sub-criterion, which, when summed, results in a total score for the photo.

If photo scores are like all other natural phenomena, then <u>most photos should have average image quality</u> and earn a score of 3 for most sub-criteria and a total score of 18 ± 3 (approx. 40-60%). <u>Extreme scores of 1 or 5 for any sub-criterion or total scores of less than nine or greater than 27 should occur rarely (maybe 5-10%)</u>. Of course, it is possible (perhaps probable if our educational mission is realized) that our photos are better than the mean of our peer reviewers' experience, in which case the scores will be skewed higher than expected (maybe averaging 20 or more).

To facilitate critique scoring, we have developed a rubric (Table 3) table for scoring, which lists all the criteria and items defining each sub-criterion. It also has the scale used to score each sub-criterion level of completion or satisfaction. Peer reviewers and photo makers are encouraged to refer to this rubric often to assess or interpret photo scores. Scores on our rubric should also direct attention to the merits and faults of the photo. Thus, peer reviewers should vary their scores to communicate their assessment of the image's success with some sub-criteria and problems with other sub-criteria (i.e., avoid straight 3's or 4's unless warranted by the photo).

The average of the total scores rounded to the nearest whole number will be used for determining monthly and year-end recognitions. Thus, the scores will provide meaningful feedback to the maker regarding successful elements and those that could be improved.

Table 3. Photo Critique Criteria and Sub-criteria Listed in our Rubric

Sedona Camera Club Photo Critiquing Rubric v5-- CRITERIA and Sub-Criteria

Rating Scale for Sub-Criteria	Not all the items listed under each sub-criterion are relevant or appropriate to every photo, so we must not score a photo based on items that are irrelevant to the photo. For example, many of the items listed under the Composition criterion do not apply to an abstract photo in which the entire image is the center of interest and the story is left to the viewer's imagination. And some styles break the 'rules' to create an effective photo. However, at least one item for each sub-criterion should be satisfied for any photo to be a successful image. All photos from landscapes and wildlife to composites and abstracts should be able to score as high as any other photo.
5 = Photo is an exceptional example of the sub-criterion 4 = Photo effectively reflects the sub-criterion 3 = Photo basically reflects the sub-criterion 2 = Photo minimally reflects the sub-criterion 1 = Photo does not reflect the sub-criterion	

INTEREST

Impact (score 1-5)
- Does the photo have Impact, which is the sense one gets upon viewing an image for the first time?
- Does the photo evoke laughter, sadness, anger, pride, wonder or another intense emotion?
- Does the photo draw your eye into the picture and cause an immediate reaction?

Creativity or Style (score 1-5)
- Is there anything particularly creative, novel, different or exciting about the way the subject or message is expressed or interpreted?
- Does the photo represent a specific genre? If so, is it a good representation of that genre?
- Does the photo employ a specific style? Is the style appropriate for the subject and is it a good representation of that style?

COMPOSITION

Elements of Composition (score 1-5)
- Does the relative placement of image objects or elements enhance the photo? (elements include pattern, symmetry, texture, depth of field, lines, framing, perspective, space, balance, color, contrast)
- Are the center or centers of interest well placed. Does it stand out from the background? Does its placement work together with all other secondary elements to express the purpose of the photo?
- Do the main lines or elements of the picture lead to the main subject? Do they add depth? Does your eye follow a path that keeps it within the picture?
- Is the horizon line placed properly for the subject?
- Are repetitive shapes or colors appealing to the eye and clearly a pattern or design?
- Are composition rules like the rule of thirds applied, if appropriate.
- Does the photo achieve simplicity with no extraneous elements?

Subject or Story (score 1-5)
- Is subject clear, or, if the photo is an abstract, is the message or intent apparent and cohesive?
- Does the photo tell a story clearly and simply? Or does it otherwise evoke imagination or wonder?
- Does the photo communicate to the viewer what the maker saw or felt at the time the photograph was taken?
- Does the photo have a well-chosen title that helps the viewer understand the image?

TECHNIQUE

Focus, Exposure & Lighting (score 1-5)
- Do the in-camera techniques used to create the photo enhance the photo?
- Is the photo well focused? If selective focus is used, is it effective?
- Is the exposure appropriate, without any blocked shadows or blown-out highlights, unless it was intentionally and effectively over or under exposed?
- Does the use and control of light, either manmade or natural, enhance the photograph?

Contrast, Color & Production Quality (score 1-5)
- Do the post processing and production techniques used enhance the photo?
- Is the global and local contrast appropriate for the photo? Is the sharpening done effectively?
- Is the color saturation appropriate for the subject?
- Are the colors balanced supplying harmony to the photo?
- Does the digital photo or print exhibit quality work?
- Does the presentation give the photo a finished look? The borders used, either physical or digital, should support and enhance the photo, not distract from it.

Comments: Please see the *ArtsEdge* framework for writing critiques.

Any given total score can be interpreted using Table 4, which shows ranges for different recognitions. This recognition scale is analogous to a grading scale in education.

Table 4. Interpreting Scores - Recognition Ranges

Total Score	Recognition	Description
≥27	Exceptional photo	Exceptional example of our criteria
≥24 & <27	Very effective photo	Very effectively reflects our criteria
≥21 & <24	Mostly effective photo	Mostly reflects our criteria
≥15 & <21	Somewhat effective photo	Somewhat reflects our criteria
≥6 & <15	Minimally effective photo	Minimally reflects our criteria

Score or Comment Clarification Requests

Images and critiques are available to all members on the club's website under the Members tab – Monthly Critiques (login required) after our seven regular meetings. When photos and critiques have been released, they are available for the maker and other club members. This display includes a compilation of all critiques for each member and a collection of all Photo Critiques from 2016-17.

Members should accept the peer reviewer's scores and comments, positive or otherwise, as a singular opinion and an opportunity to learn and improve their photographic skills. If submitters have questions about peer reviewers' scores or comments, they may request clarification by adding a comment on the website for the photo in question within a month of the critique release. The Webmaster will forward the clarification request to the Photo Critique Chair, who will contact the peer reviewer to see what clarification can be provided.

The board will continue to develop this process to enhance the communication between peer reviewers and our members.

Recognitions

We generally refrain from identifying winners and losers in our Photo Critiques. However, there is educational value in identifying and recognizing photos that effectively reflect the highest levels of the sub-criteria based on the PPA's 12 Elements of a Successful Image.

Monthly Recognitions

- All photos with total scores in a particular interval (see Table 4) will receive the same recognition. Our Photo Critiques have no winners or losers; we focus on how well the submitted photos achieve the photo criteria. Thus, our recognitions will be based on achievement with respect to our criteria, NOT by comparison to other members.
- We will recognize Exceptional (≥27) and Very Effective (≥24 & <27) photos in a slideshow at our monthly meetings.
- No monthly recognitions will be given in any subject/genre categories.
- All photos will be displayed in the digital slideshow or as prints at the monthly meeting.

Annual Recognitions

- All Exceptional and Very Effective images for each subject/genre will be recognized by genre/subject in a slideshow and a certificate. We will recognize the highest-scoring photos in each subject/genre with a certificate.
- Before the May year-end party, members can vote on their favorite digital and print photos of the year. The Exceptional and Very Effective images from all the monthly digital and print critiques will qualify for the voting.
    - The gallery of qualifying images for digital and prints will be opened for voting by the membership at or just before the April meeting. The images for digital and prints with the most votes will be the favorite images of the year.
    - Before the year-end party, the gallery of finalists for the favorite digital and prints will be opened for voting by the membership. The images with the most votes for the favorite digital and print images will be recognized at the year-end party with a certificate.
- At the year-end party, we will recognize the highest-scoring photos in each subject/genre with a slideshow and a certificate.
- The Ellsworth Schnebly and Ray Reed awards will continue the tradition with award criteria more consistent with our educational mission.
    - The Ellsworth Schnebly Award is for the most improved photographer, measured by the annual average growth rate of their photo critique scores over the last three years. Eligible members must have a minimum of 8 submissions across both digital and print critiques each year. The recipient will receive the Ellsworth Schnebly traveling plaque for one year. All members of Sedona Camera Club (including the board) are eligible for the award.
    - The Ray Reed Award is for outstanding work to help others improve their photography. The recipient will receive the Ray Reed traveling plaque for one year. All members of Sedona Camera Club (including the board) are eligible for the award and can nominate candidates. Nominations will close at the April meeting. The board will vote on these annual awards.