

How to Enter and Win Photo Contests

Introduction

What is a good photograph? While a hard definition to write, it can be any image capture you enjoy to look at.

Theoretically a good image should have four elements: composition, exposure, technique, and presentation. An image should capture the interest of the observer or judge. It may be unique or common; but to be a winner, it should stand out from all the other images.

Competitive photographers should compose images that include some of following features:

- Point of Interest
- Framing
- Background and Foreground
- Close view
- Cropping
- Lines
- Simplicity
- Contrast
- Balance
- Viewpoint
- Direction of Movement
- Diagonals
- So-called “Rule of Thirds”

Most importantly, as a competitor you will want to submit a photograph that you like rather than one that you think judges will like. If you want to please judges, you will never have your own style or individuality. Keep taking images of all kinds, building up a portfolio of images that you can use in the future for competitions, contests, and your own use. I suggest that you try not to limit yourself to one type of image or you will be “type cast.”

Many judges are subconsciously or overtly biased. We have seen this in competitions; for example, a judge may not like “cats” or “digital” images. Bias should not occur in judging, but it does.

Do not “play” to the judge’s interests: if a judge is an expert in flower photography, he or she will be super-critical of your flower images or may not prefer flowers at all in his or her judging.

Remember that judges are human, fallible, make mistakes, etc., but are not the last word. An image may lose in one competition but come in first in another.

Photograph what you like but try something different. Break the so-called “rules,” as that can make for a fine picture!

File photographs so that you know where your images are, in order that they may be easily retrieved. A great image that is lost is an image never taken. Remember, too, an image is a capture in time that cannot be repeated.

Why Enter

For the photographer who is confident in his or her abilities and is knowledgeable of the techniques available, entering contests can enable the photographer to compare his or her works with a vast number of competitive photographers.

Winning is a “high” or “ego trip” that increases self-confidence, but rejections are the path to winning. Be prepared to lose more than win. Don’t get discouraged! The awards are secondary to the universal recognition and satisfaction of seeing your photo in print.

Where to Start

There are a limited number of competitions available to the amateur and part-time professional photographer. Several photo magazines, such as *Petersen’s Photographic* and *Popular Photography*, have monthly competitions. The total submissions are huge, so don’t be discouraged—keep submitting. My best advice to the aspiring contestant is to look at past winning photos in these magazines.

Some major international competitions are: Nikon Photo Contest International (142 winners out of 42,000 photos submitted), Olympus Vision Age International Color Slide Photo Contest (125 winners out of over 13,000 submissions), and the Canon Photo contest. These three are worldwide and judged in Japan with both prints and slides. Look at the published yearbooks of winners to get an idea of what to submit (You don’t have to use their camera brands to compete.).

Another photo company with a yearly contest also is Tamron. Tamron has a competition 3-4 times a year in which images can be entered via e-mail or by mail, with a requirement that the image must have been taken with their brand of lens. The winning photo receives a Tamron zoom lens.

There is an annual PSA-recognized exhibition called the Austrian Super Circuit in which a variety of categories may be entered submitting slide images to be judged in 4 competitions, and each entrant receives a catalog of all the accepted images. The winners have an opportunity to win Hasselblad cameras with all the lenses.

Anyone worldwide may enter any of international photo exhibitions throughout the United States, Europe, South America, and Asia. See pages 46-49 for list of these exhibitions. Although there are no monetary awards, PSA members have the opportunity for medals, ribbons, and acceptances toward star ratings and the PSA distinctions of EPSA and PPSA. You can enter general, nature, photojournalism, stereo, and photo-travel

competitions with both slides and prints, which are always returned. All of these exhibitions are juried, usually on a point system, toward a final selection of the “best of the best.”

Many regional and state fairs have competitions in which you can submit your images in these fairs; winners receive ribbons.

How to Enter

Read and reread all instructions carefully. Make sure what is required: original slides, prints, or duplicate slides or whatever.

Label carefully with your name, address, phone number plus an entry number if required, per the rules of the particular competition. All competitions (except the PSA-recognized exhibitions mentioned above) require a self-addressed stamped envelope (SASE) for the return of your work. Some competitions will only return slides, not prints, and some request “dupe” only and will not return any work sent. In some cases, winning entries require original slides and negatives which will be returned within a year.

Do not enter any competition in which originals are requested and will not be returned. Competitions in which statements “all entries become property of... and will not be returned or acknowledged” should not be entered. When sending your photos, pack carefully. Slides should be in transparency protectors and reinforced with heavy cardboard. Slides should be clean and spotted to show proper orientation.

Prints should be shipped between two sheets of heavy mat board. I suggest all submissions should be sent by certified first class mail, return receipt requested. This will enable you to trace your photos if lost and will show who accepted your work when delivered.

Many competitions do not cost money to enter. Many foreign competitions request International Reply Coupons to cover return postage. These are obtained through your post office. PSA requires a small fee to cover processing your submission and for its safe return by mail.

Many of the digital competitions can be entered by sending a CD or submitting the images via e-mail. This is very convenient and you do not send your original material. One caveat is that you should put a copyright label on all submitted digital images.

What to Enter

Many if not all competitions state the explicit categories requested. Select at least two to three times the number of images that you will be entering. Go over slides with an 8X loupe on a light box. Fuzzy, out-of-focus slides with

scratches or slides which are over- or under-exposed, even slightly, should be rejected.

Nature should be just that—with no evidence of the “hand of man,” meaning no telephone wires, cars, fences, man-made props, houses, etc.

Competitions are judged by an international panel of well-known professional photographers. Look at what was previously selected, but do not imitate the photos of prior years’ winners. Most competitions want variety.

If you have several “show stoppers” and high scoring photos in club competition, enter these as they have stood the test under fire and have shown their impact and interest in at least one competition.

Don’t expect to get rich from your winnings and don’t expect to win on the first try. It will cost more for your printing, developing, and postage than the value of your prize premium. If lucky, you can win big. Many camera manufacturers pay off big for Grand Prize, first, second, and third places. You can win top-of-the-line camera outfits plus major cash awards over \$5000 to \$10,000.

A great advantage to being a member of PSA is in being able to get answers to problem questions. If a member doesn’t know, he will refer you to someone who does. As a PSA member, you can submit articles for and photographs for consideration for publication in the *PSA Journal*. You won’t get paid for your article, but you will earn points toward Star Awards and will earn prestige in the organization.

Photo Club Competitions

Enter all that you are allowed: submit clean and well-mounted images. Do not submit for the judges, submit what you like and do well. When you are selecting images for competition you are really jurying your own images.

Rules I have used over the past 40 years are: 1. Don’t submit similar images – if the judge doesn’t like them you lose twice. 2. Submit images that will catch the judges’ eyes and interests. If the image is too busy or complicated, the person judging will get confused and pass over your image. 3. Watch for large areas of highlights that take the viewer’s eyes away from the main subject. 4. Do not submit images that are not clean or have a “flat” appearance. When viewed under the judges’ lighting conditions, the image may lack snap.

Finally, don’t get discouraged but keep trying. The photos we see at our club competitions are great, and many could win international awards. The only way to win is to submit your photos. You will accomplish nothing when all you do is read the periodicals and say to yourself, “I could have done that.” Action speaks louder than words. Get moving! Start entering competitions! Good luck. 🍀

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