

Hear it from the Judges



It is usually the little details that make the difference between runner-up and winning entries. Learning to see things and be mindful of opportunities to improve are skills that must be developed all on their own.

In order to help students in this, here are some tips gathered from past judges to help you hone your skills, make your entry stand out among the hundreds, or perhaps just give it that final tweak that could make a difference in the final round!

The number one tip for each category is to take some time and examine works by great artists/writers in the field you are working. Read poems. This will be the biggest help to you as you develop your skills.

Note: these are mainly just tips, not necessarily requirements, for an entry.

What do judges look for in a winning photo?

- Originality and creativity! The entries that captivate are the ones that give a unique perspective, angle, and composition.

- The quality of the photo: the focus, lighting, how it is cropped, etc. You may have to take many photos of the same subject to get that perfect one that has all the right elements.
- Strong subject material and good composition. Does it have a clear, strong subject that stands out? You want judges to see right away what the photo is trying to show. A focal point that draws the eye in is also important.
- Adherence to themes. It must stick with the theme close enough that judges don't have to keep wondering how it relates.

What makes one photo really stand out in the judging?

- Interesting compositions. Figure out what you want your photograph to say. Clear lines, symmetry, contrast, and bold colors draw the viewer, as do interesting angles, perspectives, and crops. Work on lighting and composition when attempting to shoot a scene and you can add a lot of energy to your photo.
- The best photography captures a slice of reality in such a way that it leaves the viewer with a greater appreciation for that scene/subject. Remember, photography is a very powerful mode of communication. Never underestimate its power to affect audiences.
- Don't forget the entertainment value! Photographs that evoke emotions, or convey a certain mood or feeling often stand out.

What might be an immediate turnoff for a judge?

- Washed-out flash lighting. Try to use natural lighting, or at least natural-looking lighting, so you don't get the washed-out effect that often accompanies a flash. Practice using different kinds of lighting and experiment with when and when not to use your flash so the picture looks light and natural.
- Snap shots of obvious material. Try to avoid the obvious in your choice of subject or, more importantly, in the angle, perspective, and composition. If you are photographing an obvious subject, then take it from a different angle or give it a powerful or interesting crop. Sometimes the subject material is strong enough in its own right, but more often it needs a strong composition as well. And if you can combine a unique subject with an interesting composition, even better!

- If the photo is too posed or too contrived it may not make the final cut. The photo should capture truth and reality in a new way and not create a fiction or present a message that is too artificial to believe.
- If the judge can find no possible way for the photo to fit the theme.