



How To Win Photo Competitions

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How To Win Photo Competitions – Contents

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Who Is Peter Eastway?



My dad always told me not to boast, but I need to give you some confidence in what you are about to read. So, my name is Peter Eastway. I am a professional photographer and have worked commercially for over 30 years.

My work includes landscape, portraiture and advertising photography. I have worked for international clients and my images have been published in magazines, on billboards, books, calendars, posters and the internet.

I am also a photography magazine publisher. Titles which I am involved in include ***Better Photography, Better Digital Camera, Better Photoshop Techniques*** and ***Which Camera***. My time with the magazines has allowed me to meet and interview many of the world's most famous photographers and this has given me a very wide appreciation for all genres of photography.

I am the Chairman of the Canon AIPP Australian Professional Photography Awards and head judge of the International Loupe Awards. I have been lucky enough to win many photography awards and competitions, both in Australia and internationally. I have been the AIPP Australian Professional Photographer of the Year twice, and I'm an AIPP Grand Mas-



Cappella di Vitaleta. One of my earlier awards for a slightly different style of photography.

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ter of Photography and a Fellow of the AIPP.

Of course, since we're talking about photography, the views in this book are not shared by everyone and others have found success following different paths. However, I can guarantee that the information that follows will not only greatly improve your photography, but enhance your chances of winning awards in photography competitions as well.

Make Your Subject Obvious



By moving in closer, or simply cropping the image (see next page), a stronger, simpler composition can be created.

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Sometimes the subject of a photograph can be really small in the frame or is hidden away in the shadows or a busy background. Or perhaps it's a dark colour against a dark coloured background, so it is difficult to see.

When it comes to a photography competition, it's important to make your subject obvious because the judges don't have a lot of time. You need to make your point quickly.



Making your subject obvious doesn't necessarily mean making it large in the frame. Keeping the surroundings simple works as well.

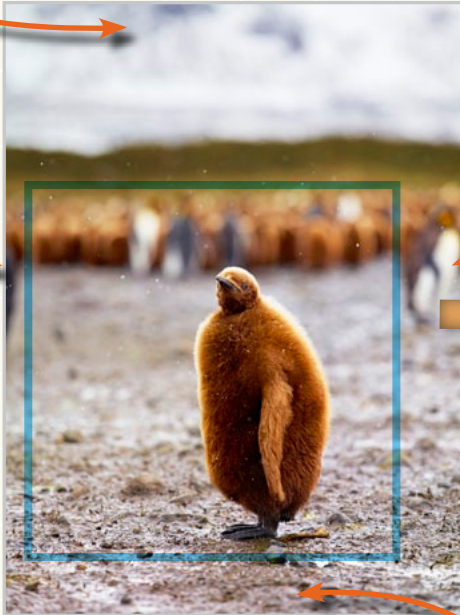
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Similarly, the human eye is very good at zooming in on what the brain is interested in. This is especially so when you look through the viewfinder of your camera and what appears to be quite large to you when taking the photograph can end up being relatively insignificant in the final image. Perhaps you need to get in close with your zoom lens so it's really obvious what the judge is supposed to be looking at, or crop your images during post-production so the subject appears more important. Of course, making your subject obvious doesn't mean it has to be large in the frame – a small subject with a simple background, for instance, doesn't need to be large to be obvious.

POST PRODUCTION WORKSHEET

Sky and hills are light in tone and distracting, so crop them out.

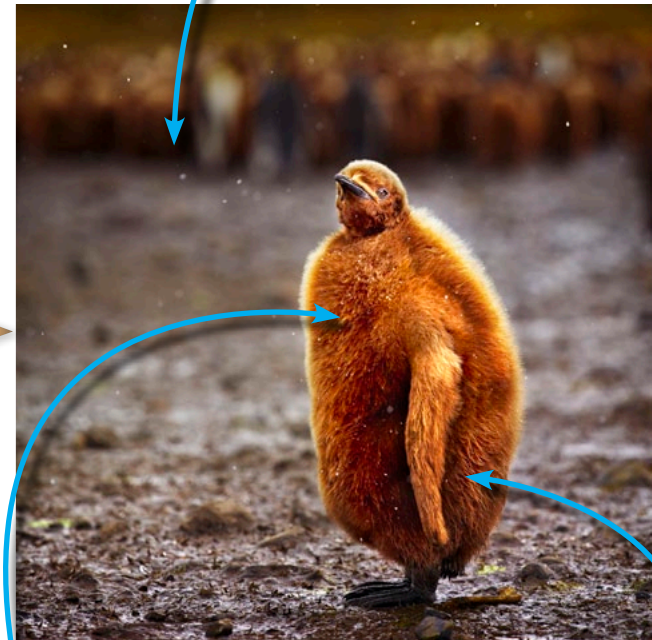
Adult penguins are distracting, so crop them out too.



Original exposure

Dark shape on edge is distracting, so crop it out! Small details are important.

Crop the foreground to balance the composition.



Darken background so the subject stands out tonally.

Lighten the subject so the judge's eye goes there first.

Frame the subject so it is not bang in the middle, but off to one side for more interest (some people say this creates more visual 'tension').

Composition – Framing

Many photographers are hoodwinked into placing the subject in the centre of the frame. There's nothing wrong with this approach, but it can become repetitive. When you look through the viewfinder of your camera, the autofocus gunsights are in the centre of the frame, so it is automatic for us to position our subjects there. However, there are many other aspects to consider.

One of the most important is framing. We've just discussed how to keep the subject dominant and ensure the background doesn't compete. You also need to consider the size of the subject within the frame, how close it is to the frame's edges, and what else is included within the frame.

Some subjects work well with space surrounding them; others are much stronger if they are tightly cropped, eliminating their surroundings and context.

In photography, it isn't always possible to have ideal framing with a clean, unobtrusive background. Sometimes the location is so busy you can't isolate your subject and have a wide view at the same time, but a tightly framed composition loses the feeling of the location. Often you will need to make compromises, but once made, these compromises may render your photo unsuitable for a photography competition.

Just because you have taken a shot of a great subject, doesn't mean it will be an award winner or that a judge will appreciate it. A judge doesn't



Water Boat, Deception Island. The boat is positioned within an amazing landscape, so it is appropriate to use a 'wide' frame that will encompass both the subject and its location.

have the same association as you do with the subject or location, and can only assess what is in front of him or her. So, to improve your chances, spend as much time as necessary to explore your subject, looking for different ways to frame it.

- If you find a good subject, don't just take one photo and move on. Spend time to explore your subject with a variety of different compositions, both horizontal and vertical.

FRAMING WORKSHOP



Overview. If you get too far away from your subject, you change everything. The water boats are in the far distance, but this is now a different shot completely.



Wide view. A wide-angle lens and a close camera-to-subject distance keep the subject relatively large within the frame, and also includes the surroundings.

Tight view. A standard lens and a different angle juxtaposes the two water-boats, retaining just a small amount of background. Note the different feeling this image has to the previous wider shots.



Close up. By moving in close and focusing on just a small section of the water boat, the whole image is changed again. The location is lost and the boat could be anywhere, so now the image relies on the texture and shape of the boat alone.

Competitions: How To Improve Your Chances



Use a program like Photoshop or Photoshop Elements to improve your photographs. This is the single most important thing you can do after you have taken a great photograph.

There are lots of programs you can use. You don't have to go to the sophistication of Photoshop or Photoshop Elements, you can use a workflow program like Lightroom, Aperture or Capture One. The important thing is to make your image file look its best.

Please note, it is really difficult to make a competition winning photo out of a bad image file. This means you must take the best photograph possible with your camera first. That's why we spent so much time in the

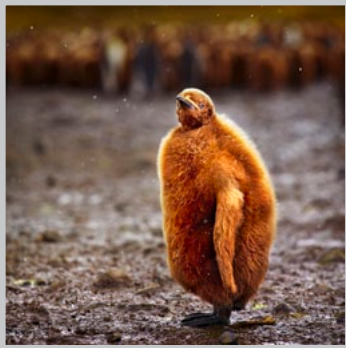
Pontecuti, Italy. The little girl was photographed in Orvieto, the bridge and background in Pontecuti. Photoshop has certainly enabled an idea to be created from 'nothing', but even 'straight' photographs need a little help to look their best.

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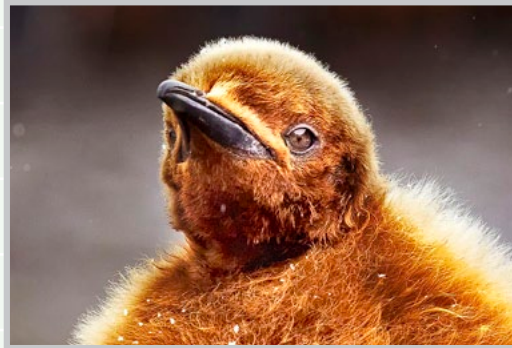
beginning of this guide reviewing camera techniques. Post-production in Photoshop can certainly make dramatic improvements to an image, but it can only produce the best competition winners if it has good material to work with.

Of course, you can also use Photoshop to create an image that wasn't really there, in which case each element in the image needs to be properly captured in your camera. Good camera technique is important!

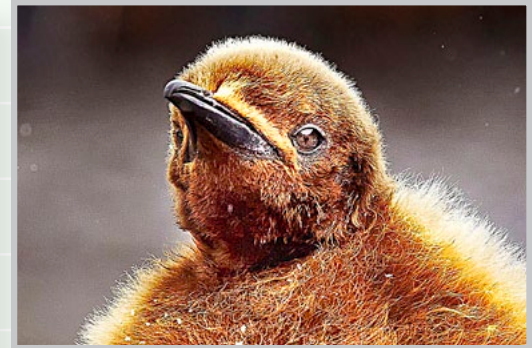
Sharpening



This is the full image presented for judging.



Sharpening is as much a matter of taste as technique. When looking at your image, it should look 'natural'.



This is an example of over-sharpening. Notice the white lines around the detail. This will lose you marks in a competition.

Sharpening images is a subject that many photographers and entrants struggle with. It is clear when judging a photograph if an image has been correctly sharpened or not, but this doesn't mean there is only one correct setting. There is usually a range of sharpening settings that will produce competition-winning results.

Why do we need to sharpen our image files? You may already know that most cameras slightly blur the image as it is recorded to ensure we have good quality colours. Then, when the files are processed, either by the camera making a JPEG or our raw processing software, a small amount of sharpening is applied to make the image look clearer with more detail.

Sharpening an image with your computer can't correct a poorly focused photograph. We are assuming your focus is correct to start with!

If you don't apply any sharpening, your image can still look good, but a little extra sharpening may make it stronger with more impact. You should test a number of different settings to see what effect they have on your image.

However, too much sharpening will lose you lots of points (although over-sharpening can also be used creatively – rules can be broken!) Over-sharpening tends to remove the photographic qualities of an image and should be avoided.

If you need help in sharpening your files, try a Photoshop plug-in like Nik Sharpener Pro or Pixel Genius's PhotoKit Sharpener. Both can be found with Google and trial versions downloaded.

How Are Competitions Judged?

Photographic competitions are judged many ways. Some are public events, others are done behind closed doors. Some are judged by experts, some by personalities. Some have one judge, others have 17 judges! And many competitions today are judged online.

When you enter a photography competition, the rules may state who the judges are and how the competition is judged. This is important to understand as it can determine how you assess your own results.

For instance, if there is just one judge and you get a low score, it's easy to dismiss the result as a single person's opinion. On the other hand, if there is a panel or three or five judges (there is usually an uneven number), a low score might be considered more carefully.

Generally, each judge is asked to give a score. Some competitions score between one and five, others give a score from 1 to 20, or 1 to 100. The higher the score the better. When the score is from one to five, it is common for the judges to regularly give scores of five for good photos, but when the score is out of 100, few judges feel 100 can be justified and will defer to a lower 90 or 95. Most don't believe there is any such thing as a perfect photograph, and so a score of 100 is either impossible or incredibly rare.

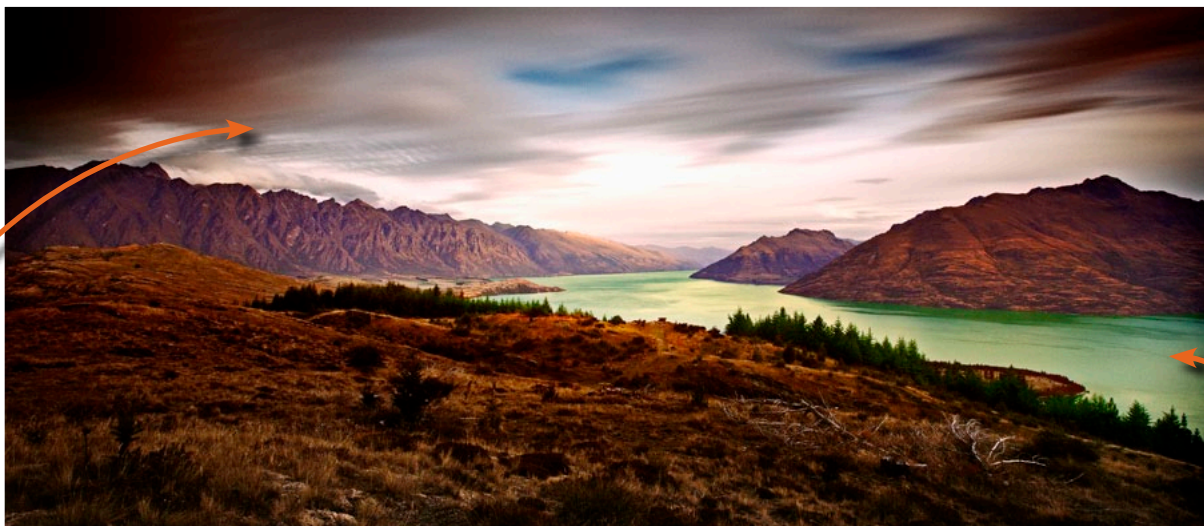
Some competitions don't give scores at all and it's a matter of in or out, whittling away the entries until there is a short list of a dozen or so which



Judging the Canon AIPP Australian Professional Photography Awards. On the left sits the panel chair and assistant panel chair who oversee the judging. Across the front are five judges, each with a microphone and computer input screen for entering their scores. Behind is the public gallery – the judging process is open for entrants and interested parties.

can be discussed and then finally a winner is selected.

Other judging systems provide scores which are a useful indication for the entrant. While you mightn't get the top score, a high score indicates the judges liked your work and, usually, this is considered a good result!



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TECHNIQUE

A neutral density filter was used to take the photograph, and this blurred both the clouds and the lake. Subtle tweaks like this can improve your chances of being noticed by the judges.

CONTRAST

Although not visible in the final image, areas in the foreground and mountain range have had the contrast increased to make them look stronger. Use local adjustments to refine your work.

FRAMING

The full frame image has been cropped top and bottom. Don't automatically assume the framing provided by your camera is the best result. Be prepared to crop your work.

COLOUR

There's no such thing as a green lake... or is there? Certainly the colour in the lake has been changed - some judges liked it, others hated it. Being different is a dangerous but essential strategy for winning.