

JUDGING HANDBOOK

THE CHICAGO AREA CAMERA CLUBS ASSOCIATION

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INTRODUCTION

The Chicago Area Camera Clubs Association provides opportunities for its member photographers to showcase their photographic efforts in a wide variety of interclub and individual competitions. Volunteer judges from the CACCA membership are called upon to contribute their time and talents to score images entered at both the CACCA competitions and at the competitions held at member clubs. It is common that most clubs structure their competitions around CACCA's rules and philosophies. Therefore, we would hope that this handbook, compiled from the perspectives of many seasoned judges, will be helpful to not only guide current judges and prospective future judges for CACCA competitions, but also will enlighten competition participants and the membership at large so that they better understand how their images are being judged whether at CACCA or at their own club.

THE JOB OF BEING A JUDGE

In reality, all CACCA photographers are judges. They judge and critique their images even before they release the shutter. They judge when they edit their work after it is processed. They judge competitions privately as they observe others who are willing to take the task to a public level by volunteering to be an official CACCA judge. CACCA would hope that, as each of its member photographers becomes skilled in the craft of photography, they would consider volunteering to be put on CACCA's Judges List. CACCA is an organization whose vitality is dependent on the willingness and generosity of its members.

It is hoped that official CACCA judges would be not only experienced and skilled photographers, but that they be lifelong learners who are always growing in their own craft, always willing to broaden their own experience base. They should be confident enough in their own photographic skills to feel that they can assess the quality of the images that they are shown. They should be willing to give supportive evidence for their assessment, and to offer constructive commentary to those who need such. While less experienced judges will not always be as confident or as adept at these tasks as are seasoned veterans, both they and the seasoned volunteer should be encouraged and supported. It is only through practice that judges will refine their techniques and become increasingly skilled in the challenging art of judging.

A judge provides feedback that is helpful

One important part of the judging process is scoring. Scoring is used to separate competition entries into groups of similar quality, thus allowing honors to be given, and standings to be defined. The judging process, however, is more than just scoring for honors. It also allows a maker to get feedback from experienced and proficient photographers as to how successfully the maker might have been in creating a striking image. While the numerical score does provide some feedback to a maker, a score should not be considered to be a definitive evaluation of photographer's work. It is simply one judge's perspective on that image at that particular time. Even judges who try very hard to be consistent and hold to a standard admit that that at another time they could very well score the image differently. They might, at a different time, notice elements that they did not see before, and they will likely simply be impacted differently. Judges' points of view are undeniably a product of their own personal history, study and experiences. Is it any wonder that others might disagree with a judge's assessments since their experience base will have been different? As much as everyone would like scoring and judging to be an exact science, it must be recognized that it is a personal assessment of an art form.

Scores alone can provide some feedback as to the quality of an image especially if there is consistency in how those scores are applied. However, truly meaningful feedback for all involved comes only when judges are given time to explain why a score was given, time to comment about the strengths of the image and to coach the maker as to how, in the judge's opinion, the image might become a stronger one. Consequently, clubs should make an effort to schedule some time during their busy schedules for meaningful coaching sessions. Some clubs do so at all their competitions. Others, because of time constraints are not able to do that but they do hold special sessions or workshops inviting seasoned judges to comment on images and the scores that might be applied to them. Encouraging the audience to also contribute to such an interchange can help broaden the horizons of all involved. The audience (and, therefore, potential new judges) will learn how various judges think. This is of great educational value over a period of time. It also helps judges (at least those with a truly open mind) to refine their thinking process and hopefully expand their horizons. Any attempt that clubs make to help their members understand the judging process, and to encourage and train confident judges, is of great benefit to an organization like CACCA.

When a judge is asked to provide commentary, he or she should feel honored and do so confidently with as much detailed insight as possible. Judges should constantly work at improving and expanding their critiquing repertoire. Cliché commentary by a judge should become less common as the judge grows in experience and skill. When commenting on an image, judges should strive to respect the dignity of the maker, recognizing the positive elements of the image, giving commentary that is uplifting and helpful while still being honest about perceived weaknesses.

While a judge should be sensitive to the maker's feelings, never being mean-spirited, the judge must still be honest. Some judges are not willing to give a low score, or any negative feedback because they fear that will be demoralizing to a maker. Such judges should note that unwillingness to recognize that a low score is warranted often results in the demoralization of yet another maker whose work truly deserved that score and is now having his or her work placed in the same category as a decidedly worse image. True learning does not come from false complements (or inflated scores) but honest appraisals.

A judge assesses an image on its own merit in an unbiased way

A judge should be aware that most competitions that they judge are considered to be "general pictorial". A general pictorial division mixes images of a wide variety of subjects and techniques. Consequently, judges, in all fairness, need to score each image based on that specific image's own merit.

Every effort should be made to judge without bias as to the subject matter, the maker, the club, the technique employed, the difficulty of the shot, or what has been seen previously. Judges will undoubtedly at some time be faced with the challenge of having to judge, with fairness, subjects that they might not like, makers whose work they recognize, images they have already seen previously, subjects they themselves have photographed, images they perceive as difficult or easy to get, etc. One of the greatest challenges to overcoming bias is when judges are put in the position of judging entries from their own club during an Interclub competition. CACCA asks judges to set aside their personal biases as completely as is humanly possible. While there is, undeniably, always some subconscious bias in every human being, judges should be personally committed to trying to be as fair and unbiased as they can possibly be.

In special competitions such as Individual Divisions (Nature, Photojournalism, Alterations of Reality, Portraits) or theme based competitions, images entered are not as broad in content and

technique as in general pictorial competitions. As judges assess the images in such competitions, they will be asked to keep in mind additional guidelines and rules that define the specific competition. Some of these rules pertain to the importance of the content of the image; other rules specify the requirements that an image must meet to qualify. It is important that the unique rules of such competitions be understood by those who judge them and that they be willing to abide by them.

In maker-made print competitions it is assumed that judges also consider the quality of the printing technique and the print's presentation in their assessment.

A judge assesses skill, craft and artistry

A judge is asked not only to be analytical, using long accepted standards of what makes a technically good photograph, but also is asked to be open to freshness, artistry and successful "breaking of the rules", that is, to be in touch with the emotional impact that an image has in addition to its technical merits. Only in this way will a judge be enough of a risk taker to use the broad range of scores that CACCA allows.

Rather than simply assessing the technical merit of an image judges should be willing to ask themselves questions such as: Does the image work as a whole? Does it evoke some emotion in the viewer such as surprise, shock, despair, love, sadness, sympathy, humor, fear, curiosity, or peacefulness? Is the image beautiful, clever, controversial, imaginative, or thought provoking? As judges grow in confidence and experience, they increasingly become aware of such factors in addition to assessing the standard technical areas of composition, exposure, and focus. They often become more holistic, assigning a score because of an image's overall positive impact and its success in achieving its goal (as perceived by the judge) rather than approaching their task simply as a one of finding fault.

A judge who is keeping an eye out for "freshness" and "emotional appeal" might caution him(her)self that what might seem trite or cliché to an experienced long time photographer and competition attendee, may indeed be a first-time fresh and exciting experience for the photographer who perhaps had never achieved such mastery of a particular subject or technique before. Just because a judge has seen (and possibly even photographed) a subject hundreds of times does not mean that the photographer has. The judge may be seeing the photographer's first image of that subject, or of such quality. For that photographer, this IS an original image. To always expect something to be truly original (or at least original to that judge) places an unfair burden on the photographer and results in disappointing a maker instead of recognizing and rewarding what the maker has accomplished. The judge then is guilty of no longer judging the merits of the image as it is presented, even though that is precisely what he or she is being asked to do.

On the other hand, a judge who is not open to freshness and new visions, and assumes that the only successful competition images are those which fit a certain time honored mold, is also doing a disservice to photographers who need to be encouraged to grow not only in their craft but also in their artistry. Judging should be honest but not stifling. Judges should be willing to recognize those photographers who bring new life, spirit and vision to an age-old craft and thus to the organization as a whole.

While judges should base their judgment calls on a knowledge of sound photographic practice, they should also be willing to recognize skilled craftsmanship, artistry and even a personal vision which might be different from their own.

A judge strives to apply his/her assessment in a consistent manner

One of the best compliments a judge can receive is that he or she is consistent. No matter whether an individual judge's scores, as a whole, are perceived by the audience as "high" or "low" the audience comes away satisfied because consistency is perceived as fairness. Even though the audience might not agree with the scoring, consistency allows them to understand that the judge has a particular point of view and applies it uniformly, and thus fairly. Consistency by a judge within a competition gives the scoring validity. However, consistency should not be confused with unwillingness to risk giving a score other than a 6 or 7. Judges should use a full range of scores and should be supported when they are brave enough to do so. Furthermore, consistency does not imply expecting uniformity by all judges. Each judge will have his or her own unique personal perspective that can be just as valid as that of a judge who chooses a different score. If the expectation were that all judges would score the same then there would be no need to have 3 judges. Even though CACCA has a score range from 3 through 9 to be used by a judge, it is wise to remember that in effect this becomes a range of 9 through 27, or more realistically 15 through 27.

A judge should not succumb to the temptation of changing his or her standards "in midstream" such as when a competition is not strong and a judge suddenly decides to give higher scores even when the quality does not warrant such, or when a different class is being judged. If a particular numerical score is not applied as consistently as humanly possible to a certain quality of image in all cases, the audience could rightly question whether a numerical score does indeed have any meaning. Or, makers might rightly feel that they are being treated unfairly in one arena compared to another. Scores should not be applied differently to different classes within a division, nor should they be applied differently to a CACCA competition compared to a club competition.

Since judging an image, as well as creating it, is a very personal and subjective experience, no maker should ever feel that their own personal vision should suffer from either receiving a particular score or hearing the personal perspectives of a volunteer judge. The way that images are assessed in a few brief moments at a CACCA competition is not necessarily the way that the image will be assessed in another competition, by another panel of judges, or by the public, or in an entirely different venue like a gallery showing, or for use in a publication.

It is indeed the rare judge who will not at some point find there to be disagreement with his or her score or commentary. Despite disagreements, a judge should always feel that his or her efforts are appreciated and are treated as valid as one person's perspective. Likewise an entrant should feel that his or her photographic efforts are also appreciated. Even though being a judge may sometimes seem like a thankless job, judges may take solace in the fact that they are given the power to bring pleasure to photographers, either because they made the maker realize that his photographic efforts have not gone without appreciation, or because the maker now feels that he has learned more about how his work might improve. Being a judge is indeed an awesome responsibility.

Viewers of a competition should show courtesy, respect and gratitude to all judges who are willing to give of their time and put their assessments on the line. If a competition chair should feel that a certain judge's style does not seem in keeping with the philosophy of the club or competition, there is a simple solution of not inviting that judge to return.

SCORES

In order to help promote consistency, CACCA hopes that the following guidelines about how specific numerical scores can be interpreted will be helpful. These should be particularly helpful to less experienced judges as they seek a foundation for developing their art of judging.

Even though CACCA makes the scores of 3 through 9 available to judges, it is hoped that all CACCA photographers would become astute enough in their own editing prior to submission into competitions that a score less than 6 would not be frequent. The scores of 4 and 3 do exist and may need to be used in only extremely rare cases when warranted. For example, some clubs hold special competitions where the makers do not have an opportunity to edit their work before it is judged (e.g. scavenger hunts) and such scores may become necessary there.

SIX is often considered a “baseline” score, the one that separates the acceptable from the unacceptable. So it will begin this discussion.

SCORE OF SIX:

A 6 would be awarded to an image that has no significant technical flaws, but which likewise has no significant strengths. Such an image is sometimes referred to as a record shot. It is **acceptable**, but does not generate any special interest or stir emotions. It is the quality of image that we would expect that most hobbyists should be able to take as a minimum standard. It has the technical proficiency that modern auto-exposure, auto-focus cameras allow. The maker has made a correct exposure in a non-difficult lighting situation and the subject of the image is sharp. However it lacks those ingredients towards which image-makers who are working at polishing their craft should be striving, as for example, achieving technical excellence, showing a knowledge of the importance of choice of subject, of good lighting, of dramatic composition, of handling depth of field effectively, of eliciting emotional impact, or of exhibiting freshness and creativity.

A 6 also would be awarded to an image that did have one of the strengths just mentioned (which might have earned it a seven) but that strength has been neutralized by a flaw.

SCORE OF FIVE:

This is an image that would have been a 6 if it were not for a significant flaw. The flaw might be, for example, that exposure is not good (one half to one stop over or under exposed), that the subject might be out of focus when it needed to be in focus, that the image might be unintentionally blurred because of subject or camera movement, that the composition is cluttered to the point of distraction, or that distracting elements are overwhelming.

SCORE OF FOUR

This image may have several significant flaws any one of which might be responsible for a score of 5. On the other hand, it may have one flaw but it is an extremely serious one, as for example, the exposure is very bad (more than a stop over or under exposed), or perhaps the whole image is not sharp (not only is the subject of the image not in focus but nothing is quite in focus), or perhaps the subject is not recognizable due to motion.

SCORE OF THREE

This is a an obvious non image, as for example, when a flash does not go off, or the shutter was released by mistake and only a blurry shot, without any real subject, results.

Once again, scores of 3 and 4 might only be seen in club competitions such as scavenger hunts where a maker does not have an opportunity to edit out such “mistakes” which do happen.

SCORE OF SEVEN

This is a **good solid image**, an image towards which every CACCA member should be striving as a minimum. Such an image is technically correct and more. It exhibits AT LEAST ONE ingredient towards which photographers who are working at polishing their craft should be striving (for example, showing a knowledge of the importance of choice of subject, of good lighting, of dramatic composition, of handling depth of field effectively, of eliciting emotional impact, or of exhibiting freshness and creativity). The elements of the image work together. If there are flaws, they are minor and compensated for by other elements in the image. For the most part, images that score a 7 do not break the “rules”. If a rule is broken, it is broken with intention and works to enhance the image. A score of 7 is the first step above a technically correct but otherwise uninspiring image that would warrant a 6. It is the start on the path towards the high impact image.

SCORE OF EIGHT

An image that scores an 8 is a **very strong image**. Such an image is technically correct and much more. The elements of the image must work together. If there are flaws, they are minor and hard to find. Obvious flaws must be compensated by other elements in the image. Images that score an 8 may break the “rules”. When the rules are broken, they are broken for impact. Technical excellence, where possible, is expected in an image scoring 8. Difficult exposures, effective use of selective focusing and depth of field, as well as other advanced photographic techniques are commonly found in such an image. The image exhibits SEVERAL ingredients towards which those who are working at polishing their craft should be striving (for example, showing a knowledge of the importance of choice of subject, of good lighting, of dramatic composition, of handling depth of field effectively, of eliciting emotional impact, or of exhibiting freshness and creativity). The difference between an image that scores an 8 versus one that scores an 7 is how strong the image is. An 8 is a really strong 7.

SCORE OF NINE

An image that scores a 9 is an **exceptionally strong image**. It need not be a perfect image, just a very, very strong image. Such an image is technically correct and much, much more. The elements of the image must work together to form a whole that is far greater than the sum of the parts. If there are flaws, they are minor and hard to find. There cannot be any obvious flaws. Images that score a 9 may break the “rules”. When the rules are broken, they are broken for impact. Technical excellence, where possible, is expected in an image scoring 9. Difficult exposures, effective use of selective focusing and depth of field, as well as other advanced photographic techniques are very common in such an image. The image exhibits MANY ingredients towards which those who are working at polishing their craft should be striving (for example, showing a knowledge of the importance of choice of subject, of good lighting, of dramatic composition, of handling depth of field effectively, of eliciting emotional impact, or of exhibiting freshness and creativity).

While the score of a 9 should not be given out without very good reason since it implies true photographic excellence, if a judge feels that an image knocked him or her out of their chair and/or that they were awestruck and immediately fell in love with it they should give it a 9 with no apologies to anyone.

Makers should not be made to feel that a 9 is impossible to achieve.

PERSONAL SCORING STRATEGIES AND PHILOSOPHIES

While the guidelines outlined above should be helpful in understanding what a score might mean, it is true that each judge will develop personal strategies which allow them to quickly and fairly arrive at a score in the brief time they are given. Each judge must develop an approach with which they feel comfortable. Judges have shared several of their philosophies and strategies and some are included here in order to help those who wish to develop their own, and to help others understand what might go on in the mind of a judge.

Judges who take a holistic approach may start by asking themselves how much initial impact does the image have. Do they see it as an “oops!”, an “OK”, a “nice!”, a “wow!” or a “knock your socks off!” Perhaps only after taking note of their initial reaction do they look at individual elements that go into making the image, elements that might not have been noticed in the overall first impression.

Judges may start by asking themselves how well has the maker achieved his or her goal (as it appears to be conveyed to the viewer). Does the image “say” something? How successfully has it been “said”? Does the image work as a whole? Such judges do not dwell on flaws unless those flaws obviously detract from the message or the goal of the image.

Some judges, especially the less experienced, wish to use a more mathematical approach. A score might be arrived at by working upwards, accumulating points for the strengths of an image, or by working down, deducting points for weaknesses in the image. Using the first strategy, a judge might start out considering that if to a blank image has been added an out of focus, overexposed, unidentifiable subject, it would earn a 4. It could earn a 5 if it is identifiable but not focused properly or the exposure is slightly off the mark. When proper technical aspects are achieved, a score of 6 would be given. As the technique and creative aspects improve, points should be added to the score in a positive or cumulative manner. In the other direction, scoring occurs by deducting points from the top as flaws in the image are observed. In this situation, everyone's image would initially start with the top score of a 9. Working in this direction assumes that each photographer is capable of creating a photo worthy of a 9.

Some judges report that they are always looking for a 9 in a competition, hoping to be able to find one even though they may not. This approach is certainly more positive than assuming that a 9 means perfection and therefore generally should not be given.

One of the most common approaches is to start at the baseline 6, a judge first asking him(her)self, “Is this an acceptable or an unacceptable image?” If it is acceptable, then they may ask, “How strong is it?...not very (6), somewhat (7), very (8), extraordinarily (9)?” If it is unacceptable, then it is a 5 (or lower in extraordinary situations). The more mathematically inclined, after determining whether the image is or is not acceptable begin adding or subtracting from 6. If it is an unacceptable image, they subtract one point for focus, exposure, poor color rendition, confusing composition, etc., two points for any two, and three points for any three. If it is an acceptable image, they add points for such things as compositional strengths, lighting dynamics, creativity, etc.

A judge may start by choosing to listen carefully to the title in hopes that the maker is telling the judge where his or her initial attention should be placed, or something about the maker's goal in making the image. A judge may then continue by trying to weigh strengths against weaknesses. Finally he or she might force him (her)self to take another look to see if there was anything that was missed. Was the initial impression a fair one? Was the initial impression so dazzling that significant weakness went unnoticed. They might finally ask themselves, “Why might another judge view this same image differently?”

Many of these assessments may seem overwhelming and time consuming to a novice judge. Novice judges should find that this can be done quite quickly as their experience increases. It is important that any judge take the time necessary to give an image a fair analysis. Even some very seasoned judges are wise enough not to allow themselves to be unreasonably rushed.

No matter what strategy a judge decides works best for that particular judge, CACCA hopes that the result will be that images of comparable quality will receive similar scores and that the scores will distinguish between images which are faulty, acceptable, strong and very strong, rewarding fairly the work of its member photographers, and encouraging them to strive for the finest images possible.

A SYNOPSIS FOR JUDGES TO KEEP IN MIND AS THEY APPROACH A COMPETITION

We hope that you:

- strive to remove personal bias and not unduly favor or penalize images based upon their subject matter, the specific technique used, the difficulty of the shot, or a knowledge of the maker or the club from which the image comes.
- apply scores consistently so that all images given a certain score can be expected to be of comparable quality no matter in which class they are, or what technique was used to produce the image.
- use the entire scoring scale effectively to differentiate images.
- base the score on the merit of that particular image rather than those that surround it, those you have taken, or those you have seen before.
- be willing to reward both freshness and creativity along with technical excellence.