

MAKE YOUR ENTRY COUNT

- **Read the rules carefully:** Any contest you enter will have different rules. It pays to read them carefully, understand what images are eligible and prepare and label each of them. Double check that you have done everything correctly before sending them.
- **Print sizes:** This is a basic one that many people get wrong. Most competitions will specify the size of the print or the matt (sometimes both). Stick to it. Oversized or undersized images can be rejected before judging. FCC has a matt size for both the mini prints and the larger prints, as does many clubs. This is often so they can display as many images as possible after judging.
- **Digital images:** These are often confusing for newcomers. There are usually height and width restrictions. Most of the time these are expressed as pixels. For FCC and many clubs, this means that the image, no matter whether it is in portrait or landscape orientation, must be no more than 1024 pixels wide and 768 pixels high. Other restrictions may be how big the file size is allowed to be and the colour-space it is saved as.
- **Category rules: Nature:** Each category may have simple yet specific rules about what is expected. Nature is one of these. Nature as classified by FAIP (Federation of International Art Photography) rules are quite strict. No domestic or caged animals or cultivated plants. Only minimal human evidence is allowed where the animal has adapted to our human environment.
- **Black and White:** If the category is just Black and white, and not mono, you must ensure that your image is just that. No toning, of any sort, is allowed in this. Generally, judges look for images where there are a full range of tones from pure black to pure white and everything in between. This will obviously not always be the case. Some high key and low key images do not always have the full range. If the intention of the author is to reduce the tones for a purpose then this should be acceptable to judges. Images where it is not obvious that there is a reason for it, and it looks as though they have been poorly processed, then the judges will mark these lower.
- **Mono:** This is another possibility in some competitions. Mono in most rules means: A black and white image toned entirely in a single colour. Partial toning or the addition of one colour becomes a colour work.
- **Don't be rejected before you get to the Judging:** This can happen in competitions with a set subject. Check the special rules and stick by them.

"Art is in the eye of the Beholder"

- Most competition judges understand the basics of good photography and will be able to spot an exceptional image, however, all bring with them their own tastes and prejudices. Some images score very highly in some competitions only to be totally disregarded in another. If something like that happens with some of your images, it is best to accept that creativity is subjective and don't take it personally.

Increase your chances of winning

- Just as in winning "Lotto", the more images you enter the greater your probability of winning. If you can enter a maximum of three images per category for the same price as one, then enter three. The more images you enter, the better your chances at getting one in front of the judges that they all agree on. Most judges will agree on the top 20% of images, so if you're in that top 20% you've got just as much chance of winning as anyone else. After that, a majority vote from the judges will decide the winner.

Edit ruthlessly

- It's all too easy to become emotionally attached to certain images, and this is when people tend to "enter" almost shots. Resist this urge. Just because a picture shows an endangered species that was taken on your once-in-a-lifetime-trip to the other side of the world, in the freezing cold and rain, doesn't mean it's any good. The fact is mediocre shots don't win. Be hard on yourself.
- Images of your children or grandchildren are another area that can lead you to believe you have an award winning image. It might be good, but the judges don't have your connection to it.
- Look at the technical and design elements. Is the image pin-sharp where it needs to be? Is the light subtle and beautiful or harsh and contrasty? Does this suit the image? Have you captured the perfect moment or have you missed it? Is the background clean and simple or spoiled by unwanted

branches or other distractions? Is the photo balanced? Does it use lines, textures, shape, tones and depth of field or colour to improve its composition?

Photography is very much about telling a story, even though you are doing it visually. Is your story apparent or does the viewer just not get it?

Put the "wow" into your image

- The image has to grab the judge's attention in the first few seconds if it's going to make the top 20%. Choose images that have impact, with strong subject matter, after all that is the reason you took it in the first place.
- All things being equal, a powerful image with impact will always outscore an image that is technically brilliant but lacks punch and emotion.
- Pick some different images, what we might think are 'left-field' images. Don't just play it safe. The eventual winner will probably have an exceptional image that has impact and a bold design and it stands out.
- Be Original—avoid clichés. If you're going to enter images of sunsets, the Opera House, the Harbour Bridge or the family pet, they should be an absolute masterpiece. The judges have seen thousands of images of these before. What feature will make your image stand out? These images that win show the subject matter in a different light. Examples could be a different angle, capture of the 'decisive moment' or even showing the scene with dramatic weather and skies. Something has to initially grab the judge's attention and make them take a second look.

Be a competent technician

- Great images are often let down by poor technical skills or finish. If the image is overworked digitally or soft where it should be sharp or shows banding or technical flaws, then all things being equal, the judges will choose an image where the photographer has a good eye AND is also technically competent.

Use the "KISS" principle

- Look at a great photograph, and there is no doubt where the photographer wants the viewer's eyes to be drawn. Images that contain too much irrelevant information rarely make it to the final list. Look at your images – is some detail distracting or unnecessary? If so get rid of it by cropping.
- Photographer's often use leading lines to take the judges eye to the point of interest.
- Another approach is to avoid having bright light at the edge of the image as it leads the judge's eyes out of the photograph. Many photographers put a small vignette around the image to contain it, thus keeping the judges attention focused within the image.

Keep the focus on your work

- There are plenty of software companies that provide "fancy" digital borders, or filters, that on the odd occasion can work quite well. These sometimes tend to be frowned upon by judges as they often draw attention to the frame or the effect rather than the image. The final result should not "scream" that a filter has been excessively used. Good photographers use the technique sparingly. No digital technique can turn a bad image into a good one.

How does the image present?

- Take a critical look at every image before you enter it. Ask someone you trust to look at each image for flaws and to give you honest feedback. Is your otherwise excellent image marred by dust or sensor spots; clumsy cloning, colours not true or the crop being too tight? Has it got a colour cast whilst printing?
- **Watch for mergers:** Mergers occur when outlines of objects intersect and cause confusion. Keep the outlines of your main subject matter clean and avoid messy or confusing backgrounds.
- **Is the composition technically sound?** Some images will follow the rules perfectly. These are great to use and to learn how to compose with.
- **Learn the rules ... and then break 'em!** Judges will often reward a brave but workable deviation from the classic rules. More often than not, images depicting bad composition will tend to get low scores or be eliminated early. A good rule to follow is, if you, or your trusted friend, are struggling to find the central element or message of your image because it's hidden amongst a lot of distracting and irrelevant detail, then the composition is technically unsound.

Come back to the image

- There have been times after a marathon Photoshop session, or hours of sniffing chemicals in the darkroom, you believe (or convince yourself) you have created a masterpiece. Avoid this temptation. Take a break. You'll be surprised how the composition, contrast, saturation etc of an image can look very different after a day or two away from the screen and or the smell.

Test the waters

- It's always difficult to bare your soul and show your images to others. Some have said it's like being stripped naked in front of everybody. Select images you are proud of and look at every competition as a learning process. Above all, have fun. That's why you started taking photos. If it becomes a chore or a horrible experience then don't do it!

Don't imitate other photographers

- It's good to look at other photographer's work and be inspired, but don't copy what they did. You'll lose impact because the judges have already seen it before and if it's not something you feel passionate about, you'll often do it poorly.

Develop your own style

- You have to be able to take something (or make something) in your own way. I will often go out with other people on outings to take photos and it's great to see that the images are never the same. We've all seen something different, or taken the images in our own style. This is what will make your images unique.

Matting

- Judges will often say they don't look at the matt. I know I try not to, but sometimes poor quality matting just yells "yuck" and destroys a good image!
- Size is the first thing. Compare these images ... which image seems stronger? The Kmart or BigW thin pre-cut matt may be cheap and easy to use, but it will make your image look cheap. The second one is better, but the third has made the image stronger. It gives it importance, it sets the image off nicely too. Spend a bit of money and get good matts, whether you get them pre-cut or you do it yourself. You can also get away with using them again if you look after them.
- Colour. This is an issue that many people don't agree on. Some people love coloured matts, and sometimes they can work really well. Unless you have a really good eye for design and colour matching, it's probably better to play it safe on this one

Always try again

- Lastly, never give up. Listen more for comments, and if there is any validity in the judgments proffered, take them on board. If not, just ignore them and enjoy your images and what you're doing. After all if you like what you've done, then that's all that matters!!!!

About Dot Radley

A diploma in Teaching PDHPE provided Dot the opportunity to develop her skills as a sport photographer, but her passion for street photography and landscapes has taken over. She has continued to attend courses to further her knowledge and inspire her. She has been inspired by Sydney photographers Max Dupain and lecturer/photographer Des Crawley. A love of black and white images has come from her first experiences in the darkroom as a teenager. The magic of developing her own prints has evolved with the advent of the digital image. Even though the technology has moved to the computer, the magic still remains.

As an emerging photographer, she has already had some success in a variety of exhibitions, local through to international level. She has also had some work published in the Black and White Magazine and in various magazines and newspapers, both online and in print. She has also done some work with local sporting clubs and taking family portraits. She hopes to one day be able to give up teaching and embark on a new career as a full time photographer. To establish herself in this very competitive field will not be easy, but she has the desire and commitment to carry it out.

preparing your images for exhibition



WHY ENTER?

- *It really is the only way to improve your skills. There's no point having your images on your hard drive, if they don't get shown to people, whether they are judges or just friends or only family. You'll also learn a lot and begin to produce images that are very different and hopefully stronger in composition and appeal.*
- *"It's a little nerve-racking" or "I'm not interested in getting awards" Yes, these are valid reasons for not entering competitions, but unless you give it a go at some stage, you'll never know what others think of your work. Once you've had a go at club level, it's often good to see how your images go in the wider community too. There are many competitions on the net, in magazines and in newspapers. Some are cost free! Have a go! You might just be surprised how you go.*
- *Success will only come with persistence. Judging is a subjective process and each judge has personal preferences, so don't take things to heart. Learn from the comments about the good and the not so good things about images. Then try again.*
- *"My shots are better than that" While it's fine to make these statements, and they might be correct, but until you put your hat in the ring, how can you really know? If your shots are better than what is there, then it's time to show them off. Stop making excuses!*
- *Personal Gratification: There's nothing better than the pride you feel when your image has been given an award or a great score in a competition. It's something money can't buy. It gives you the impetus to go and work harder at your craft. You realize that someone likes your work, apart from you that is, and that's all that matters.*
- *Accomplishments can lead to bigger things! Our list of awards and accomplishments may help us later to get a photography assignment or some work in a photography related business. For some there may be thoughts of going professional, having awarded images in your portfolio may just get you started in the industry.*