



**Image Critique Checklist**  
**for**  
**Underwater photography**

Produced by the  
Western Australian Underwater Photography Society

**2019**

## Introduction

Analysing the elements of an image – breaking it down into components step-by-step to identify its strengths and weaknesses - can be very useful in helping you to decide whether or not you wish to put it into the public arena, whether as a product for sale, as a social media post or as an entry in a competition.

Our club is a SIG – a Special Interest Group. As a special interest group, we often take “of” images – images that might suit a fish ID book or accurately record an interesting feature of an unusual animal.

But there are also “about” images. “About” images tell a story or evoke an emotion.

“Of” images can be fantastic, however, they need to be technically perfect and have the wow factor. “About” images communicate a message, they tell a story or make you feel a certain way. They create a connection between the image and viewer and evoke a response, even in a non-photographer.

SIG photographers often take photographs of unfamiliar or unusual creatures in unusual conditions, and sometimes (consciously or subconsciously) we are tempted to add weight to aspects of an image that might not, or only very incidentally, reveal themselves in the image. For example, we might be tempted to rate our images higher because of certain factors that the viewer won’t be aware of. For example:

- images taken in challenging conditions
- images of rare or unusual creatures
- images of unusually small or large creatures.

However, some viewers (like customers or non-diving judges) will not know what some animals are, nor can they identify or define the degree of difficulty in taking the image, so they will not give these factors the weight we might.

We also sometimes find ourselves staring at an image that has ‘something about it’ but you can’t put your finger on. Either something is working or not working but you can’t identify what that is.

Being able to critique your own images can help you improve your image selection, post-processing techniques and your photography generally. By running a critical eye over your own images, you will start to identify the effective and non-effective elements of your images and take steps to improve on these. You will be able to better plan, capture and develop your images.

Critique is not about opinion. It’s not about what you like or don’t like. Critique is not even about offering suggestions for improvement, that is for judging. Critique is an analytical process in which you objectively describe what you see, you interpret the image and you evaluate the image. It’s as much about what you did right as it is about what you didn’t do right and can improve.

This checklist will help you critique and analyse your own images in a methodical way.

## Checklist

### Step 1 - Describe what you actually see.

Take a good look at your image and describe exactly what you see. This will help you:

- a) Identify both intended and unintended elements;
- b) Differentiate between what you observed and what you captured.

Speak out loud or write it down if that helps. Take your time to consider the image and describe exactly what you see. Do you see an octopus or do you see a blob? What would the viewer see?

### Step 2 – Interpret the image, how do you respond?

Now think about how you respond to the image itself. How does it make you feel?

What were you trying to communicate when you took it? Does the image say this, or something else?

What are the elements in the image that make you feel that way?

Is it the subject that made you feel a certain way or is it the way you interpreted the subject?

Does the colour or light in the image affect you?

Interpreting the image is establishing the message and/or its meaning. Identifying the emotions, feeling, sensation, story, idea or thought that it evokes. Does it leave you in wonder, intrigued or perplexed?

Does the image say something to the viewer or is it too personal to you (the photographer) to mean anything to anyone else?

At this point we are trying to establish if the message and meaning is embedded in the image or if it is in your head and not likely to be received by the viewer. For example, the image might evoke a strong response for you because of the experience or memory you have of taking the photo. It may have been the first time you saw a particular animal. So while you may have an attachment to the image, it may not be a great photo and may not mean much to others.

Step back and look at the image through the eyes of the viewer. Even wait a few weeks or months before reviewing the image again, when your memory of taking the photo isn't as strong.

Try to be in an "about" headspace not an "of" headspace.

Think with your heart not your head.

### **Step 3 – Evaluate the image – how successful or effective is the image?**

What elements of the image have been done effectively or successfully? Can you make this image more effective? This step is about ascertaining whether the image communicates a message or otherwise has meaning.

#### Choice of subject

Have you chosen the right subject to share this image with others? Is the image too personal to you? (See the point above).

Sometimes there is a peak of the action or the right “moment”. Is that captured in your image? Have you chosen the right frame from the set of images taken?

Is there an obvious subject or are there multiple elements to the subject?

If there are multiple elements, is the relationship between these multiple elements the subject of the image? If so, is that relationship revealed in the position and use of those elements?

Do the multiple elements work together or are they mutually distracting? Do dominant elements have a complementary, aesthetic relationship, contrast each other dramatically or would they have worked better isolated from each other?

#### Handling of the subject

Look beyond the subject. What have you done with the subject?

Have you captured an image that is different and unique? Is it a different take on a regularly photographed subject or is it a cliché shot?

#### Exposure

Is the exposure “appropriate” to the subject and scene? You can control the exposure to create a certain mood or feeling to an image. How effective have you been at controlling the exposure to achieve your creative expression.

“Good” or “correct” exposure may not matter if you have tried to create a certain scene, mood or feel by under or over exposing.

Have your exposure settings crushed the blacks or blown-out the highlights?

#### Eye flow/rest

Is your eye drawn to the subject? Does your eye get stuck in a certain part of the image or does it get pulled from the subject? Does your eye get pulled out of the frame? Does the viewer know what they are supposed to be looking at?

Have you controlled the way the viewer will look at your image?

Contrast, saturation and lightness draw our eye.

Can you dodge/lighten to draw attention to part of the image?

Can you burn/darken to de-emphasise part of the image?

Can you sponge/saturate to emphasise or de-emphasise part of the image?

Is there enough subject contrast? Does the contrast help you focus on the subject?

### Focus and depth of field

Is the right part of the image in focus?

Does it need to be in focus? Are you trying to deliberately blur the image to create a sense of movement and motion.

If the subject has eyes, are the eyes in focus?

Is the depth of field too shallow or too deep?

Does the subject stand out from a blurred background or is it lost in an over-sharp or busy background?

Would a shallow DOF improve the image? Would it separate the subject from the background? Would it make the image more effective?

Alternatively, is there enough depth of field? Have you captured enough of the subject in the depth of field?

### Lighting

Does the image make effective use of available light (natural or artificial)?

Do the strobes successfully light the right parts of the image?

Are there hot-spots (areas where the artificial light is too strong)?

Are there areas where there is not enough light? Can you bring back the detail when developing the image?

Are there harsh shadows that are creating a hole in the image?

### Distractions

Are there elements in the image that distract the eye? Bright spots, elements in the fallow edges (roughly 10% around the edge of the image), backscatter, a stick or piece of weed poking out of or across the main subject, another fish distracting the eye, distractions in the background?

Does the viewer know what they are supposed to be looking at or are they distracted by these unwanted elements?

Does every element add to the image, or does an element distract and take away from the overall effect?

Have you effectively used the tools available to you on post-production to remove/reduce distractions?

### Composition

Does the composition have good visual weight, movement, dynamism, depth, balance?

Does the placement of the subject in the image allow the viewer to move through the image and keep them in the image or does it move their eye out of frame?

If there are multiple subjects, is there a story revealed in their inclusion? Do all the elements work together?

Have you included and left out the right elements? Is everything in the frame meaningful and balanced?

Have you cut-off parts of the animal or scene through your composition?

Have you given your subject space to move into?

Does the subject suit a portrait or landscape composition?

Do you have a good background for your composition? Bright and cluttered backgrounds are distracting and can prevent separation of the subject from the background.

Should you be closer or further away?

Would cropping improve the composition of the image? Or is there a problem with the point of view?

### Colour/tone

How effective is the colour in the image? What mood, feeling or emotion is evoked by the colour? Is your white balance correct?

Can you correct the colour when developing the image?

Should it be softer or more saturated? Would changing the colour tone or temperature change the mood or feeling of the image?

Does the image work in black and white?

### **Step 4 – Go for it**

**Once you have worked through all the items above and you are satisfied the image works, be confident to put the image out there – either into a competition, on social media, or to seek out feedback from your photography peers.**

**Be open to feedback from others and by doing so, you will continue to grow in your photography skills and knowledge.**