

Course sample

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Photography 2

Progressing with Digital Photography



Green and Red Apples Dewald Botha

Level HE5 – 60 CATS

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Project Writing descriptively

You probably think of your photography as essentially a practical or technical activity. You'll almost certainly have 'described' your photography in the form of technical notes and you've probably discussed how you've gone about a particular shoot with other photographers. And you may well have read books or articles by photographers and absorbed their accounts and experiences. But have you ever attempted a written account or description of one of your own photographs? Probably not, yet this can be a very valuable activity because it encourages you to reflect on the process as a whole. Photographers tend to become absorbed in the particular technical problem that's facing them at the moment and it's sometimes useful to step back and evaluate everything that's happened from the initial idea to the final image. Try this for yourself in the next exercise.

Exercise: Describe a photograph

Describe, fully and in a form of words with which you feel comfortable, any one of your own photographs. Follow the timeline of the shooting, beginning with circumstances or background. Take at least a few hundred words and don't worry about being concise. The aim is completeness, including factual information about the subject and the decisions you remember taking leading up to making the picture.

The next exercise asks you to write a very different form of description for the same image. This time, you'll have to be extremely concise and pick out the salient points regarding:

- the subject of your photograph
- the photographic elements of the image.

Again, these writing exercises will force you to focus very clearly on a particular aspect of your work.

Next time you pick up a photography magazine or a book on photography, pay close attention to the way in which photographers describe their work. Store copies of any accounts that particularly grab your attention in your learning log, together with your own notes.

Exercise: Write a caption

Using the same photograph as in the previous exercise, write a 50-word caption about the subject of the photograph (not the making of the photograph), for a general audience. Here is an example:



The Pontcysyllte Aqueduct, a 1,000-foot bridge that carries the Llangollen branch of the Shropshire Union Canal 116 feet (35 m) high across the valley of the River Dee, was designed by Thomas Telford, built between 1795 and 1805, and is one of the 'Wonders of the Waterways' in Britain's canal system.

Next, do the reverse: a 50-word caption about the purely photographic elements of your image, as if for a practical photographic magazine, as in the example below.



A definite composition and fortunate timing combine to make this picture work. The figures in this bathing scene in India make a distinct and unified triangle, strengthened by the position of the man diving. The moment of the man diving is the right choice, but the arm gestures of the two men on the steps add two separate moments to it.

You'll consider caption-writing again later in the course, in Part three.

Project Writing analytically

One of the underlying themes in this course is that photographs are taken to achieve something. This could be entertainment, aesthetic pleasure, or the more pragmatic aim of meeting an editorial or commercial brief. It's important, therefore, to be able to look at photographs with a clear, analytical eye and to put your findings into words. What did the photographer set out to do? How did they attempt to do this? Did they succeed?

Begin with your own photographs, ones already taken, because you have all the information. What may not be easy at first is to think objectively about them, as if someone else had taken them and you were judging them, like a picture editor.

It will help to have a structure for thinking in this way. The checklist below is a useful way of looking at any photograph with a view to understanding and judging it, although you're free to adapt or add to it as you wish. Some of the points, as you'll see, are less relevant if you're writing about one of your own photographs, but they may help you to step into the shoes of an independent observer. This is always a useful position to be in.

First impression – what strikes the eye

First impressions sometimes get closer to the heart of an image and its effect than a lengthy examination. Some images strike home faster than others: a photograph that uses rich colours will inevitably make a stronger first impression than a conceptual fine art image that requires more study time.

The genre

This is usually fairly obvious, though not always. The generally recognised genres include landscape, architecture, portraits, photojournalism, still-life, and so on.

The intended use

This is not always obvious, but can influence the way a photograph is seen and judged. For example, a news photograph is shot with some very specific objectives, and in particular circumstances. There are three major groups of use: editorial, advertising and commercial, and gallery print. There are also sub-divisions, such as between news and feature photography.

The immediate situation facing the photographer

This would be much more relevant in, say, street photography (e.g. images of a student demonstration), than in a studio, but it's important to know the difference. It helps in understanding how and why the photographer reacted and chose a particular moment and view.

An unplanned or planned photograph

From the point of view of shooting this is one of the biggest differences of all. A genuine street shot is totally unplanned, a studio shot is all planned. In between there is a large range. Importantly, a photograph that appears completely reactive and unplanned may in fact have been set up or organised in some way.

Technical details, if important

The format of the camera (large, small) or the aperture or shutter speed, may have a significant effect on the image. A slow shutter speed, for example, might impart motion streaking, but equally this might be due to camera movement. And in either case it might be deliberate, or just inevitable, or even incompetent.

Style or mannerism

This may be deliberate or an almost subconscious part of the way a particular photographer works. The tendency may be strong or weak and could involve anything from a virtuoso handling of light to an unexpected choice of timing. Some contemporary fine art photography, of the uninflected variety, avoids obvious stylistic technique to such an extent that this in itself becomes a style.

The photographer's intent

What was the purpose of the shot? Some images have more conscious purpose behind them than others, and it's easy to fall into the trap of crediting a photographer with more deliberation than there actually was.

Is there sufficient information available?

It's as well to be honest with yourself about this, rather than make unwarranted assumptions. There may be glaring question marks about what is happening in the image, or the context, and these can seriously affect any judgement. For example, a shot that seems on face value to be outstanding *could* be worth much less creatively if it turned out that it had been Photoshopped.

Success

Ultimately, a serious viewer will want to decide if the photograph succeeds within its frame of reference, based on the points above. The crude but essential question will be, is it good? Remember the three key questions. What did the photographer/artist set out to do? How did they do it? Did they succeed?

Exercise: Analyse a photograph

For this exercise, choose one of your own photographs – one that you are happy with and which you believe achieves what you set out to do – and subject it to this kind of analysis. Base your analysis on the 10 points above (adapted if necessary) and write around 500 words.

Did this detailed analysis alter your opinion of your chosen photograph? How? Make notes in your learning log.