

How to Improve Your Score – The Judges’ Viewpoint

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Competitions – Judging

- Communication – thinking, imagination, creativity, empathy with the subject, decisive moment
- Visual Awareness – composition, use of light, mood, texture, background, distractions
- Camera Work – Aperture, shutter speed, depth of field, shutter speed, exposure, highlight/shadow detail, use of light
- Quality – processing, masking, over-sharpening, control of noise, no defects (including JPEG)
- What does the image convey – Emotion, impact, mood, message, title,



Competitions – Judging - Mark

- A response to the ‘final image’
- Must match the critique
- Compares images within a class
- An appropriate range of marks including 10
- Low marks adequately and constructively explained
- Marking adjusted appropriately between different classes
- Less useful than a good critique
- Can be a useful personal indication of progress
- Used by clubs for annual trophies
- Judges do NOT want to score!



Judging – Improving Your Mark

- First Impression, Emotional Connection, Decisive Moment
- Composition, Cropping
- “Border Patrol”
- Focus, Depth of Field
- Exposure/Tonal Range
- Use-of-light
- Colour versus Black/White
- Digital Processing
- Subject/Title
- Printing/Mounting



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Visual Impact

- Initial impact counts
- What grabs your attention first?
- Does the image stop you scrolling?
- Immediate emotional or visual pull
- Judges “Initial reaction”
- Strong first impressions invite deeper viewing
- Weak ones can lose attention instantly

EXAMPLE – EMOTIONAL CONNECTION/VISUAL IMPACT -



- Black/white, moody, fits with narrative
- Leading Lines
- Emotional connection
- Grain works with the era and adds to grittiness

Visual Impact – Colour, Composition, Something Extra



Visual Impact – Colour, Composition, long-exposure, light - Something Extra



IMPACT- DOING SOMETHING



EMOTIONAL CONNECTION/VISUAL IMPACT



IMPACT EXAMPLE – INTERACTION



Example – Impact, Expression, Texture, Pose
– which is better?



EXAMPLE –PEOPLE READ LEFT TO RIGHT



DECISIVE MOMEMNT



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Composition

- The visual structure of the image
- Balance, framing, and use of space
- Leading lines and focal points
- Foreground, midground, background relationships
- Effective use of negative space
- Harmony or intentional tension
- Simplicity often beats clutter
- Composition supports, not dominates, the subject



Photographic Composition

- **Rule of Thirds:** divides the frame into equal thirds — dynamic and balanced
- **Golden Ratio (1:1.618):** naturally pleasing proportion found in art and nature
- **Dynamic Symmetry:** grid based on Fibonacci curves for natural flow
- **Square Format (1:1):** symmetry and simplicity; strong for minimalism
- **4:3 Ratio:** standard camera frame — suits balanced compositions
- **3:2 Ratio:** traditional 35mm look — ideal for landscapes
- **16:9 Ratio:** cinematic storytelling; enhances horizontality
- Judges recognise when ratio strengthens composition intentionally

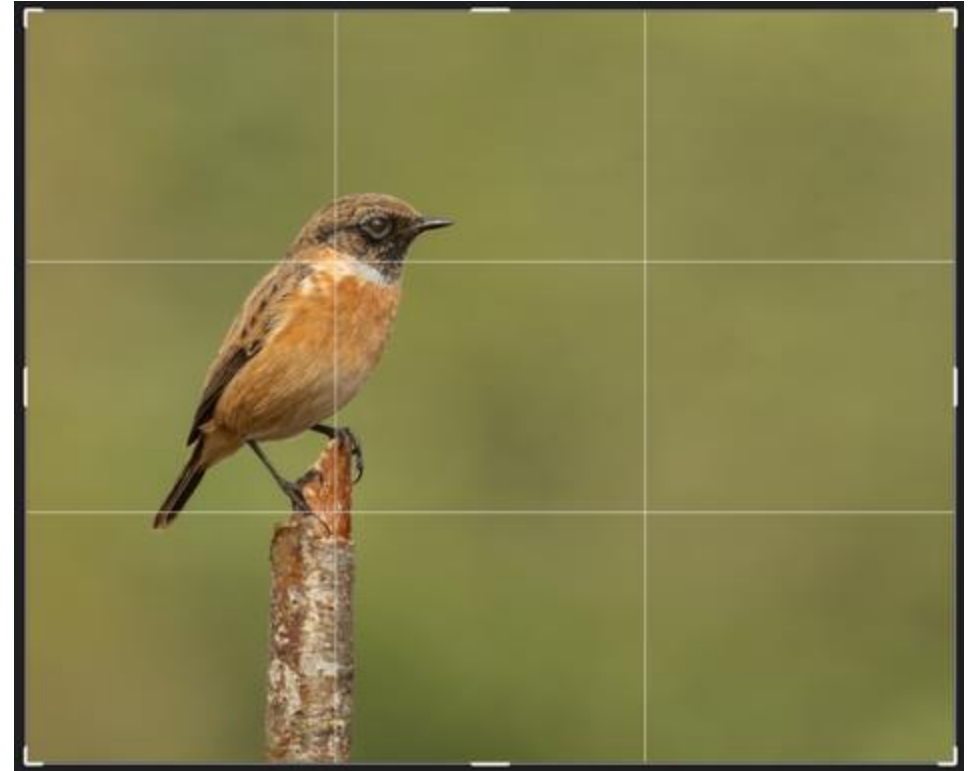
Composition

1. Keep-it simple
2. Aspect ratio
3. Avoid the centre
4. Leading lines
5. Use diagonals
6. Leave space around the main subject, including negative space
7. Keep it uncluttered
8. Be creative with colour
9. Break the rules
10. Frame within a frame

LEADING LINES



“RULE OF THIRDS”



“RULE OF THIRDS” – SPACE FOR SUBJECT TO MOVE INTO



Cropping

- Crop for story, not convenience
- Remove distractions
- Keep proportions intentional
- Bold crops can add strength
- Avoid losing context or meaning
- Cropping refines composition
- Judges notice lazy crops instantly
- Precision enhances design

CROPPING TO REMOVE DISTRACTIONS



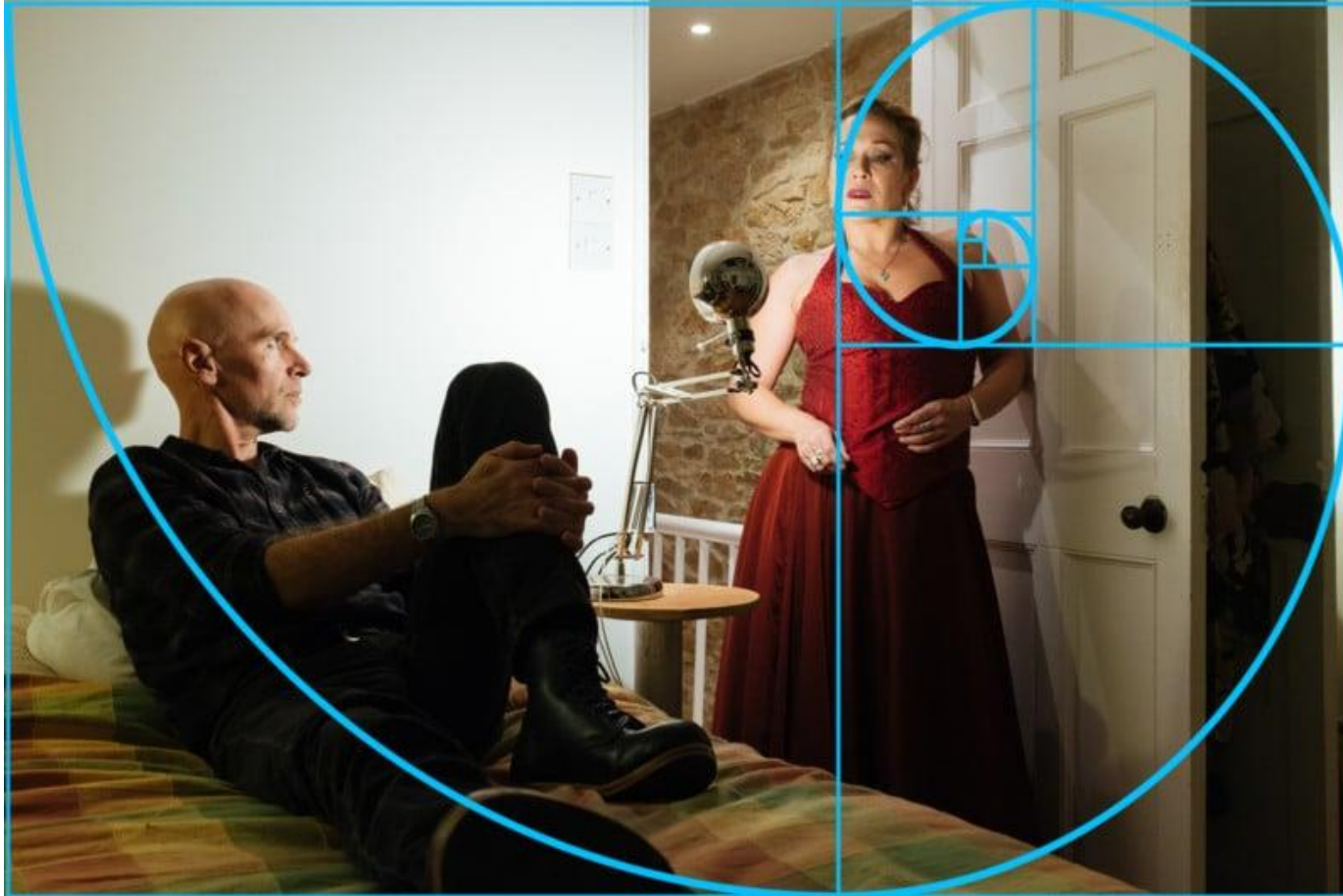
Use Diagonals







Golden Spiral



- The **Golden Spiral** (or Fibonacci Spiral) comes from nature's design
- It leads the viewer's eye naturally through the image
- The curve starts wide, drawing inward to the main subject
- Works beautifully in landscapes, flowers, and architecture
- Judges enjoy the sense of balance and gentle flow it creates
- You can overlay spirals in editing software to guide cropping
- Feels more organic than the rule of thirds — softer and natural
- Use the spiral to make the viewer's eye **travel with purpose**

Square Format



COLOUR COMPOSITION – COMPLEMENTARY COLOURS



Uncluttered Background/Concentrate Focus on the Subject



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Border Control

- “Edge/Border patrol” = the judge’s scan around the image border
- Checking for distractions that pull the eye outward
- Bright spots, half objects, or stray lines lose marks
- Judges naturally circle the frame subconsciously
- Clean edges show compositional discipline
- The frame edge is as important as the subject
- Untidy edges suggest lack of attention
- Strong edges keep the viewer inside the story

Distracting Element



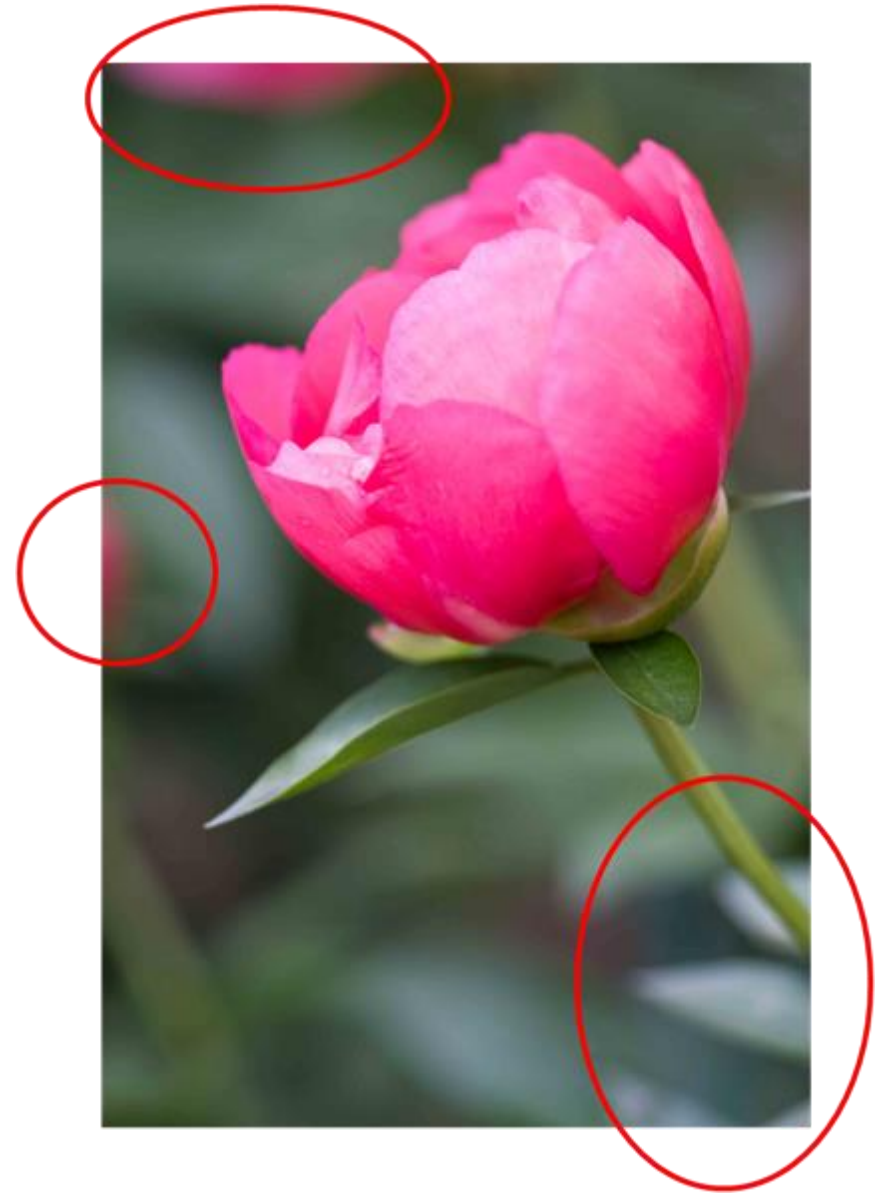
CUTTING SUBJECTS OFF



DISTRACTION – VIOLET FLOWER



DISTRACTING EDGES OF IMAGES



HARSH LIGHTENING FROM RIGHT LOWER CORNER OF IMAGE



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CORRECT DEPTH OF FIELD (DOF)

- Depth of field controls **what's sharp and what's suggested**
- Judges assess whether DoF supports the image's intent
- **Shallow DoF** isolates subject and enhances intimacy e.g. portrait
- **Deep DoF** adds storytelling and spatial depth – often used landscape
- Poorly chosen DoF can make images look confused
- Background blur must complement, not distract
- Sharpness should fall where the viewer's eye naturally rests
- Controlled DoF = technical mastery and artistic sensitivity

CORRECT DOF, DIFFERS ON GENRE



Extended depth-of-field landscape



Short Depth of Field for Portrait

CORRECT DOF – Why is this is a “@\$% shot?



WHICH IS BETTER?

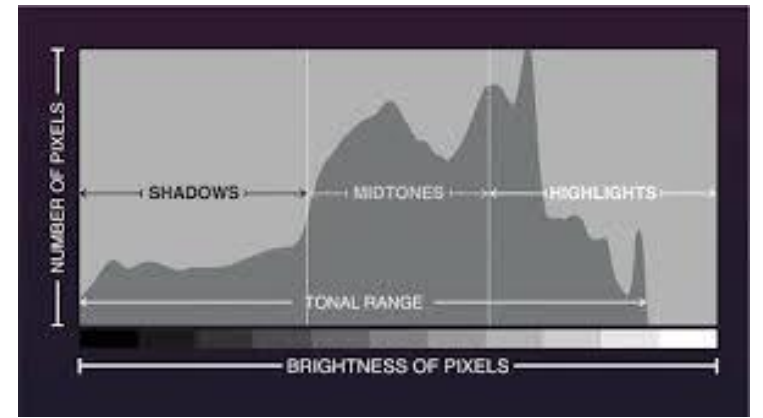


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Exposure

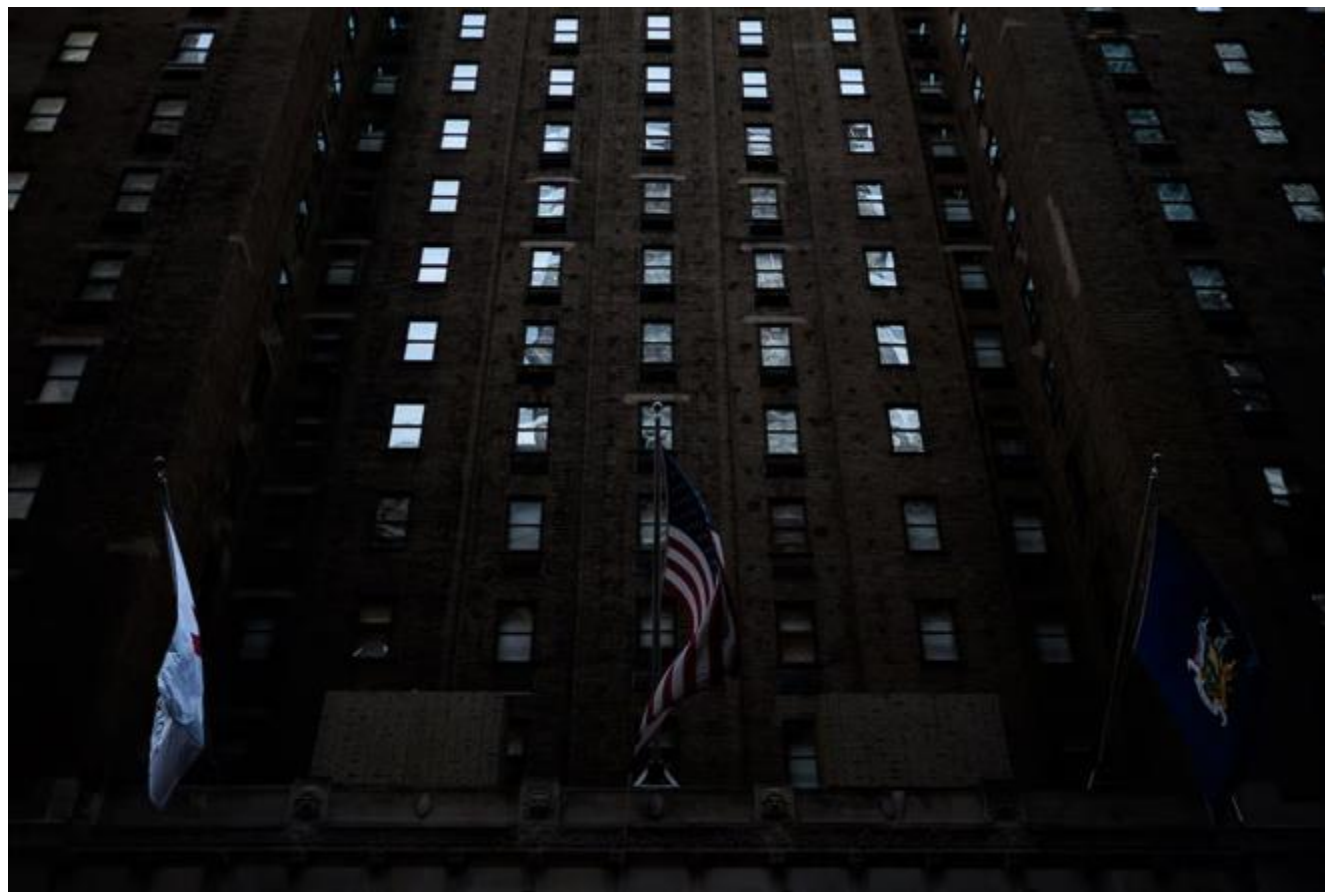


- Exposure is about **balancing light, shadow, and detail**
- Slight over- or underexposure can change the whole mood
- Avoid **blown highlights** – once they’re gone, they’re gone
- Keep **shadow detail** where it supports the story
- Use exposure compensation and histograms confidently
- “Expose to the right” – but don’t push past recovery limits
- Judges look for control, not luck – consistent tone wins marks
- Think: does the exposure match the feeling you want to create?

TONAL RANGE

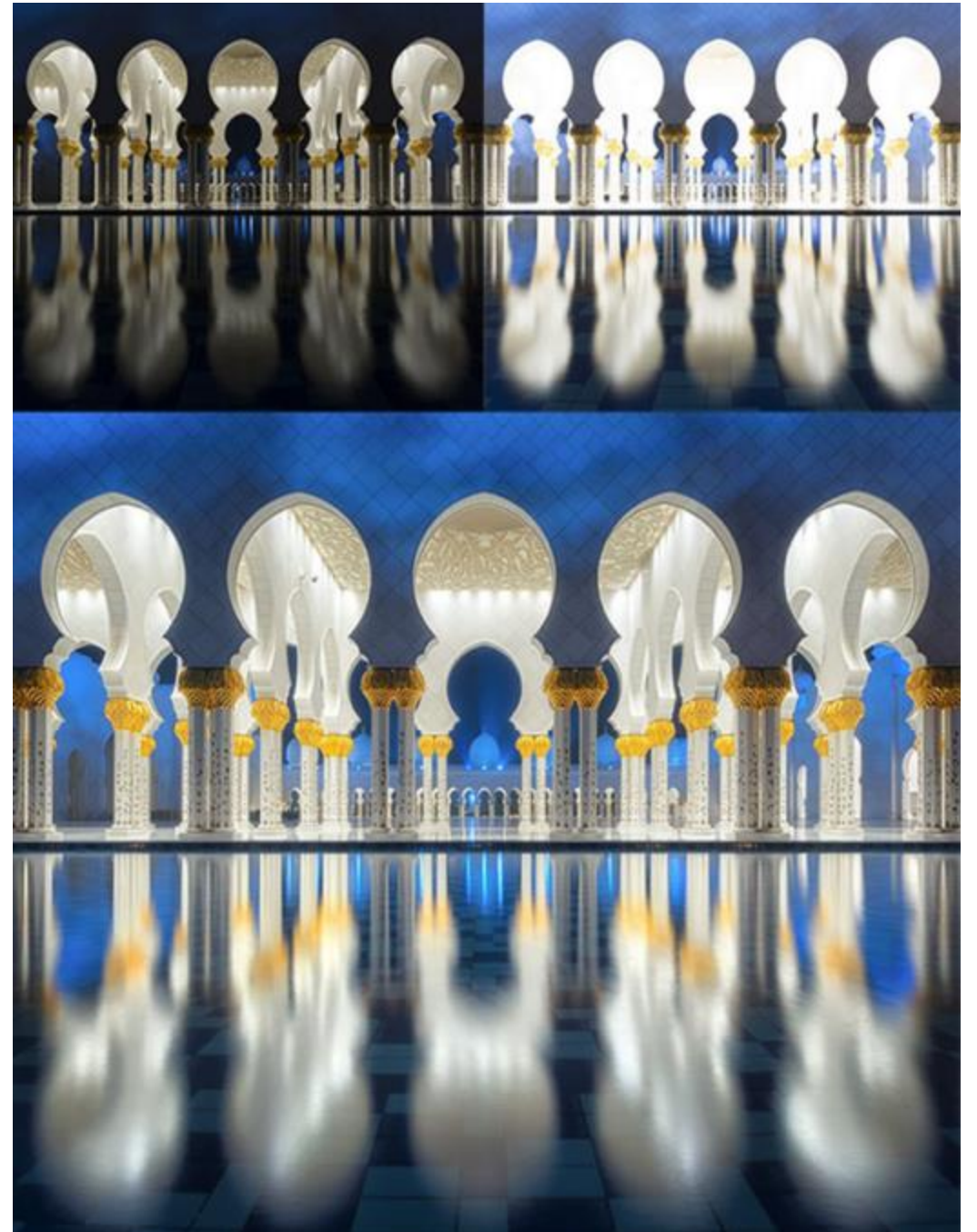
- Tonal range is the mix of **light, mid, and dark areas** in your photo
- A good image has **detail in both shadows and highlights**
- Avoid **pure white or solid black patches** with no detail
- Colour and tone work together to create depth and mood
- Balanced tones make colours look natural and rich
- Too much contrast can make colours harsh or fake
- Gentle transitions feel more realistic and professional
- Ask yourself: *does the light, shade, and colour feel right to the eye?*

OVER-EXPOSED, UNDER-EXPOSED



EXPOSURE BLENDING

Combine images exposed for the highlights and shadows, if difficult dynamic range



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Use-of -Light

- Light is the **most powerful tool** in photography
- It shapes mood, texture, and emotion
- Notice the **direction, quality, and colour** of the light
- Side light adds depth; backlight creates drama or glow
- Soft light gives calmness, hard light adds energy
- Judges look for images where light feels intentional
- Ask: “Where is my light coming from and why?”
- Great photos often start with **great light, not great gear**

Use-of -Light

- Always **look at the light first**, before lifting the camera
- Ask: is it soft, harsh, warm, cool, or changing?
- Move yourself or your subject to make the light work better
- Use shade, clouds, or reflectors/diffusers to **soften strong light**
- Bright sun gives contrast; cloudy skies reveal colour and detail
- Early and late light adds warmth and atmosphere
- Artificial light works best when it feels natural
- Judges reward images where light feels **noticed and used with care**

LIGHTENING



LIGHTENING



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Colour Versus Black and White

When to use colour:-

- Colour adds **emotion, realism, and atmosphere**
- Warm tones feel inviting; cool tones feel calm or distant
- Use colour to guide the viewer's attention
- Too many strong colours can fight each other
- Muted or limited palettes often feel more sophisticated
- Judges notice when colour **adds meaning, not distraction**
- Ask: what role does colour play in your story?
- If colour isn't helping, consider going monochrome

Colour Versus Black and White

When to use Black/White-

- Black & white removes colour — and reveals **form, tone, and texture**
- Ideal when light, shape, or contrast are the main subjects
- It can make images feel timeless or more emotional
- Judges look for **strong tonal range** and clean contrast
- Flat greys or muddy midtones lose marks quickly
- B&W needs intent — not just “desaturate and hope”
- Patterns, portraits, and documentary work often shine in mono
- Think: does removing colour make your message stronger?





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Digital Processing

- Editing should **support the image, not dominate it**
- Start with a well-exposed, sharp file — don't “fix it later”
- Adjust brightness, contrast, and colour with a light touch
- Watch for **halos, banding, and over-sharpening** — easy to spot
- Keep skies and skin tones natural
- Avoid heavy-handed HDR or filters unless stylistically justified
- Judges value subtlety, accuracy, and good tonal balance
- The best processing looks invisible — not obvious

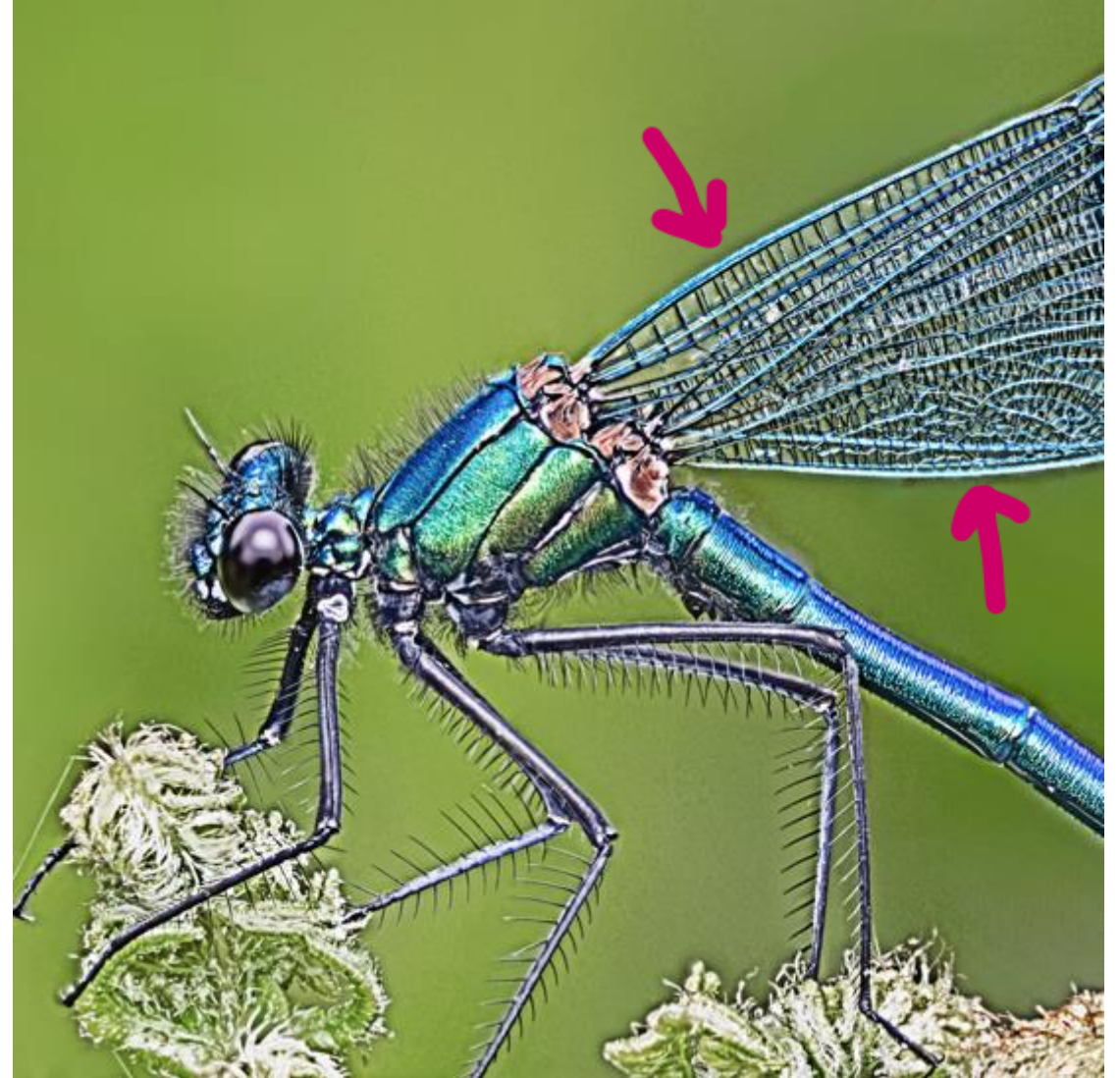
Digital Processing

- Always edit with your **story and subject in mind**
- Cropping, cloning, and blending should serve composition
- Remove distractions carefully — not carelessly
- Match your processing style to the image mood
- Keep details crisp without looking artificial
- Check edges and borders for editing artefacts
- Review your image at least 100% before submission
- Judges reward processing that feels authentic

Common Processing Errors

- **Over-sharpening** – creates haloes and crunchy textures
- **Over-saturation** – colours look unnatural or cartoon-like
- **Heavy contrast** – crushed shadows or blown highlights
- **Too much noise reduction** – skin or texture turns plastic
- **Uneven cloning or patching** – visible patterns or repeats
- **Halos around skies or edges** – caused by poor masking
- **Excessive HDR or filters** – unrealistic, “overcooked” look
- Judges reward **subtle, natural edits** that respect the image’s integrity

Over-Sharpening, including Halos



Over-Saturation



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Subject Title

- A good title helps judges **understand your intention**
- Keep it **short, clear, and relevant** to the image
- Avoid over-explaining — let the photo do the talking
- Steer clear of vague names like *Untitled* or *My Photo*
- Don't force humour or clever wordplay unless it fits naturally
- A thoughtful title can **change how the judge reads the picture**
- One or two well-chosen words often have the most power
- Think of the title as a **gentle introduction**, not a caption

Printing and Mounting

- The print is your **final expression** — treat it with care
- A well-made print shows pride, craft, and attention to detail
- Make sure brightness and colour look natural under judging light
- Avoid paper creases, fingerprints, or uneven mounting
- Mounts should **complement, not compete** with the image
- Neutral tones and clean edges always look professional
- Check alignment and spacing — judges notice instantly
- A clean, well-presented print can lift your score every time

JUDGE THESE IMAGES



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