

First: Say Something Nice.

You might struggle with the composition but really like the post-processing. You may hate the exposure but love the colors. Start with what you like and state that first. This lets the other person know you are there to lift them up; not to tear them down.

(Note: If you use any of these guidelines for critiquing someone else's work, it's a good idea to always include this one!)

Second: Be honest - but in a kind and considerate way.

Always leave the comment you would want to receive. Be honest - but be gentle about that honesty. Remember, we can be very emotionally connected to our images so be constructive and polite about anything you say to someone else.

Third, insert a qualifier statement like "In my opinion..." or "If this were my image..."

This takes any blame off the photographer/artist and lets him know that you see what he's going for but perhaps it could be done a different way with a better result. It gives him something to think about that he might not have before but it also gives him the option to take - or leave - your advice as he sees fit.

Fourth: Ask a question of the photographer to engage them in a discussion.

This lets him know that you are truly curious about their image and want to understand their thought process. Also, the more you ask, the more you learn - never forget that!

Here are some examples of what a quick photographic critique or comment might look like using these a combination of these four criteria:

"Gosh, I love what you've done here with the composition. Everything lines up nicely and fills the frame well and my eye went right to the focal point in the center of the mountain range. I am wondering about your choice of exposure, though. If this had been my image I might have tried to capture more details in the highlights of the clouds and worried about bringing up the darker tones in post-processing. Did you consider doing that?"

~OR~

"This image is so colorful! It immediately made me smile when I first looked at it. I was thinking, though, if you had stood a little more to the left if the composition might have been a bit stronger? It's nice how it is but if the moon were closer to the dip in the mountain range, would that have made for an even stronger composition?"

~OR~

"I am in love with what you've done here in post-processing! You have really created a mystical and intense mood by adding the darker tones and the vignette around the edges. In my humble opinion, I think you might be able to bring up the shadows a bit in the lower left corner to retrieve a little more detail there. I think that minor change would take this image over the top!"

See? Critiquing someone else's work can be pretty painless if you follow these guidelines. If I received these kinds of comments I'd think "This person really cares and really gets it." I'd be more than happy to answer their questions, defend my photographic vision, and consider what they were proposing.

Remember, though, that art is always subjective. Every guideline - like every rule - is meant to be broken. All opinions are just that - opinions. Still, every time you give and receive meaningful feedback on an image you have an opportunity for growth as a photographer and you begin to understand how other people really see your images and how your images can become even better.

Next up in the series, "How to Critique 301", I'll show you how to take an image apart and look at it piece-by-piece to see what its strengths and weaknesses really are.