

If I were seeing this photograph for the first time I would start off by figuring out my overall impression of the image; probably something like this:

Overall, it's a nice image. It's pretty - floral photographs should generally show off the beauty of the flowers and this image does that. I can understand why the photographer chose this particular clump of flowers to make a photograph because it shows both the greenery and the flowers in all their various stages of blooming. I like how the flower buds kind of spring away from the main blossoms - I find that kind of lighthearted and fun. It conveys the joy one feels when one sees flowers in real life.

Then I'd evaluate what I think are the image's strengths:

I like the colors - the greens and purples look really nice together and the yellow centers are a lovely bright spot in the image. I like how the flowers are all separated from each other so you can clearly see each one; they are also nicely spaced throughout the image. The composition is interesting without being overcrowded. There aren't any hot spots or areas that immediately pull my attention from the main focal point(s) or that lead my eye out of the frame. My eye travels from the top flower down to the bottom flower and then back up again to the center so there's a nice flow pattern here. I like how the top flower is lighter and more prominent and then the light fades off as the flowers move towards the background.

Then, I'd evaluate what I don't like about the image or what I thought the photographer could have done better:

The focus seems to be sharpest on the top flower but my eye wants to rest on the middle flower so I kind of wish the middle flower was as much in focus as the top one. Also, there's a purple smudge at the top left corner that is an out-of-focus flower bud that I find to be a tiny bit distracting because it is so close to the in-focus flower bud in that same corner. I might also like to see just a bit more light in the image - it's a little dark in places.

Now that I know how I feel about the image, what I think its technical and artistic strengths and weaknesses are, I can form a short critique.

First guideline: Compliment what you like about the image!

"This is a beautiful example of a floral image. I love that I get to see the flower in all stages of growth along with the surrounding greenery; it gives me a complete picture of what this flower is like. The colors also work very well together."

Second guideline: Be honest in a kind way about what you feel are the image's flaw(s).

"I do wonder about the focal point of the image, though. I find my eye wanting to rest on the flower in the center but it is not as clearly in focus as the top front flower."

Third guideline: Use a qualifier statement to help open the mind of the photographer who took the image.

"If this had been my image I might have tried to get both flowers more in focus."

Fourth guideline: Engage the photographer in a discussion to gain knowledge and to better understand his thought process.

"Did you consider stopping down the aperture to bring both flowers into sharp focus or were you trying to get the focus to fade off as the eye traveled back into the image?"

Are you starting to understand how wonderful this critiquing process is for both you and the other photographer? It helps you analyze what he did, what you like that you could use in your own images, what you might want to avoid doing in your images and, finally, it opens up a discussion between you and a fellow photographer. If you can get a conversation going it might lead to a mutual friendship, mentorship, or just another general source of photographic knowledge.

One more thing...you certainly don't have to do such a lengthy critique on every image you run across each day and nobody expects the average viewer to do this kind of in-depth analysis; this is really more for someone who is trying to learn and grow in the art of photography. Try giving one or two sentences here or there on the images that you have a definite reaction to and figure out why you are reacting the way you are. Do you see their point of view or does it totally escape you? These are images you might want to leave a few well-chosen sentences on so you and the other photographer can both grow from the experience. If you do encounter someone who is totally hostile to the art of critiquing, then I have three words of advice: "Leave him be". If his images really are that great, you can always go through this critiquing process in private and take what you learn to heart.

In the next installment of this series, "How to Critique 401", we're going to take a deeper look at some of the questions you might want to be asking as you learn to critique both your images and the images of others.