

Preparing Images for Competition

The objective of these notes is to provide you with some suggestions for preparing images for competition. Please don't consider these suggestions as 'all encompassing'; they are not intended as a substitute getting the image right in the field nor for the basic image-optimization work that should always be a part of your workflow. Rather they are intended (more or less) as a check list which can be helpful in the final steps prior to submission of the print or digital file.

These suggestions have been organized into three groups: first are suggestions which apply to both prints as well as digital files; second are suggestions specific to prints; third are suggestions specific to digital files. Therefore, if you're preparing prints, you'll want to focus on the first and second groups. Alternatively, if you're preparing digital files, you'll want to focus on the first and third groups.

PRINTS AND DIGITAL

1. Consider what judges (should) look for? CACCA has published their recommendations to judges. They recommend an image be judged on 3 criteria: technical, composition and impact. An average image should receive 6 points per judge. If the image is 'superior' on criteria, add a point; if 'inferior' deduct a point. If you ask yourself how you'd score your own image, you'll be in a better position to know what to expect from the judges. If you'd like to see more of the CACCA Judging Handbook, go to:

http://www.naturecameraclub.com/Mayslake/Club_Information_files2/CACCA%20Judging%20Excerpt.pdf

2. Did you use the full tonal range? If you think back to your film days, you may recall that most folks (including Ansel Adams) strongly recommended using the full tonal range for most images. Some bright highlights, some deep shadows and some of most every tone in between. This is still a pretty good recommendation for all but deliberately high-key or low-key images (which are few and far between).

3. Crop images appropriately. You should investigate using this important (and easy to use tool) on every image. Use it to eliminate distraction along edges and to help focus the viewer's (and judge's) attention what you consider to be the primary subject of the image. This tool is available in Adobe Camera Raw, Lightroom and Photoshop.

4. Level horizons as necessary. Judges will always notice a non-level horizon and should penalize an image's technical score by at least a point. This will often be the case where vertical lines in an image converge; this is almost as easy to correct using Photoshop's 'Transform>Distort' tool.

5. Avoid excessive saturation. Back in my film days, like many others, I preferred to use Fuji Velvia primarily because of its highly saturated colors. Adding 'Saturation' in either Photoshop or Lightroom is even easier; just modest movement of an easily accessible slider. Based on my judging experience, it's the most frequent problem I see with digitally optimized images. Use it by all means, but use it with discretion.

6. Darken edges. Good composition practice places the primary subject at a location other than in an image corner. Under most circumstances slightly darkening the corners of an image effectively draws the viewer's attention away from the corners (and the image edges, and therefore effectively towards the primary subject, thus reinforcing the maker's intention. This is easily done in both Photoshop and Lightroom.

7. Include a white border. Often the region along the edges and in the corners of an image are darker than the primary subject (see above). Accordingly, there is a tendency for these dark regions to 'merge' with the black of the print board in the case of a print, or with the black screen background in the digital case. This merger acts to draw the viewer's eye to something 'unusual'. To avoid this, it's normal practice to include a narrow white border around an image. The border does not have to be white; some prefer a color which accents the colors in the image, others sometimes use a combination of more than one color. However, unless you're sure of yourself, I'd recommend simply white; the subject is your image not fancy edges. Procedures for adding a white (or other colored border) to a digital image are available on the Mayslake website at:
http://www.naturecameraclub.com/Mayslake/Past_Comps.html

ONLY FOR PRINTS

1. Use the Adobe RGB Color Space. This Color Space is generally the best 'match' to the printer Color Space and so can be expected to produce the best print color and the best color match between the print and what you see on your monitor.

2. Sharpen for print. Any transition from analog to digital or vice versa produces some softening of an image. Therefore sharpening of a digital image is essential to correct for the softening which resulted from the digital capture. When you print an image, that digital-to-analog process also produces some softening in the final print. Accordingly, you need to slightly over-sharpen the image immediately prior to printing. Lightroom does this almost automatically in its Print Resolution dialog.

3. Consider using HIRALOAM sharpening. With conventional sharpening (the Unsharp Mask filter in Photoshop, or the Detail Panel in Lightroom), one invariably used a high Amount setting and a low Radius setting. If, on the other hand, one selects a high Radius and a low Amount (acronym: HIRALOAM), the result is a form of sharpening which when the parameters are selected properly, adds some three-dimensionality to the image. This is often helpful because it makes the two-dimensional print, a little more like the three-dimensional subject it seeks to imitate.

4. Print with a minimum resolution of 180 ppi. Check your print resolution just prior to hitting the 'Print' button and make sure the resolution is at least 180 ppi.
5. Fill the 11x14" board as much as possible. It's almost always a challenge for the judges to see all the detail present in an 11x14" print. When the print is smaller, the some detail is inevitably lost (to the judges). If your printer is capable of printing 11" wide, there's no excuse for not filling the 11x14" board, I normally print on 13x19" paper, printing to either a maximum of 10³/₄" or 13³/₄" and then trim to leave about a 1/8" wide border.
6. Use both 'Proof Setup', and 'Gamut Warning'. 'Proof Setup' lets you see a monitor view of the image 'through' the printer profile you've selected; in other words a more accurate color preview of what's going to come out of the printer. 'Gamut Warning' will show you colors which are going to be 'out-of-gamut' to the printer profile; and gives you the opportunity to make adjustments (reduce saturation) prior to printing.
7. Enable 'Black Point Compensation'. Inkjet printers cannot replicate the deepest blacks that were possible in the wet dark room. The result is that the darkest tones of an inkjet print often lack detail. 'Black Point Compensation' automatically adjusts for this by adjusting darkest tones to the limits which can be achieved by the printer.
8. Print on a glossy or semi-gloss paper. Print viewing booths reflect light off of the print back to the judges' eyes. With matte papers, very little light is reflected from the darkest portions of the image. The result is that it's very difficult for the judges to see variations (detail) in the darker tones. With glossy or semi-gloss papers this is not an issue. The result of this is that judges fail to 'see' detail present on matte papers and reduce score accordingly.

ONLY FOR DIGITAL

1. Use the sRGB Color Space. Most competition software is not Color Managed. This means that the software does not recognize the color tags which a Color Managed application includes in their image files. The result is that the non-Color Managed software defaults to the monitor color space, which is going to be a laptop computer with a very inexpensive monitor. That monitor color space is going to be closest to sRGB so starting out with your image in sRGB means the competition software and laptop monitor will do least harm to the file when it is projected.
2. Avoid excessive sharpening. Invariably it's necessary to downsize the image for digital competition (most typically to 1024 x 768 pixels.). In this case I'd recommend sharpening after downsizing. While a little extra sharpening is appropriate to offset the softening which occurs during printing (see above), that is not the case for a digital competition.

3. Immediately prior to submitting, recheck image size. Sizing errors are far and away the most common problem encountered with images submitted for digital competition. You should always do a final recheck of image size just before submitting the images to the competition.

4. Naming, when email your images you will need to name your images using the following template, MSL-Bagis0740-C1-Title.jpg. Everyone uses the same prefix, “MSL-“, “Bagis0740-” is the first 4 letters of my last name followed by my first initial and the last 4 digits of my phone number.”C1-” is my class and entry number, normally 1 through 3 and lastly the title, the second image should look like this:

MSL-Bagis0740-C2-New title.jpg