

ENTERING A UK OPEN COMPETITION

A VIPC Members' Guide

Prepared for members of the Vera International Photo Club

Every year VIPC takes part in Open competitions with UK photo clubs - a lovely tradition, and one that puts our images in front of a UK-trained judge. UK judging has its own rhythms and expectations, and most of us did not grow up with them. This short guide is meant to demystify the process so you can enter your next image with confidence, not anxiety.

The goal here is to empower you by sharing what UK judges tend to notice, so that when your image comes up on screen, it has every chance to land the way you meant it to.

What a UK judge is actually doing

A club judge typically has around 60 to 90 seconds per image to look, react, comment, and score. That sounds brutal, but it means their reaction is largely intuitive - and their comments tend to follow a fairly predictable pattern.

- 1 First impression. What is this image? Does it move me?
- 2 Composition. Is my eye led somewhere on purpose?
- 3 Light. Is light being used, or is it just there?
- 4 Technique. Is the image sharp where it needs to be, well exposed, well processed?
- 5 A closer look. Only for the strongest few images - and this is where small technical things start to separate them.

Understanding that sequence is half the battle. Judges reward images that reward their first impression - so anything that pulls attention away from that first "yes" is worth thinking about before you submit.

What judges look for

These are the qualities that come up again and again in UK judging guides. None are rules - think of them as invitations.

Impact. The moment a judge sees your image, does something happen? Impact is not about being loud or dramatic; a quiet, contemplative image can have as much impact as an action shot. It just has to feel considered.

A clear subject or story. The eye should have somewhere to go. If a viewer cannot quickly tell what the image is about, they tend to move on.

Composition that feels intentional. Leading lines, thirds, natural framing, balance - these are tools, not commandments. What matters is that your compositional choices feel deliberate rather than accidental.

Good use of light. Light does not need to be dramatic to be good. Soft, directional, atmospheric - judges notice when a photographer has really seen the light in a scene.

Technical care. Sharp where it should be sharp, exposed with detail in both shadows and highlights, colors that feel natural (unless intentionally not). This is a floor, not a ceiling - good technique alone rarely wins, but weak technique can quietly cost points.

A sense of the photographer's intent. Judges respond warmly to images that feel like choices - a chosen angle, a chosen moment, a chosen treatment. Even a simple subject becomes strong when the photographer has clearly decided what they wanted to say.

Freshness. An unusual angle, an unexpected moment, a familiar subject seen in a new way. Judges see hundreds of images and quietly light up when something looks different from the last dozen.

A gentle note on the small stuff

UK judges are, to be honest, often quite technically observant. When they are separating two strong images, they will frequently look for small things - and it is kinder to know about them in advance than to be surprised during the event.

Things worth a final check before you submit:

- Distracting edges. A twig, a foot, a bright patch of sky at the border of the frame can pull attention. A slow scan around all four edges usually catches these.
- Dust spots in plain skies or backgrounds.
- Blown highlights and muddy shadows where a little care in processing could keep the detail.
- Slightly tilted horizons - unless the tilt is clearly intentional.
- Over-sharpening or over-processing - halos, crunchy textures, unnatural colour.
- Color casts that were not part of the mood you were after.

None of these things sink a good image on their own. But when a judge is choosing between two lovely photographs, small distractions like these can tip the balance.

Two quick tricks that really help

Turn your image upside down. Close your eyes, then open them and see where they are drawn. It sounds odd, but flipping the image detaches you emotionally from the subject and lets you spot distractions you would normally overlook - bright corners, awkward negative space, imbalance.

View at 100%. This is how judges see your image. Dust spots, over-sharpening halos, and cloning mistakes only really show up at full size, so it is worth a scroll around before you submit.

What "Open" means (and why it is a gift)

Since our competitions with UK clubs are Open, there are effectively no subject-matter rules to worry about. Any subject is welcome - landscapes, portraits, wildlife, still life, street, abstract, composites - and your image will be judged as a picture, not against category-specific criteria. That is genuinely liberating. It means:

- A zoo shot, a garden flower, a pet, a staged still life - all completely fine.
- Post-processing, artistic treatments, and creative composites are welcome (as long as all elements are your own work).
- The question the judge is asking is simply: "Does this image work?" - not "Does this image comply?"

So lean into what makes your photograph interesting as an image. Impact, mood, craft, and intent count for everything here.

Before you submit

- Does my image say something, or does it just show something?
- Is there a clear place for the viewer's eye to land?
- Have I looked carefully at all four edges?
- Have I viewed it at 100% for any small technical issues?
- If I turn it upside down, does anything pull attention that should not?
- Would I be proud to see it on screen among forty others?

If the answer to that last one is yes - send it in. That is the whole point of being in a photo club.

A closing thought

Competitions are a wonderful excuse to look harder at our own work, but they are not the point of photography and they are certainly not a measure of a photographer. Judges are individuals with their own tastes, and any given image can score modestly with one judge and win outright with another. Enter what you love, take the feedback that helps you, and let the rest go.

We are lucky to have UK clubs that want to compete with us. Let us show them what VIPC looks like.

Sources drawn on in preparing this guide: Bingley Camera Club - "What do Judges look for?"; Milngavie and Bearsden Camera Club - Hints & Tips; Hamilton Camera Club - What Are Judges Looking For?; South Shields Photographic Society - Beyond the Lens; Cameradays - Camera Club Judging; Kelso Camera Club - Criteria for Image Critique (Norman Dodds, 2016).