

Criticism: A Necessary Evil

by Andy Armstrong

I was extraordinarily lucky in college. I managed to get into 400-level Editorial Illustration class that had eleven of the best artists I've ever known. We met twice a week for two hours at a time. Every Tuesday we were assigned a project which we discussed at length. Every Thursday we shared the results of our assignments and subjected ourselves to some of the bluntest, most grueling peer critique I have ever known. You grew thick skin quick as your peers tore your work apart, and you either grew as an artist or spent a lot of time crying. Yes, I was lucky to get into that class in college. It not only taught me how to be a better artist, it taught me how to listen to, comprehend, sort, and apply what I'd heard in the form of criticism of my work. It's no different in photography. If you want to be a better photographer, it is essential that you submit your work to real review and critique. It is essential that you learn to really hear criticism, comprehend its nature, sort the information you've received, and apply it to your own work. You will never grow if you don't.



Photo & Post
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Seek valuable criticism.

It's interesting that the one thing that spurns most of us into this career initially is the same thing that can eventually be detrimental to it. I'm speaking, of course, of our friends and family's reactions to our work.

The encouragement from friends and family makes many of us want to do more – to pursue this as a career, but if we only allow ourselves to receive feedback from the folks who love us, then we won't receive the kind of valuable feedback necessary for growth.

I remember vividly how good it felt when I picked up a camera for the first time and began sharing my images with friends and family. The kudos and attaboys made me feel fantastic. In fact, they made me feel so good that I began to shoot more, and I felt great about my work. So great, in fact, that I began to make a considerable investment in photography equipment.

The new equipment was harder to work than the old equipment, so I started digging for information on how to make it work like I wanted. In the process, I not only discovered how to make my new equipment work, I discovered quickly that my work wasn't so great. In fact, it was downright bad, but here's the thing. I learned how to get better at it from photographers who were further along in their journey - photographers who were willing to help me become a better photographer. Their criticism of my work was far more valuable than what I received from my friends and family.

Now, imagine if I had chosen only to post my images to Facebook. Imagine that I had never heard that valuable criticism from other photographers, and imagine if I had only relied on the adulation of friends and family. I would have never grown as a photographer, and I wouldn't be making the kind of images that I am now. What a shame that would be.

It's important to seek valuable criticism. Join a local photography club. Join one of the many associations like WPPI, PPA or one of the online communities like Modern Digital Photographers (a free and closed Facebook Group). Any of these groups, clubs or associations can provide access to folks who can help you grow – folks who can provide the kind of valuable criticism that you need.

Don't get me wrong. I still love to hear the 'oohs' and 'ahs' from my friends and family, but I absolutely appreciate the criticism of people who can help me become a better photographer.

Learn how to handle criticism.

Once you've found a group or club that offers valuable criticism from experienced photographers, make sure that you can actually handle it. That's right. You need to be able to take criticism if you want to grow as a photographer. If you can't handle criticism, you won't grow.

Here are a couple of common ways folks miss valuable criticism all the time.

Taking it personally

It's not personal. Criticism is about a single, specific image you've offered for critique, not about you as a person or a photographer as a whole. If you assign all of your value as a photographer to a single image, then you are setting yourself up for failure, and beyond that, you're putting yourself in a position to have to defend yourself based on a single image.

Stop it. It's only an image. It's not you. You are far more than a single image – as a person and as a photographer. You will learn more and handle criticism more easily if you can separate yourself from a single image offered for critique.

Making Excuses

Stop making them. They're not worth the effort, and more than that, you risk cutting off valuable critique from experienced photographers, because you seem to make an excuse for anything that might be an issue with your image.

I see this in photography groups all the time. Criticism is offered and an excuse immediately follows. Someone mentions that the photo is overexposed, and the photographer immediately says, "Oh, that's the way I wanted it."

If an excuse follows the next bit of criticism, then I know that the person can't hear criticism – can't accept it, and it's just not worth my time to offer it. I simply stop making the effort for that person.

Stop making excuses and start listening. You'll find that more people are ready and willing to offer you help when you do.

Sort the criticism you receive.

When it comes to the criticism you're offered, the old saying holds true: "You can't please all the people all the time," and here's the thing. You shouldn't try to please all the people all the time. Some criticism is just more valuable than other criticism. You need to determine the value of the criticism you're offered, and use what is valuable and discard what is not.

While avoiding making excuses during the critique process, make sure to internally question all critique. Here are some questions you should ask yourself:

Is the criticism in line with the criticism of others? In other words, is there a general consensus for the critique offered?

If there isn't a consensus, then the criticism may not be as valuable as it could be. A rogue comment isn't always

valuable. In fact, it might be way off base. Seek consensus.

Who is offering the criticism? Are you familiar with their work? How long have they been in the business?

It's important to know the work of those providing critique. Is it work you admire and aspire to? Is it subpar? All criticism isn't equal. If the criticism is from someone who obviously creates poor work, then that criticism is less valuable.

Does the criticism fly in the face of conventional photography wisdom?

If the critique doesn't jibe with what you know as a hard and fast rule of photography, then question its value. Believe it or not, unconventional wisdom in a critique can improve an image, but it's rare.

Is the criticism about the image or the subject?

In portrait work, many often offer critique about the subject. This would be useful if you were the subject of the photograph, but you're not. You're the photographer. Discard critique about the subject. It's not useful.

Is the criticism fluff?

Fluff is fun to read. It feels great. It's what our friends and family tend to offer. The kudos and adulations abound, but it's just not useful information. It provides nothing but reassurance and doesn't help you make a better image the next time.

Is there a why?

To be truly meaningful, the criticism needs to include the why. For instance, if I simply tell you the image is bad and do not tell you why, then the criticism is useless. I've offered nothing more than negative fluff. Great criticism offers the reasons why something is wrong and how you can improve the next time. If it meets the other criterion we've discussed, place a high value on this kind of criticism.

Apply what you've learned.

If you're lucky and work hard, you'll find a group where you can submit to and receive criticism. If you don't take it personally and don't make excuses, you'll receive a wide range of criticism. If you're smart about it, you'll learn how to discern the difference between valuable criticism and meaningless criticism, and above all, if you apply what you've learned from that valuable criticism, you will continue to grow as a photographer. It's not as easy as it sounds. It takes growing some thick skin, but the effort is worth it.

Criticism is a necessary evil. Use it to your advantage.□