

## **How to Enter and Win Photo Contests**

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I have judged hundreds of photo contests, so I want to offer some tips based on my real-world experience to help you take great pictures – specifically, the kind of pictures that win photo contests.

To keep it simple, I've split my tips into four categories:

Subject: What Makes a Great Picture?

Photo Contests: Where to Find Them and How to Handicap Them.

The Fine Print: Let's Dig into the Rules!

Putting It All Together: Matching Your Picture to the Contest's Needs

### **Subject: What Makes a Great Picture?**

At the New York Institute, most of our students want to become professional photographers or wish to be trained to professional standards. For those students we stress *NYI's Three Guidelines for Great Photographs*.™

*The good news* is that those Guidelines work really well for professionals.

*The better news* is that the Guidelines are easy to understand and work just as well for amateurs.

*The best news of all* is that most amateurs don't know these rules. So, if you follow them, you'll start out miles ahead of most of the competition you'll face.

Here they are:

Guideline One: What is the subject of my photograph?

Guideline Two: How can I focus attention on my subject?

Guideline Three: Is there anything I can do to simplify my photograph? Is there anything in the frame that's distracting?

#### **Guideline One: What is the subject of my photograph?**

While this seems obvious, it isn't. When you take the picture, you're in the moment and you see everything thing around you and you know what you think your subject is.

However, after you take the picture, the scene that you saw in your viewfinder is reduced to a two-dimensional rendering of your subject – either a print, or an electronic image on a computer monitor or camera LCD screen.

Let's say you're entering a contest for great holiday decorations. It's December, and you're photographing your favorite neighbors in front of their house that's awash in holiday lights. As you look through the viewfinder, you hear the sounds of the wind in the bare trees, perhaps you feel a cool December breeze in your hair, and maybe you even smell the fresh-cut pine boughs or the waxy aroma of holiday candles.

But all those sensations are left behind when you press the shutter and reduce that scene in your viewfinder to a small picture with borders. Just because you knew what your subject was intended to be when you pressed the shutter button is no guarantee that your viewer will see the subject as clearly as you did when you took the picture.

It's the same on your trip to Italy, photographing your favorite pet, or Cousin Vanessa's birthday. You need to show the viewer your subject in a way that comes across in a photograph.

What to do? That brings us to Guideline Two.

### **Guideline Two: How can I focus attention on my subject?**

Professionals know that you need to lead the viewer to the subject of the photo. The most common (and easy) way to do that is to make the subject large in the frame and put that subject in the front of the photo. There are some other tricks that professionals use, but my advice is to make sure you get close to your subject and make that sure your dog, Cousin Vanessa, or your energetic neighbors are as large as possible in your picture. That way, the viewer will have no problem knowing what you intended to be the subject of your photo.

### **Guideline Three: Is there anything I can do to simplify my photograph? Is there anything in the frame that's distracting?**

If you know what your subject is, and if you make that subject large in the frame of your photograph, then there shouldn't be too much room for other things in the photo. Keep your picture simple. For example, you don't want a telephone pole in the background to appear to be sticking out of the head of your neighbor or your dog, and you don't need an empty soda can and paper cup on the table in front Cousin Vanessa when she blows out the candles on her birthday cake.

**To sum up:** Get close to your intended subject and before you take the picture study the scene in your viewfinder or LCD panel to spot any unwanted clutter. If you take the time to follow the three NYI Guidelines, you'll see a dramatic change in your pictures right away - just in time to enter the contest you've selected.

Many photographers find that it helps to ask themselves the three Guideline Questions as they're looking through the viewfinder, and try to answer the questions. For example, if you find yourself saying, "My subject is the dog in the left corner of the frame," you'll know that you had better get closer to your subject and reframe your photo.

### **Photo Contests: Where to Find Them and How to Handicap Them.**

Not long ago, it was hard to find photo contests. It can still be a challenge for people holding one to get their particular contest widely publicized. But for people looking for contests, it's never been easier.

First of all, you don't have to look any further than right here on [www.yourpix.com](http://www.yourpix.com) to find five free photo contests each month! There are lots of opportunities in these five challenging categories - Amazing Pets, Best of Travel, Cool Kids, Best Friends, and Nature at its Best.

But then, you may want to venture further afield, looking for more specialized contests (perhaps Best Fire Truck Photo or Best Self Portrait) or big cash prizes. The Internet to the rescue! Just fire up your favorite search engine and type in some search words. Amazing! For example, the phrase "Pet Photo Contests" (with quotes in the search) yields 14,000 results in one popular engine. There are also regular contests in photo magazines, both the printed versions and the online e-zines, and loads of different contests on sharing sites. The trick is to separate the wheat from the chaff. That means you have to look at the rules.

## **The Fine Print: Let's Dig into the Rules!**

Lots of different types of organizations hold photo contests for lots of different reasons. Photo magazines, manufacturers and other photo-related companies may want to build interest in photography and their product. The "Top Dog Photo Contest" sponsored by a pet food manufacturer may suggest that they company wants photos for their advertising or some other sort of promotion. The more sophisticated the company is, the more detailed the rules are likely to be.

It's easy to skim over photo contest rules because they're usually long and dull and probably OK. But there's gold in those rules, so let me show you the important points from a judge's eyes.

Let's look at some common situations we encounter in contests. While we can't cover every topic, let's look at the big ones.

**Entrance Fee:** Sad to say, but some contests are run to make money for the people hosting the contest. At NYI, we caution photographers to avoid contests with high entrance fees. There are lots of contests that are free, or where the entry charge is minimal. I start to get concerned if it costs amateurs more than \$5 to enter a contest. If the fee is over \$5, then the prize should be really big, say \$5,000 or more. When in doubt, pass on contests with fees.

Here's an example of an expensive contest for serious "emerging" photographers that might or might not be worth entering. Named after a prestigious 20<sup>th</sup> Century photographer (now deceased) and run by a company that specializes in photo workshops, the winner will receive a one-person show, an all-expenses-paid trip to the city where the exhibit will be held, and a digital SLR from a major manufacturer. The contest is to be judged by some big name photographers and has sponsorship from several big photography companies. To enter, the photographer must submit 25 - 30 exhibition quality prints. The entry fee is \$100. Obviously, this might be a great opportunity for some people, but for most amateurs, it wouldn't make sense. Given the number of prints that will be examined, the application fee doesn't seem exorbitant.

**What You're Required to Submit:** This is the most important part of the entire set of rules. Most contests get many, many submissions, and often about 20% of the pictures that are received are good, and many of those are very good. There will only be a few winners, so often there is a pre-screen to the contest where any entry that doesn't meet the submission guidelines will be rejected. If the contest specifies prints must be between 4" x 6" and 8" x 10" don't send an 11" x 14" print. If the pictures are supposed to be unmounted, and you name and photo category are to be marked on the back of the print in black ink, do exactly that.

Here's how it looks from the inside. In any contest that attracts a lot of entries, the judges—and perhaps the staffers who process the incoming photos—are looking for a way to cut down the number of entries that must be given final consideration. There are a variety of things that can cause your entry to be tossed into the reject pile. One of your objectives is to avoid getting bumped too early.

By the way, if you're sending prints and you are putting a label on the back or writing your name directly on the print, make sure that the ink is dry and won't smear before you stack one print on top of the other. I can't tell you how many prints I've seen in contests where the image has been degraded by an ink smear.

If there is an official entry form that must be attached to the photo, follow the instructions to the letter. Don't allow your precious photo to lose on a technicality.

If the contest calls for prints within a range of sizes, my advice is to send the largest permissible print. If your photo makes it into the finals, there are often multiple judges and there may be some who favor your photograph and others that champion a different image. If your image is bigger, it's easier for your supporters to display its wonderful qualities.

For this reason, if a contest offers the option between prints and slides, I recommend you submit a print. It's hard for people to look at a tiny slide at the same time, and many contests don't have good projection facilities available for the judges.

Similarly, if a contest offers a choice between sending in a print or submitting your picture online, my experience is that prints still fare better. Judges get cranky clustered around a computer monitor, and sometimes the files are slow to open. I still favor prints, unless the only way to submit is online.

If the contest requires online submissions, be careful to send a file that is the right size and in the right format. Some contests accept a wide variety of file formats, others just a few common ones such as jpeg. If you're not sure how to size your photos, consult a friend who's into the technical stuff.

The next question is how many photos should you submit?

You will usually find a provision in the rules regarding the number of the photos you can submit. If the contest limits photos to three per entrant, should you submit one photo, or two or three?

The answer depends on what you have to submit. If the contest seeks great horse photos, and you have only one great photo of a horse, submit that one photo. Don't dilute your entry with lesser images. If, on the other hand, you specialize in taking photos of horses and have dozens of great horse photos, then, by all means, submit your three best photos.

If you send in a mediocre photo to round out your entry to the maximum number of images allowed, someone may see that mediocre image in the presort and reject your entire entry without even seeing your best image! By the same token, if you send in too many photos, your entry will probably get tossed. Remember, the decision of the judges is final.

**Original Work and Ownership:** Chances are the rules will require that photos you submit must have been taken by you. It's possible that each picture you submit will become the property of the contest sponsor and will not be returned, or, won't be returned unless you send a SASE (self addressed, stamped envelope) along with your entry. By entering you give the Sponsor the right to use your photograph. The photos you enter must not have been previously published or have won any previous award, and your pictures must not infringe upon third party rights.

Let's say you enter an "Adorable Teenager" contest (yes, they do exist) with a photo of your favorite teenager in a moment of quiet repose. As adorable as he or she may look, if your subject is wearing a T-shirt with an obvious corporate trademark, such as a T-shirt with the Nike swoosh, or the Abercrombie logo, that may cause a problem.

In many contests, you must be an amateur photographer and willing to assign the rights to your photo to the contest sponsors. Professionals might balk at that notion, but it's common in photos with prizes for amateur pictures.

**Prizes:** As far as I'm concerned, the bigger the better. Remember, cash and valuable prizes will mean that you're required to report them as income on your taxes.

**Other provisions:** The rest of the rules usually cover standard stuff. Judge's decision is final, entry period and deadline, if you win you need to supply a release for the people in the picture, and permission for anything that else that appears in the photo.

Usually there's only one winner allowed per household, and as you would expect, employees and members of their immediate families of the Sponsors, their affiliates, and other companies participating in the contest aren't eligible to enter.

### **Do I Get My Picture(s) Back?**

Read the rules. In many contests, all entries become the property of the entity holding the contest. In other contests that accept prints or slides, you may submit a self-addressed, stamped envelope to get your photos returned.

If you have a choice, I suggest that you do ask for your photos to be returned to you. This will take a little more work and cost you a little more money in postage. I recommend this because it shows that you care about your photos. And if you don't care about your photos, why should the judges?

### **Putting it all together: Matching Your Picture to the Contest's Needs**

First, get your entry category right. I can't tell you how often I see great pictures entered into the wrong category in a contest. Don't enter your family dog dressed as a tap dancer into the Beautiful Landscape category. It's not the judges' job to move your picture to the right category – that's your job.

Assuming you're in the right category, what makes a winner?

### **Upbeat Helps**

The three guidelines I mentioned first will help you make better subjects for all your photographs. With contests, you need to give some added thought to what the people holding the contest want to see. For example, if the theme of the contest is "Party Time," you can bet the winning images will show a fun party, a celebration. It's unlikely that a scary Halloween party photo will win. Similarly, it's unlikely that a sympathetic portrait of a young child who's having an anxious moment at a party will win. Most of the time, contests are looking for upbeat subjects.

Humor, when appropriate, can work well in many types of contests. People, including judges, like to laugh.

You also need a bit of luck, including not duplicating last year's winner. For example, if you enter a baby food "Beautiful Baby" photo contest with a photo of your six-month-old daughter with her shock of bright red hair, you stand a slim chance of winning, no matter how good your photo, if last year's winner was a baby girl (or, for that matter, a baby boy) with bright red hair. Chances are, the judges are going to pick a child with blonde hair, black hair, or no hair this time out. They don't want to proudly announce the winning photo and run it on their packaging or advertisements and have people remark that it looks "a lot like last year's." Similarly, if last year's "Best Zoo Photo" had an elephant as subject, don't expect a repeat this year.

What if, despite all these tips, you lose?

It happens. I actually talked to one NYI student who told me he entered his first photo contest and when he didn't win, he grew so disenchanted with photography that he stopped taking photographs altogether for three years.

That's ridiculous. After all, there are lots of entries in every contest, so it's possible that there were a few photos that were better than yours. If the winning images are published, before you get too discouraged, look at the photos that did win the contest. What elements did the winning photos have that your photos lacked? Did you interpret the theme as accurately, or as inventively, as the winners?

If your photos were weaker than the winners', take heart. Learn from the experience. And look at the winning photos and compare them with your images several times. Treat this as a learning experience. If your photos were as good as the winning entries, then that means you're getting close. Next time out, you may end up in the winner's circle.

There's no way that you can know for certain what's going on in the "inside" where the judging takes place. All you can do is give the contest your best shot, have fun, and learn from the experience. And above all, bear in mind that all photo contests are very subjective. In a swimming race, the contestants compete against one another and the clock. It is easy for all to see and measure who won and who lost.

In entering a contest in the visual arts, there's no race and no clock. The judging is bound to be highly subjective. It's worth paying heed to what went into the winning photographs, but it's not worth your while to feel that your photos that did not win "lost."

That's it. Remember the Three Guidelines, pay close attention to your subject, and have fun entering contests. As the lottery people say, "You have to be in it to win it!" Good luck, and may the best photos win!