Evaluating Photographs

*How can you put a letter or a number on something
so fleeting as the content of a photograph?*

by Jack Zibluk

Assistant professor, Arkansas State University

DIANE ARBUS is famous for her disturbing photographs of everyday life and characters on the fringe of society. She often cropped out her subjects heads, feet and arms.

Her work may hang in art museums worldwide, but what grade would she receive in a photography class? How can you put a letter or a number on something so fleeting as the content of a photograph?

There is no one perfect method. Each has its strengths and weaknesses.

James Gordon, professor emeritus of photojournalism at Bowling Green State University, developed a system in the 1960s to try to give some structure to the process and mitigate some of the subjectivity involved. Similar systems are used elsewhere, including at Arkansas State University's photojournalism program.

In his system, students receive a numerical score from one to 10 in five areas: composition, negatives, printing, creativity/originality and cutlines or a written description of the photo. The student is then given an aggregate score. At Arkansas State, students have given the grading system uniformly high marks on annual student evaluations, fours and fives on a scale of one to five.

Gordon, too, had few complaints. "It gave them something they could at least understand. You couldn't always eliminate my opinion but at least they knew what I was looking for," Gordon said recently. He said he saw a similar system used at Syracuse University in the 1960s and it just "evolved from there."

Of course, not one model fits every educator's, or student's, needs.

Curtis Steele, chairman of the art department at Arkansas State, gives two letter grades. "Two grades are assigned to

each piece. First is how well the photograph accomplishes the assignment ("show motion," "shape," etc.) and the esthetics of the composition, including some technical qualities. Second is a technical grade that encompasses everything from focus (in camera) to final print quality including things like cleanly cut and square edges, unmarred print surface."

Tom Hubbard, former professor of photojournalism at Ohio State, is also no fan of numerical grades. "I finally abandoned the form because a picture could accumulate hefty points and really not communicate much," he said. "I went to a more subjective analysis. I decided that the strong points of any photo are subjective so I would analyze and reward those strengths."

Hubbard said he found the critique and subjective analysis method worked well with new technologies. "I went to color negatives and Photoshop about 1994. I was the first to completely abandon the wet lab. Students would shoot and have their film developed at a photofinisher. They would scan their negatives on a Polaroid scanner and "print" in Photoshop." "This was my grading system: Students would leave their photos on a server in the lab. They placed their photo in a folder they could write to but could not open. After the deadline, I would take them off on a Zip disk and take them home to grade. I would open the photo in Photoshop and also open MS Word. I would look at the image and make free-form comments and assign a grade in Word. I figured my system was close to a coaching session such as a newsroom editor might give. (It takes a pretty good monitor and ample memory to run Photoshop and Word at the same time.)"

Of course, computer-only grading has its pitfalls. "I had two problems I never could correct," Hubbard said. "One was filenames. No paper or prints were handed in so there wasn't the automatic name at the top of the paper. I needed their name and the assignment name in the filename. "myphoto" didn't give me much clue to who did it. The other was file size. I requested under a thousand K but often got

20MB files. Now, a 20MB file and Photoshop and MS Word WOULD choke my computer."

With digital projects at Arkansas State, the instructor alters Gordon's system, eliminating printing and substituting a technical grade covering exposure for the grade on negatives.

Both Hubbard's OSU program and the photojournalism program at Arkansas State offer students the chance to re-do work. "Most took advantage of this and learned the much more while re-doing assignments. There was student incentive because they seemed to think I was allowing them to get away with something. He told me what to do and improved my grade for doing it," Hubbard said.

Despite efforts to assign letters and numbers to photos, some believe that you just have to go with your gut instincts. "After 20 years in the business I have never numbered photos I have seen," said Ken Bizzigotti, a photographer with the Poughkeepsie Journal and associate director of the National Press Photographers Association region Two. "Maybe its the old fart in me but I go by my first reaction when I see a photo. As you walk by the photo will make you stop and look closer. Good subject matter or a good photo will cause a reaction. That's what it is all about."

GRADING CRITERIA

By Jerry Townsend

Remember, a photograph is a form of self-expression. Each print you make says something about you as well as the subject. Make it say something worthwhile. Any assignment accepted for use in a campus or professional publication will earn a one letter-grade bonus. Each picture submitted will be graded using the following criteria.

a. **Impact**. Did you choose an appropriate subject with good interest value. Did the photographer go beyond the obvious?

b. **Composition/Creativity**. Does the organization of the picture show an unique arrangement of elements?

c. **Technique**. Do print quality, focus, contrast and other elements of technique help the picture do its job?

d. **Lighting**. Do the light direction and light quality enhance and reveal the meaning in the subject?

Each factor will equal 5 of the 20 points possible for each assignment.

Exercise

❦

Using the various grading forms, evaluate these photos. What information do you not have that you need to evaluate them completely? If you had to turn in a numerical grade on each photo, what would it be? Was that numerical grade reflected through use of the evaluation instruments?

Photo by DAVID KLOUS-BEACH • Brentwood HS, Los Angeles

Photo Evaluation

PRINT GRADE _____   **PROOF SHEET GRADE** _____

TECHNICAL STRENGTHS   NOTES

Yucky   OK   Good   Super   Photo is in sharp focus

Yucky   OK   Good   Super   the print has good contrast. There are rich blacks and crisp whites and a wide range of grays.

Yucky   OK   Good   Super   The print is free of scratches, dust, fingerprints and other flaws.

Yucky   OK   Good   Super   The chemical and enlarging process have been successful. Grain size is minimal. Dodging and burning in have been used effectively.
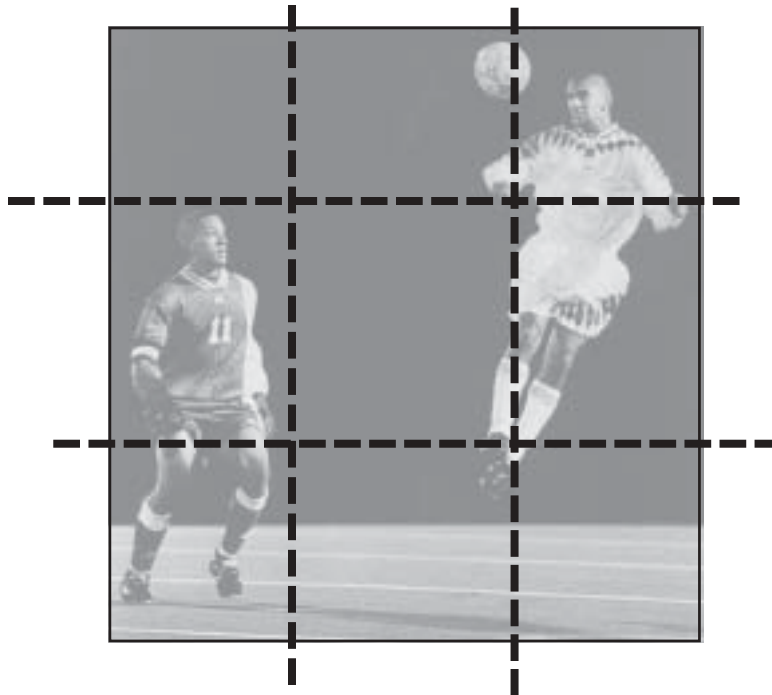
COMPOSITION STRENGTHS

Yucky   OK   Good   Super   One center of interest dominates and attracts the eye immediately. The CVI is large enough to tell the story.

Yucky   OK   Good   Super   The photo is unusual or unique in some way, like the angle, action, lighting or subject.

Yucky   OK   Good   Super   The photo effectively communicates a message, action or emotion.

Yucky   OK   Good   Super   Special attention has been given to using a pleasing, not distracting, background.

Yucky   OK   Good   Super   The composition effectively uses the Rule of Thirds.

Yucky   OK   Good   Super   Unimportant aspects of the photo have been cropped out.

Yucky   OK   Good   Super   Framing, leading lines or repetition of shapes have been used to give the photo depth.

Yucky   OK   Good   Super   Leading lines have been used to establish a mood or to draw the viewer to the subject of interest.

Yucky   OK   Good   Super   The subject has room to run/look

CAPTION

Yucky   OK   Good   Super   The caption is well-written and contains all the essential information.

Photo Assignment

#1 • RULE OF THIRDS

RULE OF THIRDS • Divide the frame into thirds both horizontally and vertically. The subject goes at the intersection of any two lines.

ASSIGNMENT • Composition is the placement of your subject matter in your photograph. Most of us start by centering everything we shoot. We discover soon that these photographs start to look boring and similar. Using the Rule of Thirds is an easy way to break this habit.

Mentally, you should divide your photo into thirds, both horizontally and vertically. This establishes four points where the lines intersect. These four points are the strongest places to place your center of visual interest.

For example, water and sky horizons create a clear horizontal line which you want to keep out of the center of the photo. Place these on one of the horizontal lines depending on interest.

When a subject moves across the camera's field of view, the final image has much more impact when the subject is off-center. For example, if a soccer player were hitting the ball with his head and looking to the right, it would be better to leave the open space in the direction the player is looking, on the left side of the picture.

GRADED ON • Content and use of the rule of thirds

DUE ON _____ • Two points off for every day late. After two weeks, your grade will be a zero.

Grade Sheet

ARKANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY • BY JACK ZIBLUK
(please attach to finished print, negatives and contact sheet)

NAME _____

ASSIGNMENT _____

POINTS
A=10/9, B=8/7, C=6/5, D=3/4, F=2-0 Two-point deduction for each day late. No submission results in a zero grade.

Visual content/composition _____

Technical quality: negatives _____

Technical quality: print _____

Creativity/originality _____

Cutline _____

TOTAL GRADE _____

CAPTION
Write title and a cutline here.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

THE TEN DEADLY SINS of beginning photographers

- ☐ 1. Camera not held steady.
- ☐ 2. Didn't shoot enough exposures.
- ☐ 3. Too far from subject.
- ☐ 4. All shots at eye level.
- ☐ 5. Photo doesn't SAY anything.
- ☐ 6. Poor use of light.
- ☐ 7. Not enough face shown/subject hidden.
- ☐ 8. Bad cropping in camera or in print.
- ☐ 9. No variety in distance or perspective.
- ☐ 10. Poor composition.