Improving Your Photos
Using the 12 Elements of an Excellent Photo

Agenda

- History of the Elements on an Excellent Photo
- Technical Excellence — + Group activity
- Composition and Storytelling — + Group activity
- Style, Creativity and Impact — + Group activity
- Process Ideas for Creating Better Photos

Presentation At

CCullens.com/elements
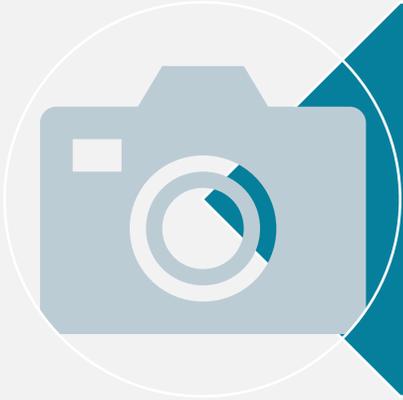
Chane Cullens – Chane@CCullens.com

May 4, 2022

Oxford Greens Camera Club

Please ask questions at any time!

It's an opportunity for everyone to learn.

?

Viewpoint – Beauty is in the eye of the beholder

The photographer directs the eye of the beholder to the beauty.

Today we are going discuss how the *12 Elements of an Excellent Photo* to help everyone see the beauty.

Chane's Rules for Photography

Rule 1

Crafting an excellent photo is not simply math or science

It's art, it's subjective, it's self-expression

Rule 2

All photos will benefit from some guidelines

No photo will benefit from every guideline

Rule 3

There are no required rules

There are lots of guidelines and an unbounded set of ideas

Agenda

History of the Elements on an Excellent Photo

Technical Excellence   + Group activity
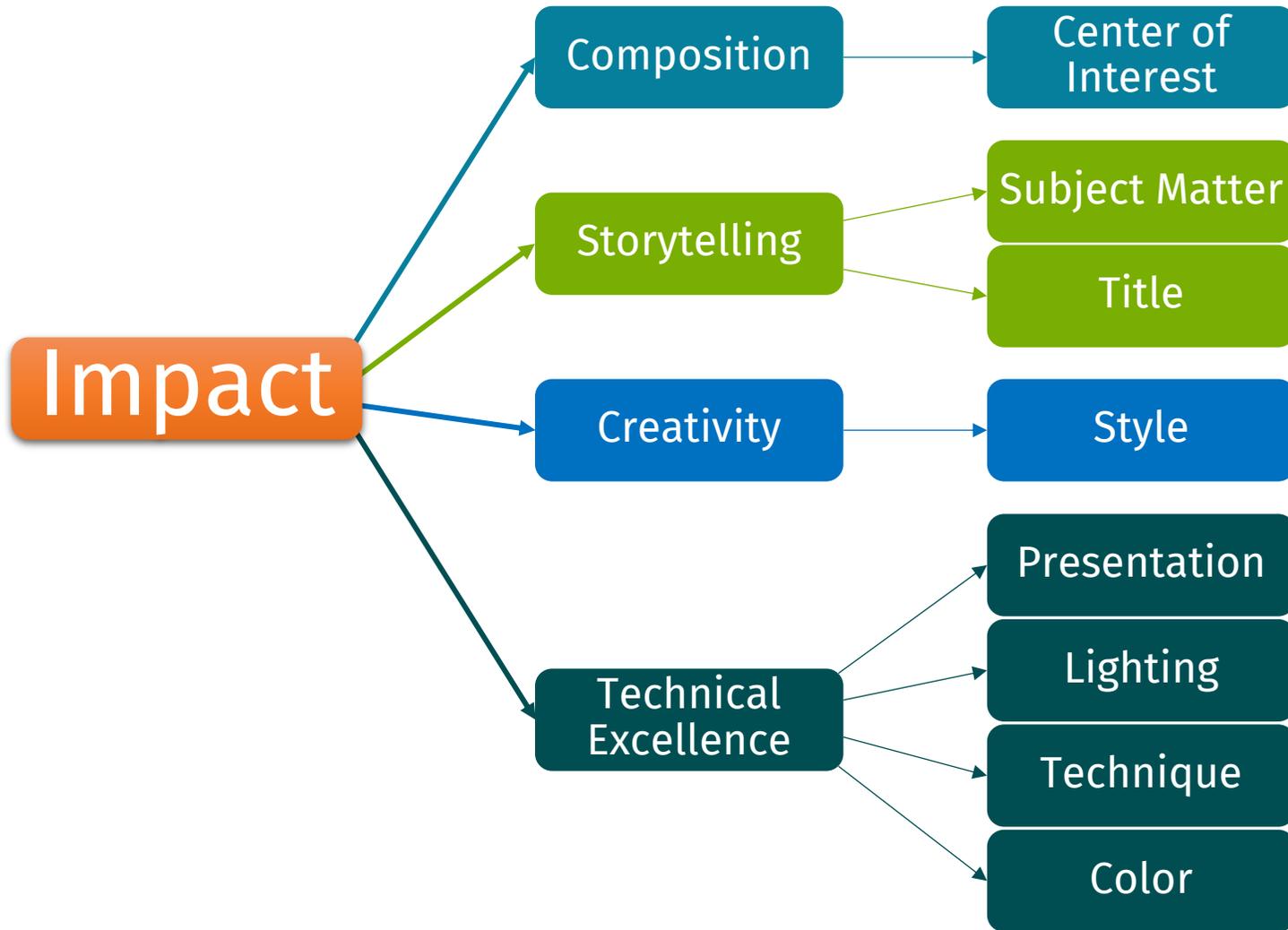
Composition and Storytelling   + Group activity

Style, Creativity and Impact   + Group activity

Process Ideas for Creating Better Photos

The 12 Elements of an Excellent Photo

Impact

- Composition → Center of Interest
- Storytelling → Subject Matter, Title
- Creativity → Style
- Technical Excellence → Presentation, Lighting, Technique, Color

"Any art piece or photograph will reveal some measure of all elements, while a visually superior example will reveal obvious consideration of each one."

Based on work by the Photographic Exhibition Committee of the Professional Photographer Association (PPA.com) on The 12 Elements of a Merit photo. Formalized in 2011.

"Impact is what you get when all the other elements are working together in concert."

Creates Impact   =   Pillars   +   Attributes

Summary – Impact, Composition, Center of Interest, Storytelling, Subject Matter & Title

Professional Photographer Association, The 12 Elements of a Merit photo

Impact
The sense one gets upon viewing a photo for the first time

- Impactful photos evoke laughter, sadness, anger, pride, wonder or another intense emotion
- This is the eye candy, the wow factor. It is the reason we love the photo. It moves us to look inwards.
- Impact is what you get when all the other elements are working together in concert

Composition
Bringing all the visual elements together to express the purpose

- Holds the viewer in the photo and prompts the viewer to look where the creator intends
- Do you follow the standard rules of composition? When do you break them to enhance the photo?
- Don't break the rules just to be cool, only use it if it enhances the photo. Includes what to leave out.

Center of Interest
The point or points where the viewer should stop as they view photo

- Can be subtle or strong, regardless, they allow the eyes to pause in preconceived areas
- Occasionally there will be no specific center of interest (scene is the center, beautiful forest)
- Or there may be two, primary and secondary. Two primary centers of interests may confuse people.

Storytelling
The photo's ability to evoke imagination

- Take a step back to see what kind of stories your photos can create
- One beautiful thing about art is that each viewer might create their own message or story
- Take a step back and look at the photo as if it is your first time, find the story and make it noticeable

Subject Matter
Should always be appropriate to the story being told in a photo

- Keep it interesting and appropriate. Pretty doesn't mean it's right.
- Subject matter is sometimes linked to the competition category or photo title
- Not everyone will inherently understand your subject, use additional elements to help the viewer

Title
Use the title to provide an emotional connection to the photo

- At a minimum, use the title to tell the judges where to look when titles are announced before scoring
- It's always good to try many titles, the best might be the first or the last, avoid common short titles.
- Don't waste the title to name the location (Niagara Falls) or obvious subject (Gorilla)

Summary – Creativity & Style
Professional Photographer Association, The 12 Elements of a Merit photo

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Creativity
Fresh expression of imagination to convey an idea, message, thought

- It's looking at an ordinary subject and finding an extraordinary way to portray it
- In photographic competitions, you may get bonus points for creativity and originality
- There are classic photos we have all seen, use creativity to differentiate yourself

Style
A specific genre or recognizable characteristic to showcase an artist

- Has a positive impact when the subject matter and the style are appropriate for each other
- Your work can be anything from traditional to surreal, candid to abstract, hard or soft light
- Use light or color in a special way, a blue tone in monochrome, high saturation, consistent angle

Summary – Technical Excellence, Presentation, Presentation, Lighting, Technique & Color

Professional Photographer Association, The 12 Elements of a Merit photo

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- Impact is what you get when all the other elements are working together in concert

Technical Excellence
The quality of the photo itself as it is presented for viewing

- Lighting, focus, exposure, camera motion, printing, mounting, color, retouching, manipulation …
- The nuts and bolts of photography. Be wary of going too far with adjustments
- It's what makes you a pro. Lack of it can ruin a great scene.

Presentation
Affects a photo by giving it a finished look

- The mats and borders used should support and enhance the photo, not distract from it
- Applying digital borders, customized for each photo, can either make or break your photo
- Making sure there is no dust (digital or analog) or scratches showing on the photo

Lighting
Defines dimension, shape and roundness in a photo

- The strength of your subjects should be portrayed by the strong lighting choices you utilize
- Light from artificial, natural or added in post-processing, proper use enhances a photo
- Light also impacts the color of a photo because in low light human perception is monochrome

Technique
The approach or perspective used to create the photo

- Focus, posing, angle, capture, posing, expression, skin tones are part of technique applied to a photo
- Including lens, choice of paper, digital noise, mono conversion, texture, sharpening
- Move, change your perspective, learn new ways to control what you capture

Color
Color or monochrome tones working together enhance the emotional appeal

- Color tones are not always harmonious and can be used to evoke diverse feelings for effect
- Are your colors and corrections pleasing to the eye? Do they look like they belong together?
- Color balance can be used to supply a structure to a photo

Agenda

History of the Elements on an Excellent Photo

Technical Excellence   + Group activity

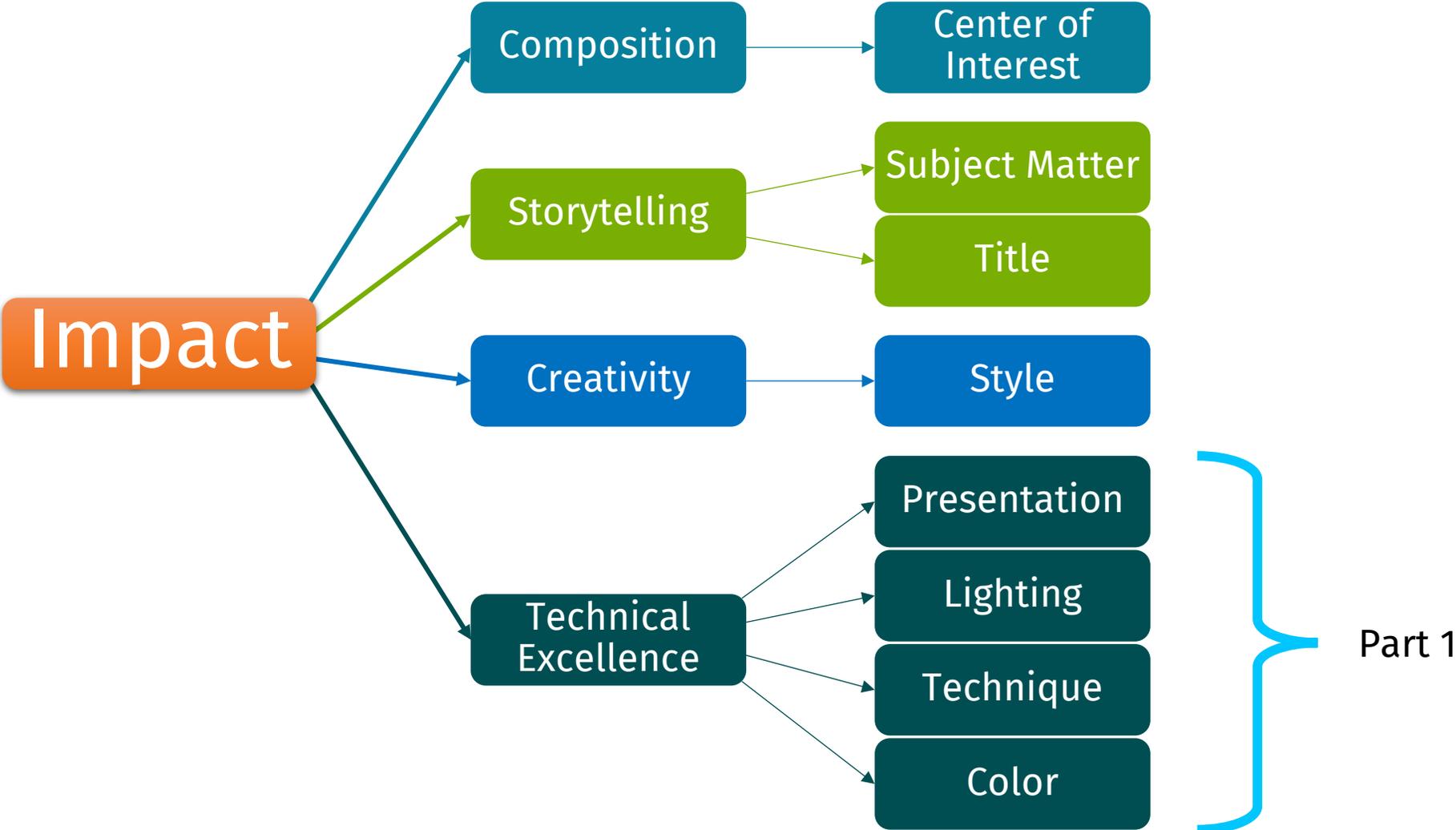Composition and Storytelling   + Group activity

Style, Creativity and Impact   + Group activity

Process Ideas for Creating Better Photos

Part 1 – Technical Excellence Pillar

Presentation

Affects a photo by giving it a finished look

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- Applying digital borders, customized for each photo, can either make or break your photo
- Making sure there is no dust (digital or analog) or scratches showing on the photo

Presentation

Awareness of fine details is critical.

The horse's head and front has a small white outline.

Became ugly on 24"x30" print. Fixed before I printed at 30"x40".
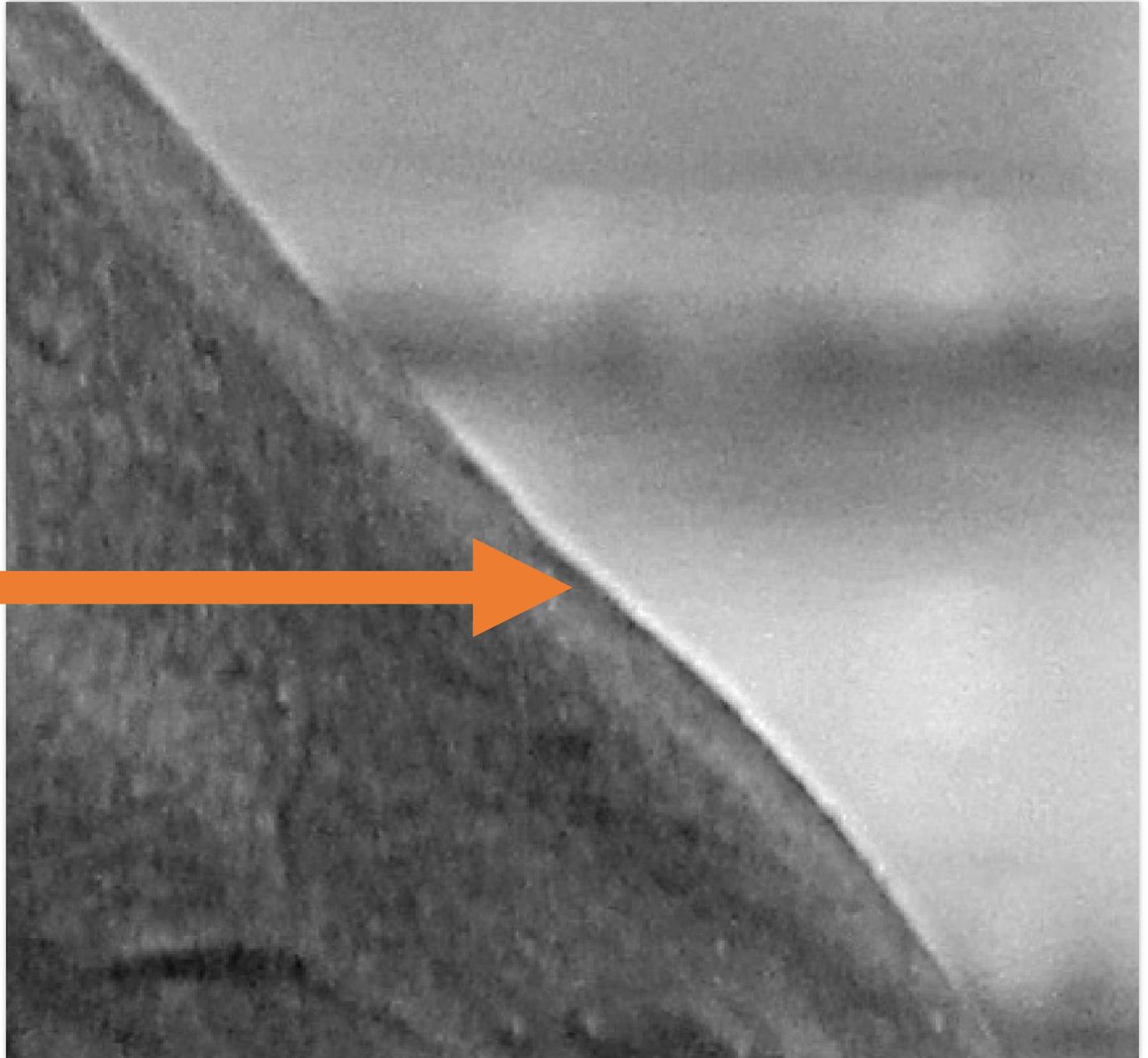
Lighting

Defines dimension, shape and roundness in a photo

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• Light from artificial, natural or added in post-processing, proper use enhances a photo
• Light also impacts the color of a photo because in low light human perception is monochrome

Lighting the cookies

Start by thinking about what you are trying to achieve. Then experiment! Then try again. Light dimension, shape, roundness, depth …

This was not used

This was used

Technique

The approach or perspective used to create the photo

- Focus, posing, angle, capture, posing, expression, skin tones are part of technique applied to a photo
- Including lens, choice of paper, digital noise, mono conversion, texture, sharpening
- Move, change your perspective, learn new ways to control what you capture

Color

Color tones working together enhance the emotional appeal

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Color
aka
Color Balance
Color Harmony

Experiment at Adobe Color
https://color.adobe.com/create/color-wheel

COLOR THEORY

COLOR MODELS

CMYK
Printing standard.
Mix of cyan, magenta, yellow and black inks.

RGB
Digital standard.
Mix of red, green and blue channels of light.

HSB
Variation of RGB.
Mix of hue, saturation and brightness.

GRAYSCALE
Intensity of black.
Uses only black intensity to create shade.
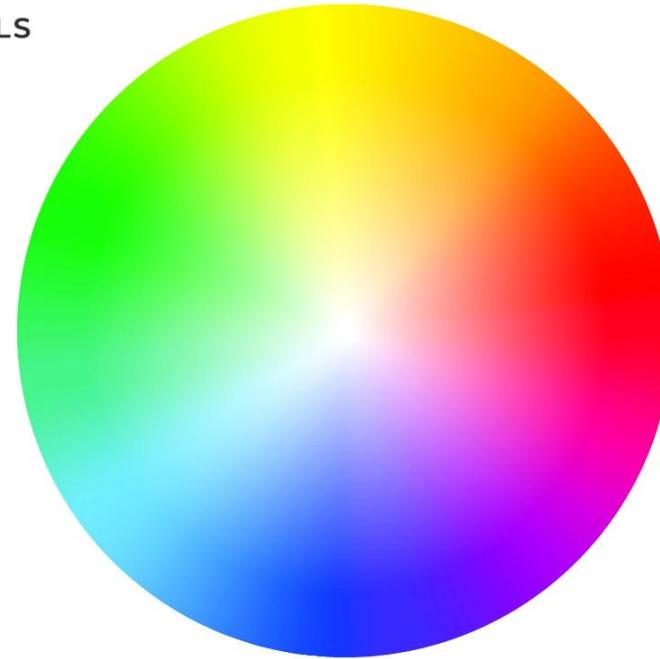
COLOR MEANINGS

PASSION, LOVE, BLOOD, DANGER, STRENGTH

ROMANTIC, FEMININE, LOVE, SENSITIVITY, EXCITING

OPTIMISM, SUNSHINE, CONFIDENCE, ATTENTION, SUCCESS

HEALTH, GROWTH, PEACE, VITALITY, WEALTH

ENERGY, HAPPINESS, SUCCESS, WARMTH, CREATIVITY

TRUST, SERENITY, PEACE, COMMUNICATION, SADNESS

ROYALTY, MAJESTY, MYSTERY, SPIRITUALITY, LUXURY

ORGANIC, HONEST, NATURAL, SIMPLE, WHOLESOME

COMPROMISE, NEUTRAL, BALANCE, CONSERVATIVE, FRUSTRATION

ELEGANCE, POWER, LUXURY, MYSTERY, SORROW

PURE, SIMPLE, INNOCENCE, VIRGINITY, MINIMALISM

COLOR PROPERTIES

WARM   COOL   SATURATED   DESATURATED   BRIGHT   DARK   MONOCHROME

COLOR HARMONIES

ANALOGOUS   COMPLEMENTARY   TRIAD   SPLIT COMPLEMENTARY   TETRAD   MONOCHROMATIC   SQUARE
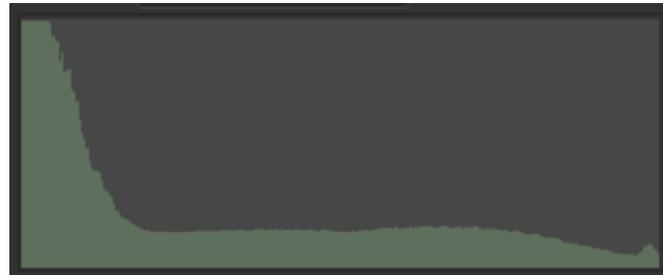
Color – Monochrome

Black   White

Monochrome tones useful to remove harsh colors

- Color in monochrome is the range from fully saturated (black, sepia) to unsaturated (white)
- Do they look "bland" or "muddy" due to no areas on the left and right edges of the histogram?
- Add structure by altering the individual colors, for example should blue be light or dark

Technical Excellence

The quality of the photo itself as it is presented for viewing
- Lighting, focus, exposure, camera motion, printing, mounting, color, retouching, manipulation …
- The nuts and bolts of photography. Be wary of going too far with adjustments
- It's what makes you a pro. Lack of it can ruin a great scene.

Judging Group Activity #1

Find one of these elements in the photo

Or

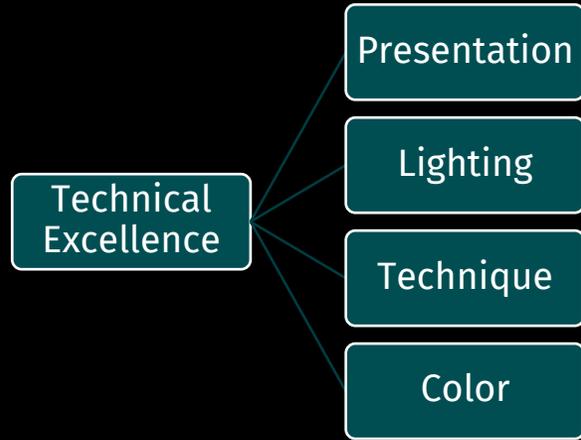Identify one of these elements that could be improved in the photo

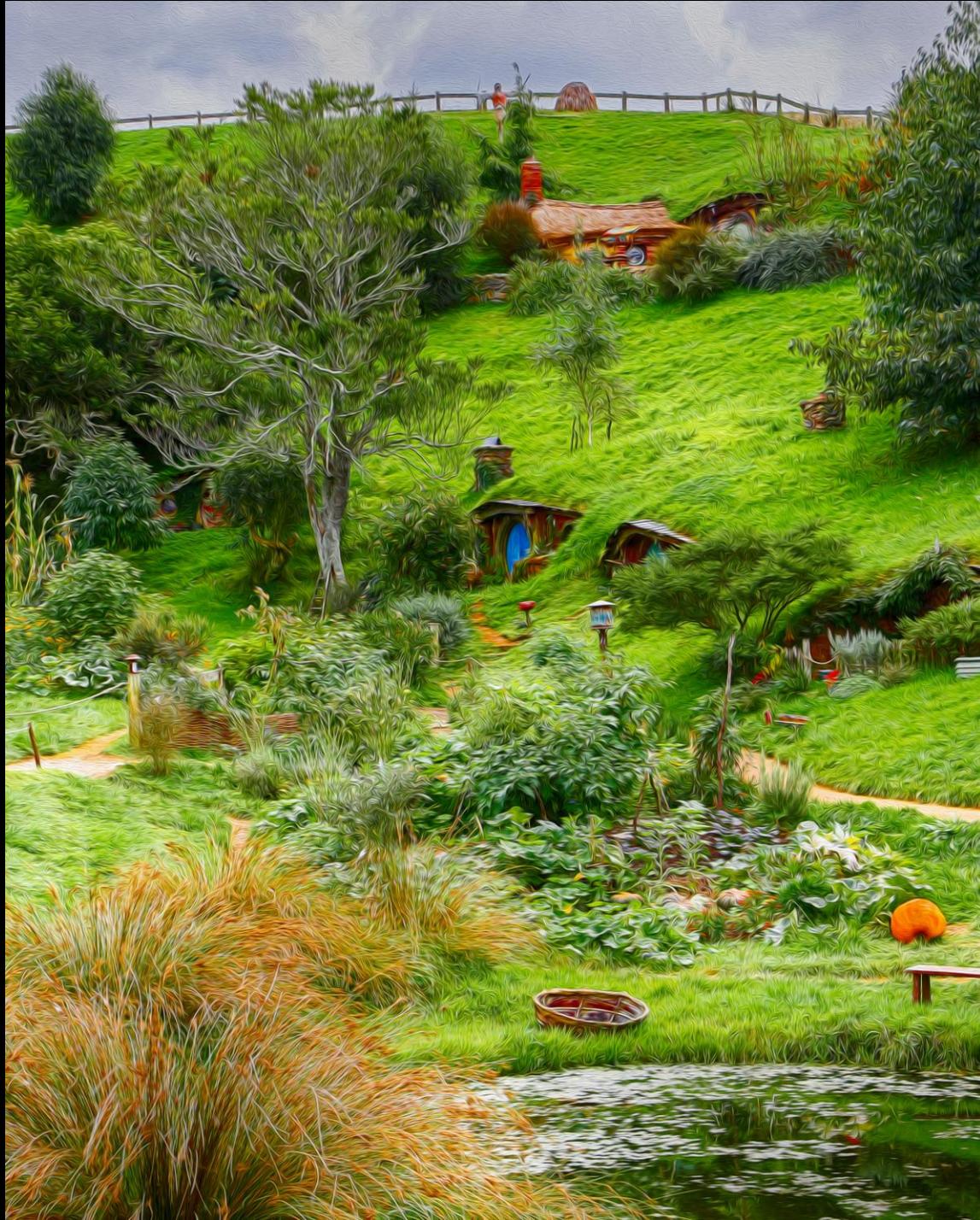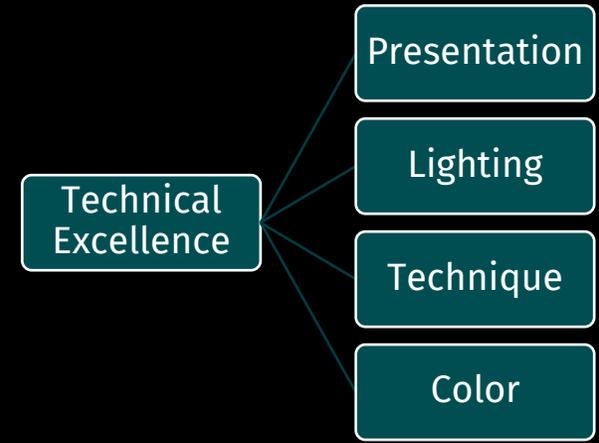Technical Excellence

Presentation

Lighting

Technique

Color

Technical Excellence
- Presentation
- Lighting
- Technique
- Color
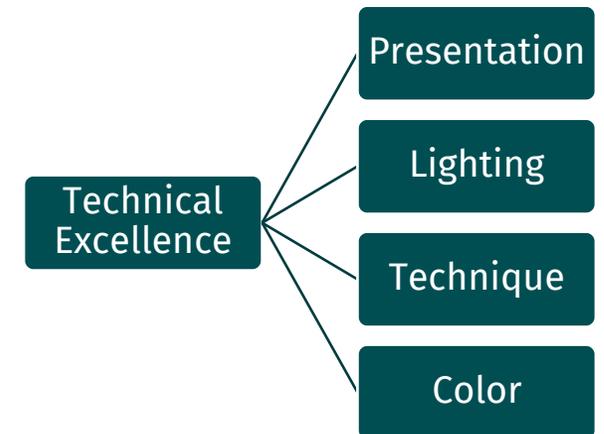
Presentation

Lighting

Technical Excellence

Technique

Color

Staring into Wisdom

Technical Excellence
- Presentation
- Lighting
- Technique
- Color

Dreaming of Hobbiton

Technical
Excellence

Presentation

Lighting

Technique

Color

Buck Senses Danger

Agenda

History of the Elements on an Excellent Photo

Technical Excellence   + Group activity

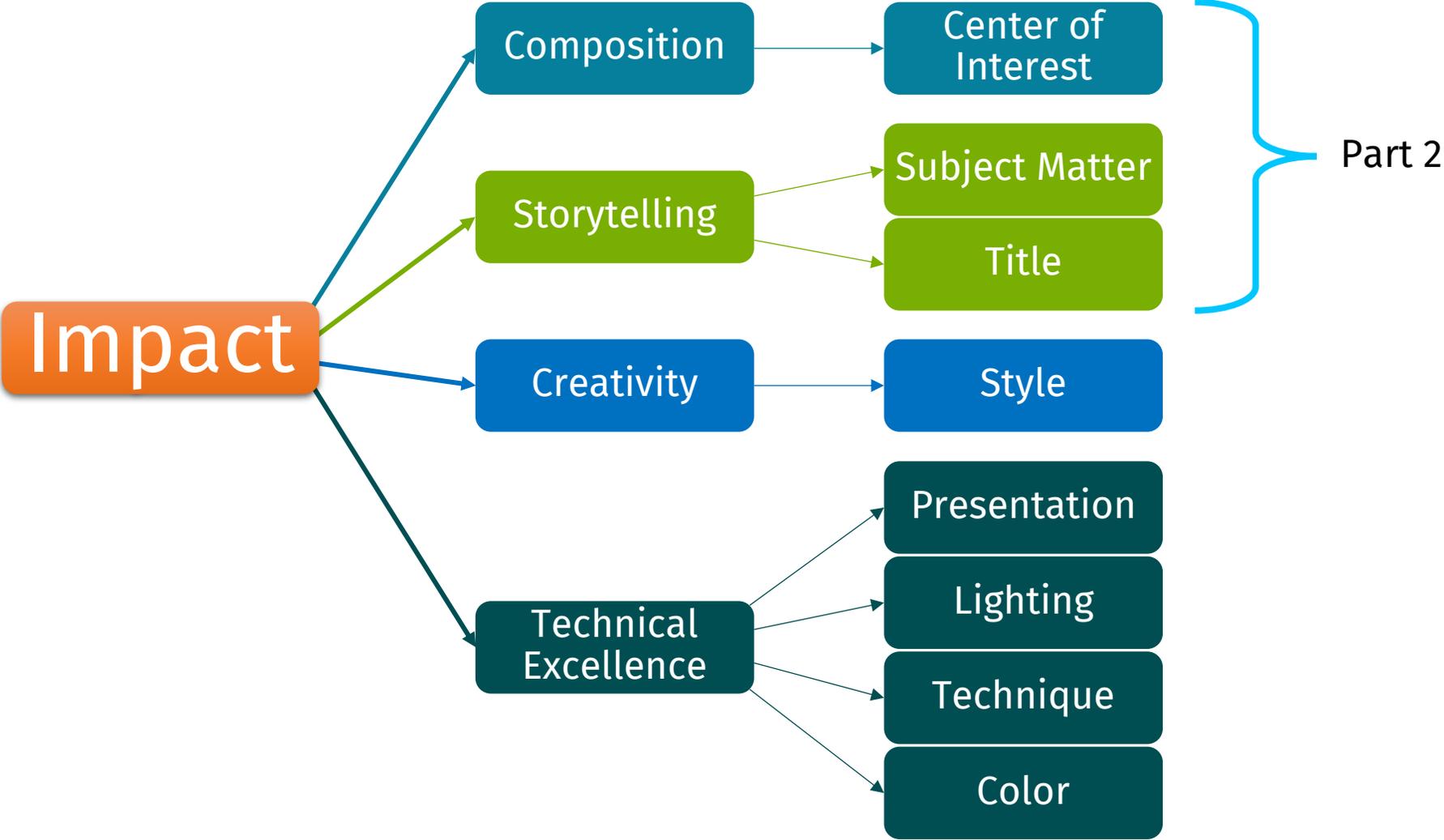Composition and Storytelling   + Group activity

Style, Creativity and Impact   + Group activity

Process Ideas for Creating Better Photos

Part 2 – Composition & Storytelling Pillars

Center of Interest

The point or points where the viewer should stop as they view photo
- Can be subtle or strong, regardless, they allow the eyes to pause in preconceived areas
- Occasionally there will be no specific center of interest (scene is the center, beautiful forest)
- Or there may be two, primary and secondary. Two primary centers of interests may confuse people.

Composition

Bringing all the visual elements together to express the purpose

- Holds the viewer in the photo and prompts the viewer to look where the creator intends
- Do you follow the standard rules of composition? When do you break them to enhance the photo?
- Don't break the rules just to be cool, only use it if it enhances the photo. Includes what to leave out.

Composition Ideas

1. Balance
2. Centered/Symmetry
3. Color combinations
4. Depth
5. Distance
6. Fill the Frame
7. Framing
8. Isolate the Subject
9. Juxtaposition
10. Leading Lines
11. Left to Right
12. Patterns & Texture
13. Points
14. Rule of Odds
15. Rule of Thirds
16. Shapes – diagonals, triangles, golden ratio
17. Simplicity & Minimalism
18. Space – positive, negative, breathing
19. Tone
20. …
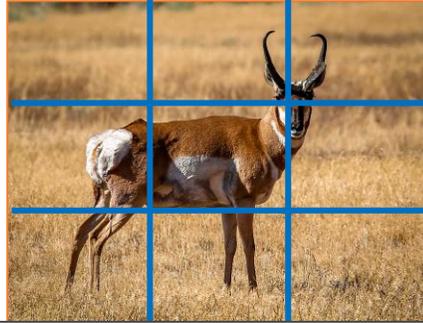
Rule of Thirds
Place the most interesting item on the lines or intersection

Leading Lines
Use a line to lead the viewer to the most interesting item

Rule of Odds
For visual balance and harmony use 1, 3 or 5 items

Leaving Space
Breathing room and implied motion

Subject Matter

Should always be appropriate to the story being told in a photo

- Keep it interesting and appropriate. Pretty doesn't mean it's right.
- Subject matter is sometimes linked to the competition category or photo title
- Not everyone will inherently understand your subject, use additional elements to help the viewer

Title

I Can See You Too

Use the title to provide an emotional connection to the photo

- At a minimum, use the title to tell the judges where to look when titles are announced before scoring
- It's always good to try many titles, the best might be the first or the last, avoid common short titles.
- Don't waste the title to name the location (Niagara Falls) or obvious subject (Gorilla)

Storytelling

Rhonda Cullens

The photo's ability to evoke imagination

• Take a step back to see what kind of stories your photos can create
• One beautiful thing about art is that each viewer might create their own message or story
• Take a step back and look at the photo as if it is your first time, find the story and make it noticeable

Judging Group Activity #2

Find one of these elements in the photo

Or

Identify one of these elements that could be improved in the photo

Composition → Center of Interest

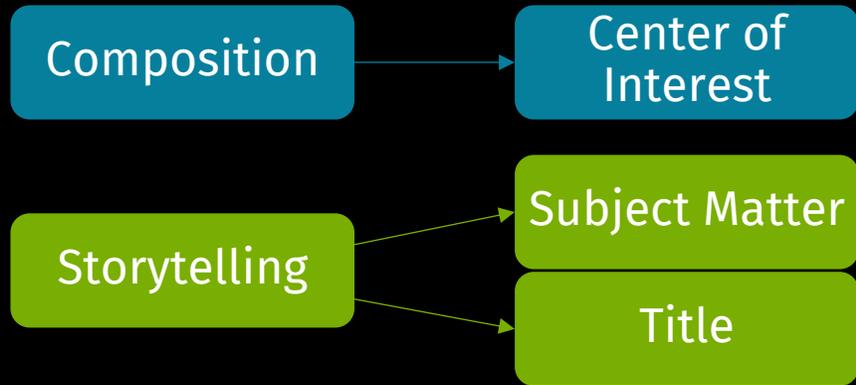Storytelling → Subject Matter

Title

Composition → Center of Interest

Storytelling → Subject Matter

Title

I'm Looking at You

Composition → Center of Interest

Storytelling → Subject Matter

Title

I'm Looking at You

Composition → Center of Interest

Storytelling → Subject Matter

Storytelling → Title

Brooklyn Bridge Flag

Composition → Center of Interest

Storytelling → Subject Matter

Storytelling → Title

Cascades

Composition → Center of Interest

Storytelling → Subject Matter

→ Title

I Don't See Any Food

Composition → Center of Interest

Storytelling → Subject Matter

Title

I Don't See Any Food

Composition → Center of Interest

Storytelling → Subject Matter

Title
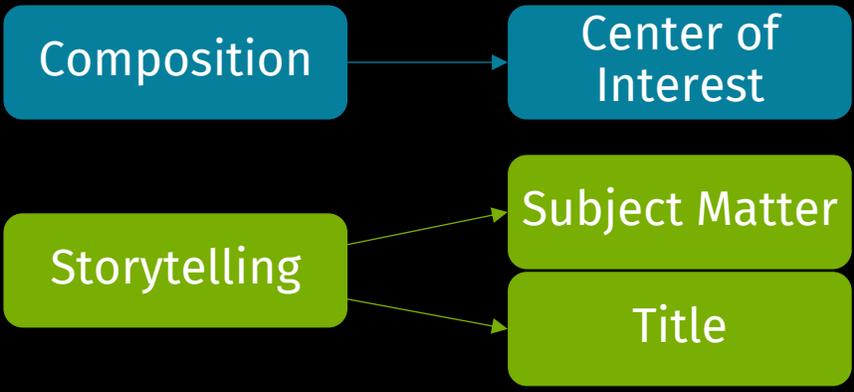
Look Mom, No Hands!

Agenda

History of the Elements on an Excellent Photo

Technical Excellence   + Group activity
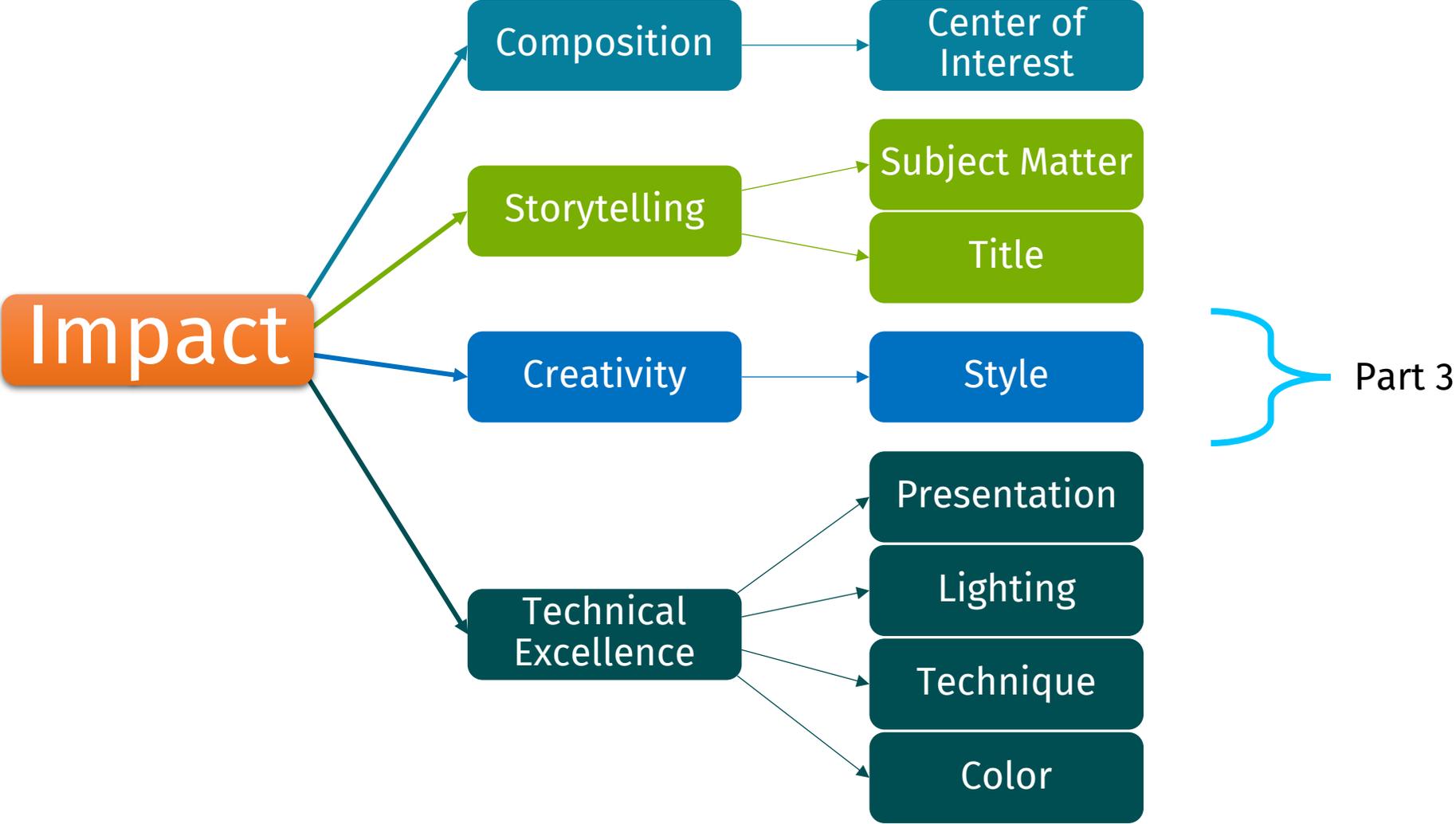
Composition and Storytelling   + Group activity

Style, Creativity and Impact   + Group activity

Process Ideas for Creating Better Photos

Part 3 – Style, Creativity and Impact

Style

Rhonda Cullens

A specific genre or recognizable characteristic to showcase an artist

- Has a positive impact when the subject matter and the style are appropriate for each other
- Your work can be anything from traditional to surreal, candid to abstract, hard or soft light
- Use light or color in a special way, a blue tone in monochrome, high saturation, consistent angle

Creativity

Fresh expression of imagination to convey an idea, message, thought

- It's looking at an ordinary subject and finding an extraordinary way to portray it
- In photographic competitions, you may get bonus points for creativity and originality
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Impact

The sense one gets upon viewing a photo for the first time

- Impactful photos evoke laughter, sadness, anger, pride, wonder or another intense emotion
- This is the eye candy, the wow factor. It is the reason we love the photo. It moves us to look inwards.
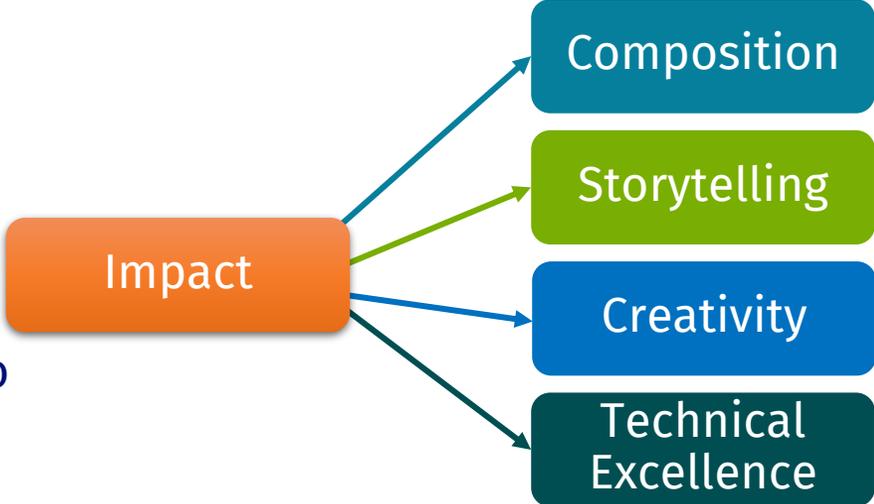- Impact is what you get when all the other elements are working together in concert
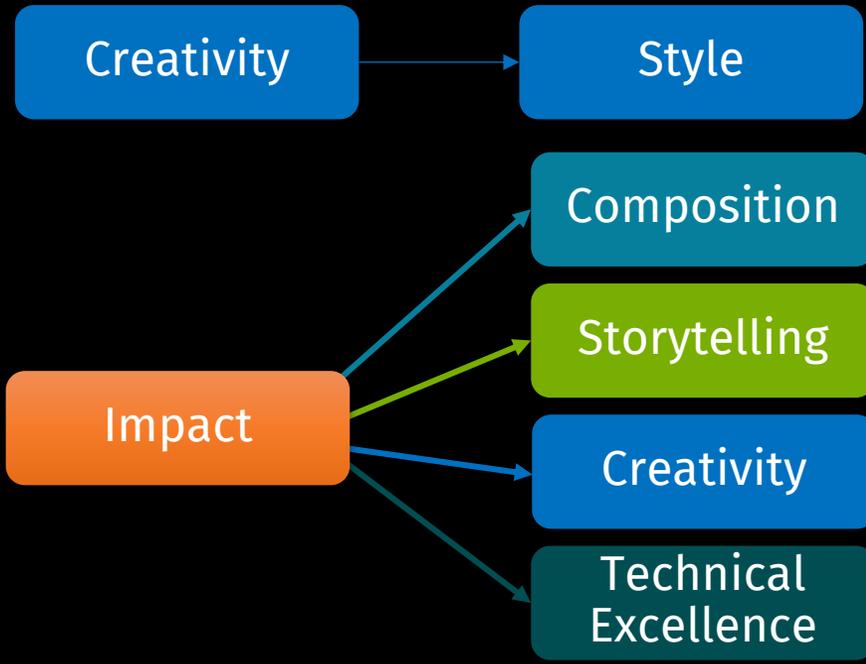
Judging Group Activity #3

Find one of these elements in the photo

Or

Identify one of these elements that could be improved in the photo

Creativity

Style

Composition

Storytelling

Impact

Creativity

Technical Excellence

Creativity → Style

Impact → Composition
Impact → Storytelling
Impact → Creativity
Impact → Technical Excellence

The Baker's Magic Hands

The London Eye

Creativity → Style

Impact → Composition
Impact → Storytelling
Impact → Creativity
Impact → Technical Excellence

Historic Icons of Newtown

Creativity → Style

Impact → Composition
Impact → Storytelling
Impact → Creativity
Impact → Technical Excellence

Slicing Vegetables Reflection

The Elements of an Excellent Photo - Summary

Impact

Composition → Center of Interest

Storytelling → Subject Matter, Title

Creativity → Style

Technical Excellence → Presentation, Lighting, Technique, Color
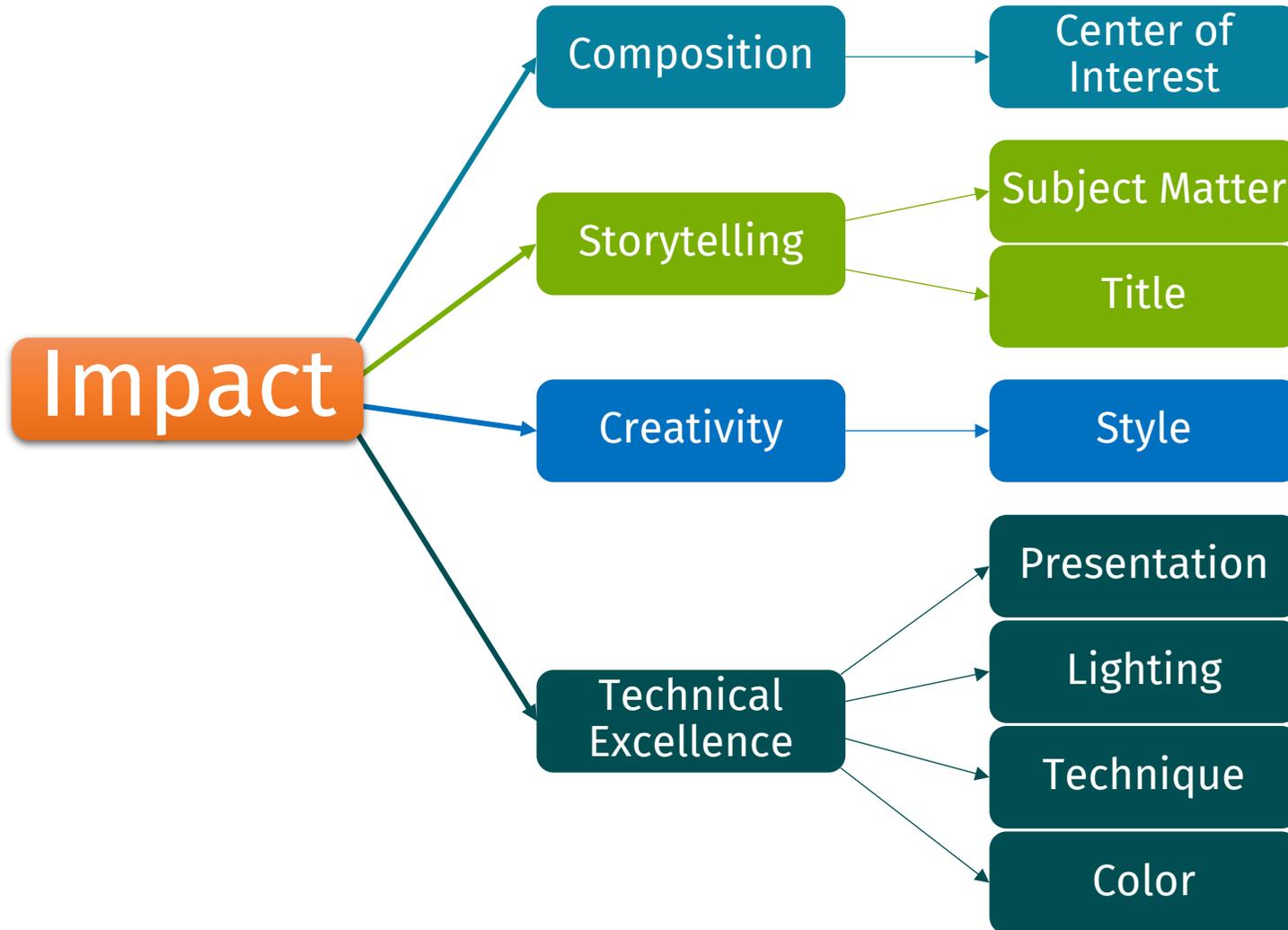
Each Element is important on its own

⬇

The more Elements you use, the stronger your photo becomes

Agenda

History of the Elements on an Excellent Photo

Technical Excellence   + Group activity

Composition and Storytelling   + Group activity

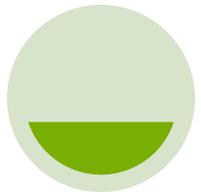Style, Creativity and Impact   + Group activity

Process Ideas for Creating Better Photos
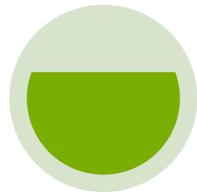
Ideas for Creating a Photo

Sometimes you're at the at the right place at the right time

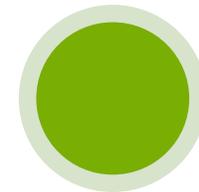However, even then you need think to "**create**" a great photo

Here is a 3-step method to help in creating a photo

Vision   Prepare   Achieve

Creating a Vision

DEFINE

UNDERSTAND

VERIFY

DEFINE
- "Wow, it's beautiful" is not a vision
- Strive for the clearest possible vision in your mind
- Simple, but clear
- With emotional impact
- What are the top three Elements to use

UNDERSTAND
- Possible subjects - flowers, water, moon, tree, people?
- What subjects work, what subjects don't work?
- What is the main subject?
- What is the foreground?
- What is the background?
- Audience?
- Why? Why? Why?

VERIFY
- Say it
- Pretend you are explaining your result to an audience
- Evaluate the vision on relevancy to your primary audience
- Get feedback from another person
- Iterate

A "Simple Things in Life" Starter Vision

- An enjoyable evening watching Netflix

- Feet up relaxing, some candy
- **Composition** – use feet as a leading line
- **Lighting** – dark, the TV, not the room
- **Center of interest** – is not the TV screen

- Then for the next week I tried to
  - Understand details
  - Verify if it makes sense with Rhonda
  - Finding ways to make it better

Vision Discussion Life"

Assignment "Simple Things in Life"

- **How would you improve this vision?**

DEFINE

What impact on the viewer

UNDERSTAND

Subject, Foreground, Background, Focus, Light

VERIFY

How to explain it over the phone

Prepare

Figure out how to create it, in the camera and in post-processing

What weather? What time of year? What equipment?

Cost? Time? Effort? Probability of success?

Knowledge – especially digital darkroom skills required

Honesty – leverage consideration of reality to drive creativity

Achieve

Time is always a limiting factor

Nature may be a limiting factor

Check & recheck equipment list

Plan alternatives

The more times you try the more times you'll see improvements

What should I do differently next time?

Skipping Vision & Prepare = Suboptimal results and wastes time

Assignment Knife

Vision: Knife on a cutting board

Prepare: Standing up the knife

Achieve: Boring

Vision: Knife with things you cut

Prepare: Run out and buy some vegetables. Change lighting and surface

Achieve: OK

Vision: Finally realize that adding action is important

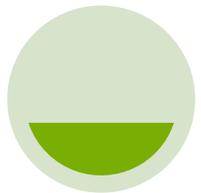**Prepare:** Move the light over and over

Achieve: ☺

Better vision would have reduced the whole day of shooting
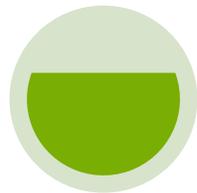
Ideas for Creating Excellent Photos – Summary

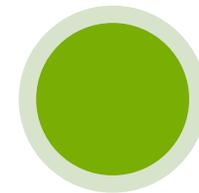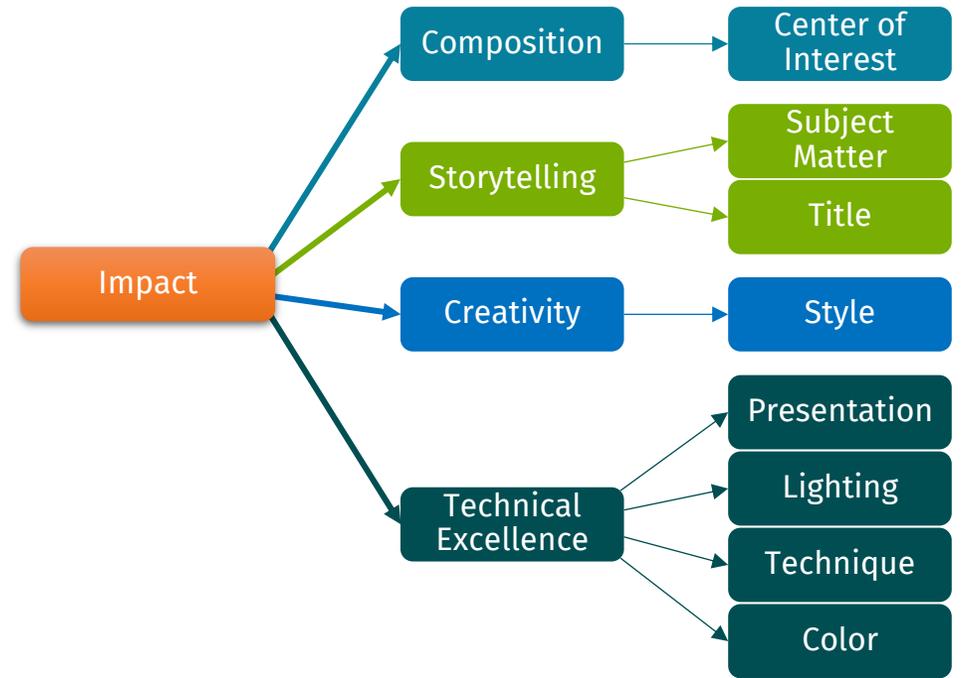*Envision the best photo possible from the scene, then figure out how to create it!*

Vision   Prepare   Achieve

History of the Elements on an Excellent Photo

Technical Excellence   + Group activity

Composition and Storytelling   + Group activity

Style, Creativity and Impact   + Group activity

Process Ideas for Creating Better Photos

Impact
- Composition → Center of Interest
- Storytelling → Subject Matter
- Storytelling → Title
- Creativity → Style
- Technical Excellence → Presentation
- Technical Excellence → Lighting
- Technical Excellence → Technique
- Technical Excellence → Color

Questions?

Chane Cullens – Chane@CCullens.com

Presentation At

CCullens.com/elements