



## SCPF Judging Guidance - Marking and Marking Ranges

### Summary

Since 2020 SCPF has recommended the following approach when marking competitions at all levels.

Its purpose is to bring consistency of approach to marking and clarity of understanding.

It is not intended to tell judges how to respond to or mark any particular image. Neither will it eliminate inconsistency of marking across judges; any image may speak strongly to one judge but not to another. We are human and we encourage giving credit weight in our appraisals to the perceived Expressive Quality (EQ) of an image, which is highly subjective.

### General Principles

- We will adopt a normal marking range of 6-10 for all competitions;
- We will mark images relatively to what is presented in this competition class;
- ‘Relative’ means there will be at least one high score 10 and at least one low score 6, irrespective of the overall perceived level of quality in the class;
- In advanced classes, a score of <6 may be awarded (hopefully rarely) if the judge feels that an image does not meet the expected base competence level for that class of competition;
- In beginner / club classes, the normal range will be 7-10;
- In open ability or intermediate classes the normal range will be 6-10 but negotiable with clubs according to the ability of that group;

SCPF Judges are expected to adopt this approach as standard, but we will not mandate it to clubs. Clubs remain free to use their own schema, but we should work in partnership and encourage adoption of this common approach so that judges and photographers alike become familiar with what it means and practised in its application.

**Important:** For SCPF League matches, judges should always adopt this approach and use the 6-10 relative range. Hosting clubs must ensure that judges are aware of and agree to this requirement when accepting the booking.

There are arguments in support of and against marking. Marking gives photographers some measurable indication of progress, but a constructive critique is still the most important aspect of what we do.

We are aware that an increasing number of clubs have moved away from marking. This guide does not encourage clubs to adopt a marking system where they have made a choice not to do so.

... Ken Scott  
SCPF Judging Adviser  
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## A Common Approach to Marking

### 1. General Principles

- a. We will mark relatively to what is presented, i.e. the best image(s) in that event scores 10 and the '*base competence*' image(s) scores the low of the normal range.
- b. We will strive to mark consistently across images of a similar quality and coherently so that the mark is in line with our comments.
- c. We will manage expectations well, especially for those images that are competent – i.e. have nothing 'wrong' with them but are less expressive than the highest scorers.

### 2. Marking in Advanced Classes:

- a. We will adopt a normal marking range of 6-10;
- b. Images that are at the top of the standard for that event should score 10;
- c. Images that are at the '*base competence*' level for that event should score 6;
- d. Images that are deemed not to meet the expected '*base competence*' level for that event should score less than 6 – we will use these scores carefully (and hopefully rarely);

### 3. Marking in Intermediate Classes:

- a. We will adopt a normal marking range of 6-10, which may be contracted to 7-10 by agreement with the club dependent on their relative experience in the class;
- b. There is no expected '*base competence*' level, so we will not mark below the agreed minimum;

### 4. Marking in Beginner / Club Classes:

- a. We will adopt a normal marking range of 7-10;
- b. There is no expected '*base competence*' level, so we will not mark below 7;

### 5. Marking in Open Classes (i.e. Open Ability):

- a. We will adopt the approach as for Advanced classes;
- b. There can be no expected '*base competence*' level in an Open ability class. Owing to the mix of abilities, the appropriate minimum expected mark must be agreed with the club;

### 6. Marking in SCPF League matches:

- a. **Use of this recommended scheme is mandatory for SCPF League matches.**
- b. We will adopt the approach as for Advanced classes
- c. The expected '*base competence*' level is higher than at club, so it is justifiable to award 6 to the '*base competence*' images at a league match even if they are of high quality, or <6 if an image is deemed not to meet the expected '*base competence*' level.  
See Footnote 1
- d. All clubs hosting league matches must require judges to use this guidance regardless of the Federation with which the judge is affiliated;



## What do the Marks Mean?

Description	Considerations	Marks	Salon	Other
Highest standard	Very high in Expressive Quality (EQ) and (usually) excellent in both Technical and Craft.	9.5 – 10 (19-20)	5	Gold
Very Good standard	High in EQ, but less so than in the highest range, with the same technical considerations.	8.5 – 9 (17-18)	4	Silver
Good Average standard	Competent, and reasonable to good examples of photography at this level. Any technical or craft issues are minor and inconsequential.	7 – 8 (14-16)	3	Bronze +
Scope for development	Images which are at the ' <i>base competence</i> ' level for this event. Any technical or craft issues might be noticeable and consequential.	6 – 6.5 (12-13)	2	Bronze -
Not suitable for this competition	Images in this range have issues which do not meet the <u>expected</u> level of competence for this competition class (advanced only).  Or: in a Set Subject class clearly does not meet the brief,  Or: does not meet competition rules – we would expect such images not to be presented.	<6  (<12)	1	Pass

**Note 1** – These descriptions should be read in a relative sense. An image might be “*Very high in Expressive Quality (EQ) and excellent in both Technical and Craft*” relative to the others in the class, even if it has room for improvement. In another competition of a higher overall standard that same image might be at the '*base Competence*' level for this event, relative to the others.

**Note 2** – There is often nothing 'wrong' with images in the Good Average or even below average ranges. They may be perfectly competent in technical and craft but they are considered perhaps less expressive or individual than those in higher ranges.

**Note 3** – Minor technical or craft issues may be mitigated by exceptional Expressive Quality. What some may see as a technical or craft flaw may be an artistic choice by the photographer that contributes to EQ. Judges must be able to distinguish the two.



## Appendix 1 – Marking Guidance Background Discussion

This appendix details the background discussions and issues raised with marking. Marking continues to be the ‘bête noir’ of our craft and causes far and away the most significant volume of debate.

### 1. Methodologies Compared – Relative vs. Absolute

There are two scales we could use in separating images in a competition, absolute and relative.

- A **relative** scale is where each photograph is marked relative to the others in the competition. The best scores the highest mark and the least good scores the lowest of the agreed range. It is a ranking.
- In an **absolute** scheme, each photograph is marked on its merits against the highest possible standard, or a defined benchmark.

There are pros and cons to both, but we must use one or the other.

A trap that judges (we) and clubs fall into is to mix these methodologies, i.e. to mark relatively at the high end – the best on the night scores 10 – but absolutely at the low end, where we feel unjustified in giving perceived low marks to an image that is competent.

On the balance of supporting reasons, we recommend a **Relative scheme**.

A Relative range is a ranking with fixed high and low end marks, and ensures that we use the same range across all standards and classes. If the low end of a relative scale were optional or variable then we would be back to mixing methodologies and compressing ranges.

#### Base Competence Explained

Judges use a preview to assess the overall standard of the class and to ‘pin’ the image(s) that will score the lowest mark. That image(s) represents the ‘*base competence*’ level for that class at this event and should score 6.

In a higher standard of competition e.g. an SCPF League match, the expected ‘*base competence*’ level will be higher than for a club competition. Image(s) may have scored well at the club, but relative to others in this event might be less expressive, even if competent or good.

**Important:** Some judges have expressed reluctance to use 6 as the low mark in for example SCPF League Division 1, because the standard is very high. The question in response would be to ask if we would not award a 10 in Division 8 or a ‘Club class’ because the standard is less high.

In an Advanced class, if there is an image that does not meet an expected level of competence (generally across most clubs), then it should score <6. Club (Beginner) and Intermediate classes do not have an expected base competence level.

#### Absolute Scales

We are often asked why we can’t mark images on merit. The answer is usually a question: ‘*what does better mean*’?

If we were to mark absolutely, there would be bunching and little differentiation, because there are relatively few ‘poor’ images. Conceivably, in a higher level of competition, everything might score 8 or more. Equally there might be no 10 awarded if none is deemed to be of sufficient quality.



*Strictly Come Dancing* uses an absolute scheme with a range of 1-10. It can do this because there are clearly defined criteria for what constitutes a great dance of each type. By the end of the competition, most dancers are scoring 9-10. But, there is still subjective variation among the judges.

To define criteria for every style of photography would be impossible. We might have to consider tariffs, like in diving where marks are awarded for execution and multiplied by a difficulty factor. What about Artistic Impression, equivalent to EQ? And then, in addition to giving an informed critique whilst thinking on our feet, we would have to apply the formula!!

Such tariffs for the wide variety of photography that we see would be impossible to implement, especially in Open classes, but might be possible in set genre classes. And then a photographer will come up with something new for which we don't have a tariff! That is art ...

## 2. Incoherent marking

Incoherent marking is where an image is praised and then (perceived to be) marked low, or vice versa.

We urge judges to listen very carefully to what they are saying and to mark accordingly. This is especially important in the middle ranges where there usually is nothing wrong with the image, it is just not as expressive as some others

A common question is *“if an image has no flaws, it must be concluded that the image just didn't appeal to that particular judge on the night. Is this fair?”*

The answer is that most club images have nothing 'wrong' with them; they are perfectly OK and attract an average to good mark of 7-8.5 (using our relative scale of 6-10).

The absence of faults does not signify an outstanding image.

We should not look for faults to justify a middle mark; these images are maybe less expressive than those scoring 9 or more.

Expressive Quality (EQ) is highly subjective. In a high-class of competition such as League 1, using a relative scale, it is perfectly possible for a technically-good image to score 6-7 because, relative to the others, it is below average expressively.

We might also overlook a minor technical matter if the image is highly expressive, but we must explain our reasoning. Finally, this depends to an extent on what you believe a low mark to be. An 'average' does not mean low.

### Managing Expectations

What we have to do better is to manage expectations, both at the start of an evening and in our commentary. And it helps if we are able to explain our thinking before giving every mark.

There is also an onus on clubs to understand and communicate this to members. This is especially important for 'competent' images in the middle ranges.



We can manage expectations by:

- Being positive and constructive but not over-praising, which would build expectation;
- Listening to our language and enthusiasm and taking note when giving the mark;
- Not seeking technical flaws that don't exist or suggesting irrelevant crops and tonal adjustments for marginal gain in order to justify not awarding a higher mark;
- Using an introductory script before commencing, e.g.

*'The majority of images tonight will be perfectly OK and fall into the mid-range between 7 and 8. There will be nothing wrong with most of them; it's just that they may not be as expressive as those that get the highest marks. So I will give them due praise, but if I have suggestions as to how to improve them, it might be simply to find ways to develop your vision and individuality.'*

And in the higher ranges:

- Explaining carefully if we are going to overlook a clear technical issue to award a good mark to a highly expressive image. Many photographers do believe that technical excellence is the end point;

### 3. Inconsistency

This question was asked in the 2022 Judging Question Time for clubs.

*"According to the SCPF Document 'Judging Guidelines 2020', EQ (expressive quality) counts for 55-60% of the credit weight (score?). The document also states that EQ is 'highly subjective'. Given that EQ makes up a large proportion of the score, how do you ensure judges are consistent in their approach?"*

We can and do attempt to achieve a consistency of approach through our training. Consistency of approach is not the same as all judges agreeing on which images are expressively strong, because it is, as stated, highly subjective. There are some aspects of photography that will be universally appealing, but many others that will divide opinion artistically, sometimes between one end of the scale and the other.

There are two forms of inconsistency:

- **Inconsistency within judges:** where we individually mark images of similar quality differently in one competition – which we know is hard to get right because it is done largely from memory unless all those similar images are held on the lightbox.
- **Inconsistency across judges:** where the same image receives very different marks from two or more judges. This arises legitimately from the high weight afforded to Expressive Quality (EQ). We will never achieve consistency across judges on EQ and photographers should not expect it. What should be expected is a fair appraisal, which is reflected in our Core Qualities.

However, inconsistency is not acceptable when it can be attributed to unconscious bias or to lack of understanding of the requirements of a genre.

As to the weights – EQ/Craft/Tech; they are only a guide and can vary across genres. It is too simplistic to translate a 'weight' directly into a mark because marks in a relative scheme reflect a ranking rather than an absolute score.



## Appendix 2 - The Appraisal Elements Explained

These appraisal elements are based loosely on criteria devised by Dr. Eddy Sethna FRPS in his piece '*An Analysis of Judging*'. They have been adapted for practical purposes in the SCPF judging training and are generally available knowledge.

**Technical** means how well the image has been produced technically. It is **objective** to a reasonably trained eye and counts for roughly 10-15% of the credit weight, but the debit weight might be higher. Factors include:

- Sharpness: in-camera steadiness and general focus
- Exposure and contrast, Tonal range and colour saturation
- Handling of digital production: noise / compression artefacts / sharpening / cloning ...
- Quality of printing e.g. banding

Advanced club photographers should not get these wrong – many digital issues are introduced in post-processing. Judges must be able to distinguish between technical faults and artistic choice by the photographer, which would either detract from or create Expressive Quality.

**Craft** means how technique has contributed to the overall effect of the image. It is largely **subjective** because it entails assessing the **appropriateness** of the choices made by the photographer for the subject matter. Judges should assess and explain the effect of craft choices as presented, not conformity to so-called 'rules'. It counts for roughly 30-35% of the credit weight.

- Composition / visual design, and its effects
- Choice and control of lighting, and its effects
- Choice and use of lenses / POV and perspective
- Choice and application of depth of field / critical focus point
- Timing / 'the decisive moment'
- Use of colour ... or monochrome tonality
- Appropriate use of styles, treatments and effects
- Format - portrait or landscape orientation
- Media and Presentation – choice of paper and mount / use of PDI keylines etc.

**Expressive Quality** or **EQ** refers to how the image 'speaks' to the viewer, how the individual engages with it on a personal level. It is **highly subjective** because everyone responds in their own ways to art. Judges should be able to interpret and discuss these considerations. EQ counts for roughly 55-60% of the credit weight.

- Does it engage you emotionally? / Does it invoke a strong reaction, positive or negative?
- Does it show individuality / originality / photographer input?
- Is it especially beautiful / ugly / subtle / dramatic
- Does it convey an idea or information? / Does it keep your interest?
- Does it ask questions / create intrigue or curiosity?
- Does it make you think?

These 'weights' might vary by genre. For example Abstract images are highly artistic and can produce very subjective responses. Nature and Documentary subjects often rely more heavily on quality of technical and craft, but both can be highly expressive as well in the information they provide and the stories they tell.