Steyning CC - Genre and Theme Briefs 2026/27

These definitions are provided in order to prompt ideas for how to go about set genre and themed competitions / appraisals.

Clubs often use 'Set Subject' as a catchall descriptor, but it is useful to be aware of some subtle differences in interpretation:

Set Subject Usually an object or common subject matter. The image is either of or about that thing or it isn't – it's not sufficient for the image to 'contain' the thing.

Set Theme: Usually more interpretive e.g. Calm, Water, Temptation. The photographer has more freedom to interpret an idea in their own way. Degree of fit is almost always subjective.

These two are often interchangeable.

Set Genre: Usually one of the main classifications in photography e.g. Portraiture, Architecture, Landscape. These have criteria that could be definable.

The questions I ask in the briefs are the ones I would ask when I am appraising. No judges are the same, of course, but our appraisers will be aware of the briefs, and so hopefully we will all be on the same screen, so to speak.

One of the first questions is "could I tell the theme from simply seeing the photograph?" If the answer is yes then the picture will almost certainly be a good fit. This is always a matter of interpretation. Examples include:

- a cityscape may 'contain' Architecture, because all buildings have inherent architectural qualities, but is the picture 'of' or 'about' architecture?
- a portrait of a leopard shows an animal with 'Patterns in Nature' on its coat; but is the picture 'of' or 'about' the patterns?
- a landscape that includes a river or the sea may 'contain' Water; but is the picture 'of' or 'about' water?

The great thing about genres and themes is that they take us outside of our normal comfort zones. They are a great way to expand our expression through photography, so be bold and have fun.

… Ken Scott
Summer 2026

Print Definitions

Monochrome - Genre

Monochrome is a craft genre, covering any subject and subject-matter.

A monochrome photograph gives the impression of having no colour (i.e. only black, white, shades of grey), or it may be toned in a single colour across the entire image e.g. sepia or selenium. Partial toning or spot colour is not permitted.

Monochrome, by removing all colour, is an interpretation of tonal values and contrast. Tonality is therefore vital to the effect of the image and should be considered carefully. Tonality can be wide (a full range) or limited (high-key or low-key / pure black and white such as Lith); there are no rules about 'detail in blacks' or 'paper white' – Ansel Adams has a lot to answer for – but these ideas should be used purposefully and / or graphically in your composition.

Leading Lines – Theme

Leading lines are an essential compositional idea – physical or implied lines take the eye through the image from the foreground to the background, creating a visual journey from front to back.

Leading lines may make use of natural perspective, converging towards a single key subject element or point of interest — or a virtual vanishing point. They may draw attention to an important area of the scene. They could be created by actual lines – road markings, rail tracks, furrows in a field, shadows or tonal / colour contrasts, the line of a street – or they could be virtual, created by taking a point of view that aligns physical objects.

However, don't be constrained by these traditional modes of thought, particularly the rather cliché idea that there must be a single point of interest – there is nothing to say there must be. Using the maxim of "*not all who wander are lost*", your lines could take the viewer on a journey of exploration through the whole scene.

Most often, themes like this one are observational; distinctive photographs often arise more from awareness and seeing in the moment than by searching. Whichever approach you choose, the primary purpose is to create depth by leading the viewer through the image.

Atmosphere – Theme

Atmosphere is an expressive quality in a photograph that can create an elevated sense of feeling or mood in the viewer. Mood, by contrast, is the emotion or feeling that the viewer experiences individually, which is highly subjective and personal. If you like, atmosphere is the stage and mood is the viewer's response.

In a literal sense, we might be most aware of the atmosphere that surrounds us physically when there is fog or cloud or rain, for example. Couple those atmospheric conditions with light and you may have an atmospheric landscape, or maybe a depiction of atmospheric optical effects such as rainbows or sundogs or halos.

In a human sense, our mood is often influenced by the atmosphere of a place such as an intimate restaurant setting, a bleak alleyway, a dark forest, or by a crowd of people such as at a sports stadium or concert where the viewer can share in a collective expression of emotion.

In other words the intention of tuning into the atmosphere for a photograph is to influence the viewer's emotion and mood. The more you feel it as a photographer, the more the viewer will sense it. The great Don McCullin said: "*Photography for me is not looking, it's feeling. If you can't feel what you're looking at, then you're never going to get others to feel anything when they look at your pictures.*"

PDI Definitions

Two of a Kind

Remember the old idea that a photograph is better with three (or an odd number) of something than two? Dismiss that. This **IS** about two, and of a **Kind.**

'Two of a kind' implies a similarity, or belonging to the same class of things. Two objects could be identical or very alike, or they might not be alike at all but still belong to a category, in the sense that two people of different ethnicity appear unalike but they are still people.

Think here about the relationship between the two things and how you show that. Do you create proximity, such that the viewer naturally sees them as being together? Do you place them apart so that perspective creates an altered scale? Do you stage the composition of two things together or observe them as they are? Do you create a heightened sense of their togetherness by including a third element as a contrast e.g. togetherness versus alone or shunned?

Diptychs are two complementary images displayed as one, with a clear relationship between the two parts. Diptychs are acceptable as an approach within this theme.

Shadows

A shadow is an area of darkness created where light is blocked. This could include:

- The shape of the blocking object being cast onto a surface, such as a wall or ground
- A dark area in a room or outside space – somewhere that is in shadow or shaded
- The dark side of the blocking object, i.e. a silhouette
- The shadow cast into the frame by an object outside of the frame

Object shadows can create wonderful shape illusions, such as the familiar tennis player or camels in the desert shadows. They can create poetic and evocative patterns and abstract visions. If the blocking object is outside the frame then its shadow in the frame can create intrigue or even confusion.

You might also consider '*chiaroscuro*' – in Italian 'light and dark' – an artistic term for the use of strong contrasts between light and dark to create a sense of depth and three-dimensionality.

The photographic potential is endless, whether observed in playful moments or created purposefully. Of course, contrast is the key visual element here, so lighting is key. The essence of this theme is that the shadow(s) must be either the principal visual element in the photograph or contribute significantly to the visual appeal.

I have an album of over 550 examples here, if you're stuck for ideas https://flic.kr/s/aHsjiZLmN1

Your Thing

This might appear on the surface to be another Open subject, where anything goes. To an extent it is, but the key word is **YOUR** Thing.

You might have a passion or hobby in life, such as a collection of objects or participation in an activity or sport, that is not photography but which could be expressed through photography. That could be the 'Your Thing' subject matter here.

We all have subject preferences and styles that to some extent identify us as photographers. But what is it about your approach unique and authentic? Sometimes these takes a long time to develop and for us to feel confident in that expression. If you know what your signature style is then work with that because it will distinguish your image from anyone else's; if not then tune into what is special and interesting for you about the subject. Either way it is important to be able to say in your photograph what makes it special and important to you, expressed in your own way.

If your picture can express the proverbial thousand words, then great. But like documentary and journalistic genres, this theme will benefit from an expanded caption or statement, which states for you why this is **Your** Thing.

A requirement is, therefore, that each image is submitted with a caption of no more than 50 words that will be read when the image is displayed. Part of the appraisal criteria will be how well your image matches your statement – a good discipline for anyone considering an RPS Distinction.

Note for Appraisers

Appraising themes, as with open subject classes, is always subjective. However the first intent should be to understand what the photographer is attempting to say in their image. Success is often marked by how well they have achieved that, not by their compliance to preconceived norms.

Our briefs are provided to photographers to encourage openness and creative intent, so appraisers are asked to read the briefs carefully and to work with them.

1. An image cannot score highly if it doesn't fit the brief, no matter how good it might be in an Open class. There are degrees of fit and interpretation, but a clear no-fit should score the lowest in the range.
2. Always give benefit to images with a good fit over those that do not, even if they are technically less proficient.
3. An image scoring 19-20 or chosen as a winner or award must be both a clear fit AND show the high standards of EQ, Craft and Tech we would normally expect.
4. High EQ might be represented by an individual or unusual interpretation that you might not have thought of ….