



**A GUIDE FOR NECCC MEMBER CLUBS TO
WRITE DESCRIPTIONS FOR MEMBERS
AND INSTRUCTIONS FOR JUDGES
REGARDING ALTERED REALITY COMPETITIONS**

I) INTRODUCTION

NECCC has formed a panel consisting of photographers from a variety of backgrounds tasked with providing information designed to help participating NECCC clubs organize and run **Altered Reality (AR)** competitions. Specifically, the panel will attempt to: 1) provide suggestions and examples to help clubs write guidelines for the AR category for their members, and 2) offer suggested guidelines for clubs to provide clear instructions for judges to assess the images.

These types of competitions are currently being offered under different theme titles. Here's a rundown with some brief commentary on each.

Creative Some clubs call this the "Creative" category. However, the Panel feels that this term is too general to adequately build a concise description for members and judging guidelines. Essentially all photographers strive to make their images "creative," depending on the maker's choice of subject, composition, camera settings, lighting, etc.

Manipulated The intent of this category title is to isolate images that the maker had manipulated in post processing. But, once again, the theme title is too vague. In today's photographic world, almost every image is 'manipulated' in some way during post processing, whether it is to adjust the color balance, remove noise, sharpen the image, etc.

Abstract This title is too restrictive to encompass all the possibilities of AR themed images.

So, **Altered Reality** seems to be the simplest, most descriptive theme title from which member guidelines and judging instructions can be derived. PSA uses "Creative Altered Reality" but the Panel feels that adding the word "creative" unnecessarily complicates the understanding of the category. Creativity (originality, uniqueness, imaginativeness) is already a key component that contributes to the impact of any competition image.

II) WHAT IS ALTERED REALITY?

An Altered Reality image is an image that has been constructed in such a way that the image no longer resembles what our eyes and brains are used to seeing. PSA's definition of "altered reality" is: *The image must obviously display a change in natural color, form, shape, or any combination of these three. In other words, an altered reality image is one that is no longer a true and realistic representation of reality. Such Altered Reality must be readily apparent to the viewer.*

Examples of Altered Reality images are vast, but would include: a hot air balloon rising from an open book on a table, house doors floating on cumulus clouds, etc. One method for creating AR images is to place normal objects in abnormal scenarios, creating a sense of unreality. For example, portraying the moon as a cube-shaped object suspended in space. That simple image might qualify as an AR image (cube-shaped moons are no longer realistic), but it might not score very well. In order to score well, an AR image, just like any other image, should tell a story, evoke an emotion, etc. So, if that cube-shaped moon was placed in a sky above the canals of Venice in evening moonlight, the image becomes more interesting and might produce a better score.

Many AR images go further, bending reality into dream-like scenes. Often such images still include something identifiable that the viewer can relate to. This provides perspective and a basis for understanding the image intent, emotion, story, etc. For example, if part of an AR image is a flower sliced into layers, the viewer knows that the image has something to do with a flower. That knowledge can help the viewer better understand the image.

Other examples of AR images bend and distort reality into surrealistic, artful arrangements of shapes and colors intended to evoke emotion. Sometimes these types of "extreme" images become a challenge for some judges to evaluate. But actually, AR images should be judged on the basic criteria used to judge all photographs, without thought or consideration to how the image was created.

It is important to understand that all of the explanations above are just examples of the *conditions necessary for an image to qualify for AR competition*. Makers should understand that each AR image should still be judged on fundamental criteria for any competition image [see *Judging Criteria toward the end of this document*]. It is important for judges to ignore the "how" of AR image construction and focus on the elements of impact, emotion, technical merit, composition, etc., just as with any other image.

It is a misconception that in order to create award-winning AR images the maker has to be a Photoshop savant. In fact, there are several AR-creation techniques that can be accomplished entirely in-camera and do not require any post production skills. Additionally, image manipulation in post production can range from one-click image filters, to complex multi-layered composites that require advanced post production skills and experience. More explanation of these techniques is provided below, along with descriptions of what this Panel recommends for techniques that should or should not be allowed in AR competitions.

III) SUGGESTIONS FOR TECHNIQUES TO ALLOW IN ALTERED REALITY COMPETITIONS

Following are examples of some of the many techniques for creating AR images. This is not intended to be an all-inclusive list. Our goal is to show enough examples to give club leadership an understanding of the basic principles that we recommend be used to determine which techniques to allow. Ideally, clubs would then be able to build their own descriptions of the AR category. Such descriptions should include enough detail and examples that club members can clearly understand what is allowed in your AR competitions. The same information can also be used to support writing instructions for judges. With all techniques, the end result must be an AR image, per the “definitions” above.

1. **ICM (Intentional Camera Movement):** In-camera manipulations including pans, zooms, and twirls...no post production skills required. Beginners guide:
<https://www.juliaannagospodarou.com/guide-icm-intentional-camera-movement/>
2. **Multiple Exposures:** In-camera manipulation resulting in two or more exposures on a single image “frame”...no post production skills required.
3. **Abstract Subject Matter:** Subject matter that is captured in such a way that it does not immediately have an association with the “real” world, done in camera...no post production skills required.
4. **Time Lapse Multiple Exposures on a Single Frame:** Similar to multiple exposure, this technique usually requires a tripod mounted camera and flash to capture a series of images on one “frame” over a period of time to demonstrate motion. The result will show movement in a stepped fashion...some techniques require basic post production skills. (See Section IV-4 for more discussion of star trails.)
5. **Filters or Objects That Refract (Bend) Light:** Prisms, fractal filters, and some camera lens filters can turn a camera into a kaleidoscope and produce fascinating AR images. No post production skills required.
6. **Textures:** A texture is added to an existing image to give the image depth and to evoke an emotional interaction. Textures can aid in producing an altered reality image. There are many sources of pre-existing textures available for sale or free download. If the texture used in an image originated from any third party source, then we recommend that the resulting image should not be allowed in an AR competition. Makers can build their own library of textures by photographing interesting designs, patterns, etc. If the image uses textures created by the maker, then the image should be allowed.
7. **Digital Painting:** is a technique where the maker uses painting tools to produce a painterly, artistic effect. There are filters that can apply a painterly effect to an image with one click. By itself, this technique might not result in images that would fit the above description of AR competition images. However, applying impressionist, post-impressionist, or other more reality-changing techniques to the whole image, or portions of the image, could result in an image appropriate for AR competition.

8. **Brushes:** There are many types of brushes that can allow the maker to add smoke, dust, hair, etc. to a composite image. These brushes can be made from one's own images, or purchased from various online sources. This technique requires that the maker applies the effect in an artistic and impactful way. The maker must select color, size, orientation, and placement of the brush effect. Because of the method of application, the use of brushes can be considered the maker's work. As such, we suggest that clubs allow the use of brushes in the creation of AR images.

9. **Composite Images:** A composite image is made by combining elements from two or more images to make a new image. *[PLEASE NOTE: Clearly not all composite images fall into the AR category. While this document explains how composite images can be used for AR-themed competitions, the examples below can also be applied to ANY competition that allows composite images.]*

When Is a Composite Image “OK” for AR-themed Competition

OK: A composite image requires TWO conditions to qualify for inclusion in AR competitions. 1) The final result must *obviously display a change in natural color, form, shape, or any combination of these three*. AND 2) All the elements within the image must come from sources that the owner has created.

NOT OK: If the image is lacking EITHER ONE of these features, i.e., 1) does not *obviously display a change in natural color, form, texture, or appearance, or any combination*. AND/OR 2) the image contains any element that has not been created by the maker...then that image would not qualify for inclusion in an AR competition.

Specific Examples of Techniques Used to Create Composite Images for AR Competitions

Sky Replacement

OK: replacing the original sky with a sky from the maker's gallery of their own images such that the resulting image represents altered reality.

NOT OK: replacing the original sky with the skies provided by any third party source (because the skies are coming from a source that is not the maker's image), regardless of the final result being altered reality.

Generative Fill

OK: Filling a selection with pixels from the original image. Generative Fill has a text box that, if left empty, is said to use only content from the original image (as explained in a pop up message within Photoshop).

NOT OK: Entering text in the text box can result in this tool picking pixel content from its vast database of images. In this case, the fill content will not be sourced from the maker's original image and the resulting composite would not be eligible for inclusion in AR competitions.

Neural Filters

OK: Neural Filters that use pixels from the maker's original image are OK.

NOT OK: Neural Filters that use pixels sourced from the cloud (such as Adobe Firefly) are not OK to use. The reason is that the end result image will no longer contain only pixels from the maker's work. Such images would not be allowed in just about all types of photography competitions.

Clip Art

OK: if the clip art comes from images that were created by the maker

NOT OK: if the clip art comes from any third party source (because the clip art is coming from image sources that are not the maker's images)

Textures

OK: if the texture comes from sources that were created by the maker

NOT OK: if the texture comes from any third party source (because the clip art is coming from image sources that are not the maker's images)

IV) SUGGESTIONS FOR WHAT SHOULD NOT BE ALLOWED IN ALTERED REALITY COMPETITIONS

In each of the examples below, the technique by itself is NOT likely to produce an image that meets our explanation of an AR image. However, an element from any one of these techniques might be combined with other elements to create an AR image.

1. **Focus Stacking:** This is a technique that makes use of specialized software to align a series of stacked, focus-bracketed images so as to produce a final image that has a sharp focus through a deep depth of field. The technique is used primarily in macro photography. For AR, if the end result is a realistic image that appears sharp from front to back, then such an image should NOT be used in AR competitions. However, if a Focus Stacked image is combined with other elements so as to create an AR image, that image should be allowed. It's not the tool that determines eligibility for inclusion in AR competitions. Instead, it is whether or not the final result "*obviously displays a change in natural color, form, shape, or any combination of these three.*"
2. **Sky Replacement:** If the final product of a sky replacement effort was a realistic looking image, then that image should not be used in AR. However, if the final result was an image that "*obviously displays a change in natural color, form, shape, or any combination of these three*" ...then it could be used in an AR competition. For example, if a very large image of the moon, surrounded by star trails, was inserted in a daytime image of the canals of Venice, that would probably qualify as an image suitable for AR competition.
3. **Realistic Looking Composite Images:** No matter the degree of complexity or difficulty in producing a composite image, if it looks realistic it should not be used in an AR competition. However, if the final image was other-worldly, showed a creative combination of elements, and "*obviously displayed a change in natural color, form, shape, or any combination of these three*" then it could be allowed in an AR competition.
4. **Star Trails:** Star trail, aurora, etc. images in and of themselves would not qualify for altered reality. Our reason for this suggestion is that the recent pervasiveness of star trail, aurora, and milky way images has resulted in those images becoming common to viewers. This is an example of a technique that does produce altered reality images, but those altered images have become the true and realistic representations of the subjects for most viewers.
5. **LensBaby Images:** If the result of using an image-distorting lens produces an altered reality image, then THAT image probably qualifies for AR-themed competitions.
6. **IR Images:** An InfraRed image by itself would NOT qualify for AR competitions. However, if an IR image was combined with other elements in such a way as to produce an altered reality image, then that image probably could be used in an AR competition.

7. **Light Painting:** Typical light painting of a scene would most likely not qualify for altered reality. However, creative light painting (such as using a moving strobe light, or a combination of different colors of light, etc.) or other unique techniques that result in an image that *“obviously displays a change in natural color, form, shape, or any combination of these three”* might produce images that qualify for AR. Also, if the light painted image was combined with other elements that qualified the image as altered reality, then light painting could be used in AR competitions.
8. **HDR Images:** Normal HDR by itself would probably not produce an image that should be entered in an AR competition. However, as with most of these techniques, if HDR is applied in such a way (HDR to the max, etc.), or combined with other elements, such that the resulting image *“obviously displays a change in natural color, form, shape, or any combination of these three”* then that image might be appropriate for AR competition.
9. **Panoramas:** Many of today’s cameras, as well as most photo editing software, can automatically stitch together a series of images to produce a panorama image. An image in panorama view is not altered reality unless it includes some element that makes it an untrue or unrealistic view of the scene. For example, a landscape photographer might make images of the same exact scene over the course of the year. And then use certain segments of images from different seasons to build a panorama. That *“four season”* landscape scene would be something our eyes and brains are NOT used to seeing and might qualify for AR competition.
10. **Digital Frames:** Stroke Frames, Heavy Digital Frames, etc. by themselves would not qualify an image for AR competition. Adding the frame in a way that alters reality, or combining the frame with other elements that might qualify the image as altered reality, might make the image appropriate for AR competition. Again, it is not the tool itself that determines eligibility for AR competition, it is how the maker applies the tool and the end result they accomplish.

V) HOW CLUB LEADERSHIP CAN APPLY THE PRINCIPLES DESCRIBED ABOVE TO ANSWER MEMBER QUESTIONS.

First, let's summarize our suggestions for how to decide if a technique should be allowed. Really, it is just two suggested precepts: 1) The technique must utilize components that are a result of the maker's own work (in other words, the technique must not be the result of efforts by someone other than the maker...no third parties, etc.) 2) Does the image in which this technique is used fit our description of an Altered Reality image, "an image that is no longer a true and realistic representation of reality and is readily apparent to the viewer."

EXAMPLE: Can Photoshop's Puppet Warp tool be used to make, or help make, an AR image for competition?

The Puppet Warp tool enables the user to move and shape parts of an image. For example, an arm or leg can be moved to a different position.

To decide if the Puppet Warp tool can be used, simply apply the two conditions described above: 1) does the image fit the description of an AR image, and 2) has the Puppet Warp tool been applied to an element that is the maker's work?

GUIDELINES FOR BEST PRACTICES IN JUDGING ALTERED REALITY THEMED COMPETITIONS

Suggested Criteria for Judging Altered Reality Images *[NOTE: These recommendations come from several members of this Panel who have many years of judging experience, as well as from various Camera Club Council and PSA image evaluation training courses.]*

1. The first thing a judge should do is put aside personal biases and preconceptions of what makes an Altered Reality image. Read the club's definition of AR that it provided to members to get clarification in what THAT club is seeking in images entered into this category. That is the sole context within which you should evaluate whether an image fits the category.
 - a. If you have questions, ask them before scoring images.
 - b. During judging refer regularly to the written description provided by the club.
2. Judging an Altered Reality image should not be much different than judging any other competition image. First, determine this significant criteria: does the image fit THAT club's description of what an AR image should be. Beyond that, the fundamental criteria of all photography should be the basis for judging AR images.
 - a. Impact (originality, storytelling, emotion, etc.)
 - b. Technical Elements (light, camera settings, sharpness, noise/grain, blending, etc.)
 - c. Compositional Elements (rule of thirds, leading lines, left to right, etc.)
 - d. Artistic Elements (line, shape, texture, pattern, balance, etc.)
3. Your perspective should be whether an image speaks to you as a viewer, NOT whether it is something you would or would not do yourself.
4. There are four key factors in an effective image:
 - a. **Impact:** Does the image get and hold the viewer's attention (does it cause the viewer to stop and look...to study the image)?
 - b. **Story:** Does the image have a story, real or perceived (imagined by the viewer) or cause the viewer to have an emotional response? This is directly related to the viewer's level of interest in the image. Will the viewer want to stay with that image for a longer period of time?
 - c. **Technical Quality:** The quality of the image from a nuts and bolts (technical) perspective.
 - d. **Pictorial Quality:** The quality of an image that is often associated with composition, but which goes beyond that basic element. This governs how the viewer's eye flows through the image.
 - i. Does the eye travel smoothly or are there "stumbling blocks" of shape, luminosity (tonality), or color that interrupt (disrupt) the eye's journey through the elements as it passes to the ultimate subject?
 - ii. Are the elements in the image all supportive of the story shown, or are there extraneous or missing elements?

[NOTE: Technical and Pictorial Quality will have a significant influence on the image's impact and the willingness of a viewer to stay with the image...the image's interest value.]

5. Some additional factors that can help guide the review of an image:
 - a. Are the key story elements in focus and appropriately sharp?
 - b. Is the depth of field appropriate for the subject or story being shown?
 - c. Is the exposure (tonality) of the key elements handled well?
 - d. Have highlights been clipped or shadows blocked up?
 - e. Are there areas of light, dark, or colors that pull the viewer's eye away from the key story elements?
 - f. Is the level of contrast sufficient for good impact but not overdone while still being appropriate for the subject matter or story?
 - g. Does the color palette work well or are there color elements that are at odds with the key elements in the image?
 - h. Does the processing performed enhance the image or detract from it? (e.g., over saturation, over sharpening, use of a vignette when not warranted, etc.)

6. If you feel a change would have made the image more effective for you as a viewer, irrespective of whether you view the technique applied as simple or complex, think of phrasing your thoughts along the lines of these suggestions:
 - a. The maker may want to explore ways to make this more effective (more technical merit, better composition, better storytelling, more originality, more impact, more creativity) such as...(insert your suggestion)
 - b. Keep your comments focused on which elements are working and which might be changed to improve the image.
 - c. Your comments should always include things that you find well handled in the image (e.g., visual flow or design, color palette, etc.)
 - d. Good practice is to begin with what works in the image, even if it is only the concept you feel the maker was trying to convey, then follow with no more than one or two possible suggestions for improvement.
 - e. Multiple images within a competition may exhibit similar weaknesses. As best you can, try not to repeat the same suggestion for image after image, especially if the competition takes place in front of an audience.
 - f. Use a variety of comments even if it means mentioning aspects where the suggested adjustment is slightly less important.

JUDGING GUIDELINES, Continued

Suggestions for What to Avoid When Judging AR Images

[NOTE: Just as there are suggestions for what to look for when judging AR images, we have some suggestions for what to AVOID when judging AR images.]

1. Don't wonder about, or comment, on HOW an image was altered.
[It shouldn't matter how much time or effort was spent making the image. When judging a nature image, the judge doesn't take into consideration the freezing temperatures or how far the photographer had to hike.] There are obviously some circumstances where the "how" of an image might impact your judging decisions. If the end result of an apparent "how" doesn't produce a very compelling image, it might be appropriate to comment on that. For example, you might say something like, "Whatever process was used to create this image, for me, the image does not have enough impact. The maker might consider exploring alternate methods that would produce images with more impact, for example..."
2. Avoid phrases like "I love this image..." or "This image doesn't work for me..." etc.
[Whether or not a judge 'loves' an image should be irrelevant in the judging process. Take as much of your personal reaction about the image out of the judging equation and rely on judging the merits of the image as described above.] Keep in mind that the creators of these images are looking for guidance, not criticism.
3. Avoid suggesting changes by saying "I would have..."
[Saying 'I would have' strongly conveys a message to the maker that you - the judge - feel that you are a better photographer than the maker. It can cause makers, especially beginning photographers, to feel alienated and inferior.] Instead, couch your suggestions in terms such as, "The maker might want to try..." or "It might be interesting to see the result if..."
4. Especially avoid not explaining your reasons when you give an image a lower score. Too many times we've heard judges say they thought an image was well done, but gave the image a low score without explaining why. This does not help the maker improve their photography. Provide guidance for how the image might be improved.
5. The same thing applies when images are given a higher score without comment. Not explaining why an image gets a high score is missing a great teaching opportunity. Pointing out the factors that resulted in the higher score can be an excellent learning experience for the audience watching the judging process.
6. Another excellent teaching opportunity occurs when one image shows a more effective use of a technique. It's appropriate to point out that effective technique and explain how that could have been used to increase the impact of a weaker image.

HOW CAN MAKERS BECOME MORE PROFICIENT AT CREATING AR IMAGES

Following are some suggestions for photographers to consider in order to produce better altered reality images.

1. **Build Your Own Library of Clip Art** Spend some time dedicated to photographing a wide assortment of objects, settings, etc. to serve as your source for clipart elements for composite images. Make sure you shoot these items in a variety of lighting conditions, perspectives, etc. so the blended components will not seem out of place.
2. **Build Your Own Textures Library** Similar to your own clip art library, start collecting images that can be used to make your own textures. The following YouTube video provides easy-to-follow guidance on how to make a texture from a photograph: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T1MFLFOGuUc>
3. **Gain Familiarity With These Tools:** Take the time to learn about Layers, Masks, Blend Modes, Mixer Brush, Blur Tool, and as many other post-production tools as you can. <https://www.adobe.com/creativecloud/photography/discover/composite-photo.html>
4. **Look at examples of composites** created by other makers. Seeing as many examples as you can will help give you ideas for creating your own altered reality images. Do a Google search for: “Examples of composite photo creations” or “Examples of creative photography” or “Behind the scenes for creative photography.” *[CAUTION: You can also search for “Examples of Altered Reality photography,” but some of those results might use techniques that would not be allowed in AR competitions.]*
5. **Become Familiar with LUTs.** Look Up Tables (LUTs) are a kind of color filter you can apply to your image during post processing. Unlike the usual red, yellow, magenta color filters that you might apply to your lens, LUTs are mathematical formulae that change the colors in your image to achieve a certain look and feel. There are LUTs that change “day into night,” or apply “candlelight” to your image. Creatively applying LUTs and using masks can give your image a completely different look and feel from the original. Do a Google search for: “What are LUTs and what do they do in photography?”
6. **YouTube can be a valuable resource.** While there are plenty of sources offering to sell you courses in image alteration, YouTube can provide hours and hours of free instruction for how to use Photoshop tools (and even in-camera examples) for making Altered Reality images. Do a YouTube search for: “photoshop tools for compositing” *[CAUTION: Be aware that many of these videos will delve into “Augmented Reality” where elements of the final image may not be elements that you created. Using such techniques would disqualify your image for Altered Reality competitions.]*

7. **Create a structured learning schedule.** The more hands-on experience you can get, the quicker you will learn how to do the manipulations that help to make fantastic Altered Reality images. Set up a schedule for yourself where you take an hour or so every week to explore a new Photoshop technique. Then, practice that technique until you master it.

8. **Learn Your Camera's Little-Used Functions.** Today's cameras come with a plethora of functions, many of which we photographers don't use. Dust off the manual that came with your camera and search for menu items such as "multiple exposure," "monochrome," "film simulations," and other 'hidden' gems. These techniques can be used to create Altered Reality images directly in the camera, without the need for post processing expertise.