

# The 4Cs Scoring Scale

A Review With Example Images

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In 2000-2001, a committee of 4Cs members assembled guidelines for judging and scoring images in 4Cs competitions that included the 4Cs scoring scale and descriptions of what each score meant. However, it isn't always easy to decide which description applies to a given image, especially for newer club members. As a result, I thought it might be useful to compile a set of reference images illustrating the different scores. So three other selectors and I culled through a mass of images to extract a set that we thought was a fair representation of the scale; that set is the basis for this presentation. One major caveat: although I was chairman of the 4Cs when assembling this program, it is not officially approved or sanctioned by the 4Cs at this time.

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Gordon Battaile  
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## What is the 4Cs scale?

An absolute scale with a range of 1-9.

Absolute implies that a given score should mean the same thing in every judging.

Even though the range is 1-9, 1 is reserved for disqualification so the effective range is 2-9.

# Why do we use this scale?

We needed a common yardstick that could be compared across judgments (tallied over the year). This implies an absolute scale.

The primary goal for interclub competition is provide direct and honest feedback on quality of images. This also is best done with an absolute scale.

The scale is meant to cover the whole range of images, not just 4Cs images. This (in theory) makes the scale more intuitive to judges, even if it means that most images will score in a fairly narrow part of the scale.

Note: in retrospect, setting aside a score of 1 for disqualification was not a good idea; disqualification should be determined by the administrator, not by a judge.

## Important:

The 4Cs promotes this scale solely for use in judging 4Cs competitions.

The 4Cs in no way requires or recommends that member clubs use this scale for internal competitions.

# Scale Interpretation

2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Awful		Weak		Stronger		Great	

The key 4Cs descriptions:

6 - “competent”

7 - “rewards contemplation”

# Score Descriptions And Examples

Examples selected by:

Carol Berget

Pat Starr

Drinda Battaile

Gordon Battaile

All four selectors agreed that each of the following images was a good example of the specified score.

I recruited Carol, Pat, and Drinda for several reasons. All three are excellent photographers, all three have done a lot of judging using the 4Cs scale, and all three have multiple years experience running 4Cs competitions. In addition, they do very different work and consequently have diverse perspectives on images.

Note: In going through this process I concluded that the 4Cs descriptions need to be revised. The descriptions included here are my own approximations.

What is a 2?

A train wreck:  
an image with no redeeming features



Nothing about this image is competently handled.

What is a 3?

A train mishap: still pretty bad,  
but it has at least one redeeming feature



The image is poorly handled in most ways but at least the focus is reasonable.

What is a 4?

Significantly incompetent: a 'snapshot'



Normally Half Dome is an engaging subject, but the lighting and composition are both very weak. (Nice sign.)



The image is simple and has good color, but that's offset by sharpness problems and unfortunate timing.



Technical handling is acceptable but the image completely fails to communicate why it was taken.

What is a 5?

Almost competent



The subject has potential but the lighting is flat and the composition fails to emphasize anything interesting.

The subject-- fall color and water-- is time-honored and the composition is effective with good foreground interest, but the lighting is a real problem; the foreground is hard to make out, the sky is blown out, and the color is underexposed enough to render it drab.





The middle 20% of the image has potential, but the composition-- especially the framing of the foreground-- is not well handled.

# What is a 6?

Competent: an image that on the whole is reasonably handled and creates some interest

The scene appears not quite level, but otherwise is well framed to isolate the subject and emphasize the pattern of the waves.

Drab lighting but a dramatic subject.





Interesting if not dramatic subject cleanly presented with lighting that emphasizes the shape and texture of the caps but renders drab colors.



Undistinguished subject but image has good lighting that shows shape and color well. The composition is nicely balanced but includes significant clutter.

What is a 7?

A notch above competent:  
an image that rewards contemplation

Undistinguished subject  
but framed well with  
unusual contrasting  
background that adds a lot  
of interest. Lighting  
preserves detail in whites  
without being too dark on  
stem.



A subdued treatment of a dramatic but familiar subject. Soft lighting produces good texture and an interesting abstract quality that creates visual puzzle over what is in front of what. Dark on the right, though.



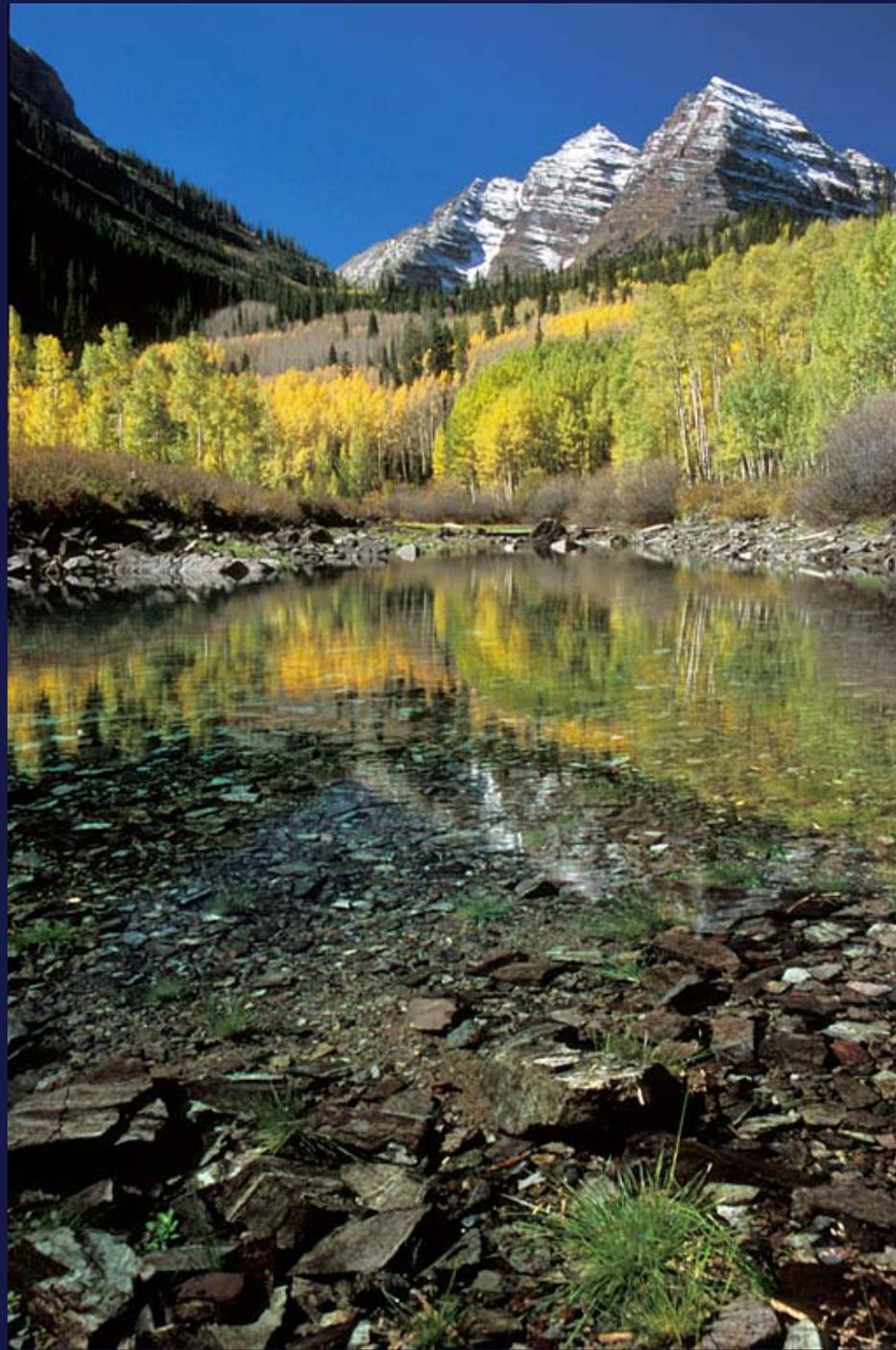
Dramatic subject shot in low, warm light with an interesting perspective. However, there is too much shadow and too much framing in proportion to the really interesting parts.



## What is an 8?

Outstanding: an image that either has no significant detractions or has exceptional qualities that offset them

Great color in sky and trees. The snow brings out texture in mountains. Reflection of fall color leads eye to underwater details.





Clean presentation of a visual puzzle.



Unusual perspective with strong colors and lighting that emphasizes the form of the tree.

# What is a 9?

The very best:  
an image that is a strong candidate for  
Image of the Year

The closer you get to the top of the scale, the more disagreement you're likely to get between judges over which image is better; if you show 100 strong images to 20 sets of judges and ask them to pick a winner, you'll probably get close to 20 different winners. Rather than try to figure out which images everyone is most likely to agree on as examples of 9, I've included examples that have actually been selected as winning images. My thanks go to the photographers who have let me use their images for this purpose.

Winged Victory

Mike Burgess  
(PPS)

2004 4Cs  
Slide of the  
Year



Monkey Tree

Karen  
McClymonds  
(PPS)

1998 4Cs  
Slide of the  
Year





Purple and Orange Pond  
2005 4Cs Slide of the Year

Rick Charlton (PPS)



Aqua Fork Madness  
2000 4Cs Slide of the Year

Gordon Battaile (FGCC)



Backlit Californian  
Winner, 2007 Best of the  
Northwest

Carol Berget (FGCC)

# Example: birds

Birds are a common subject in 4Cs competitions.  
The following four images provide examples  
of scores 6 through 9 using this subject.



The reviewers concluded this was a 6, a compromise between some really nice features and some problematic features. On the plus side, it shows good action in the incoming bird with nice light coming through the near wing. The displaying bird below it also is in a clean position with good feather detail, and its position sets up a relationship with the landing bird. On the minus side, the background is very cluttered and distracting, there is a lot of space above and to the left of the landing bird that is unnecessary, and the partial bird in the lower right corner is also a distraction. In addition, the lighting is harsh with the sunlit whites being burned out.



The reviewers concluded this was a 7, though perhaps toward the weaker end of 7. On the plus side, it is a very clean composition that directs your attention right to the egret and eliminates background distractions. The lighting brings out the texture in the breast area, and the bird is large enough in the frame to show off the yellow eye and red eye patch. On the minus side, the bird isn't doing anything unusual or interesting, some of the whites appear to be burned out, and there is a lot of unused space in the frame.

Harris Hawk

Pat Starr  
(PPS)



The reviewers agreed this was an 8. The studio lighting, unusual for a bird image, creates a lot of interest and shows off the feather details nicely. The downward gaze is also unusual, and the resulting arc of the bird's back makes an excellent compositional echo of the arc of the limb. The only significant minus is the loss of detail in the white feathers.

And for 9:

Great Egret  
Displaying

Marilyn Pitts  
(PPS)

2008 4Cs  
Slide of the  
Year

© Marilyn Pitts



*Finis*