



# **The Photography Review Festival How-to Guidebook**

**A guidebook for presenting work at photography festivals**

**Presented by Photolucida and friends**

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**Welcome** to our second how-to festival guide. We asked several photographers who frequently attend review festivals for their collective wisdom about how to make the festival experience as positive and successful as possible. You will find suggestions on how to prepare your portfolio as well as general etiquette. Take note of the comments that follow, the contributors have some great advice to impart.

### **The Quick Cheat Sheet:**

- Your portfolio should be a complete body of work with a solid vision (15-20 prints). Do bring alternate portfolios and examples of other work if you want, but your primary presentation should be a complete body.
- Package your portfolio such that you can carry it, open it, show it, and put it away with minimum fuss. Simple clamshell portfolio boxes are one perennial festival favorite.
- Research the reviewers as best you can before you show up at the portfolio reviews, and honestly assess which reviewers are the best fits for your work (the internet can be a valuable tool for this).
- Always be courteous to the reviewers and your fellow photographers.
- Network with your fellow photographers as they can also serve as a source of contacts and suggestions during Photolucida and afterwards.
- Respect the 20 minute time slot you have for showing your work and be ready to move on when your time is up. Some overlap is inevitable; however, when the 5 minute warning is called start wrapping it up. If there is more to be said, quickly make an appointment to meet afterwards: if the interest is there an additional meeting will happen.
- Yes, the reviewers **will** remember who you are if you follow them into the bathroom to show them your work, and not fondly. **Don't do this.** Really, don't do this.
- Bring leave-behinds for the reviewers; make sure that it includes all of your contact information. Bring plenty of extras as you will probably want to give some to your fellow photographers as well.
- Take notes after your reviews and follow up with reviewers when you return home.

## I. PREPARING FOR YOUR REVIEWS

### ***Craig Barber:***

Try to research the various reviewers prior to sitting in front of them. Not all curators are a good fit for your work. If they are interested in conceptual and you are doing landscapes, the fit might be off.

### ***Leo Nash:***

A couple of months before the event I go through the reviewer list and see who is coming. At this point I've usually cleared the decks and have a block of time to make some new work in a concentrated way rather than the way it's spread out through the year. I am at my most crabby and territorial during this time. Get between me and my work and... I get a sense of what I want to create and then I then pretty much forget about the reviewers until a week before, when I'm putting packets together. Then I'm just seeing where the conversations I may have had with them in the past are, and where I would like them to go, even if I've never met them. I see the meetings as the start or continuation of a relationship.

### ***Brad Carlile:***

Be ready to talk about your work and explain the concepts that hold your work together. You should have a practiced and concise description that you can comfortably give at any time.

Know a few questions that you want to ask each reviewer. Have these in your notebook to remind you if you should forget in the heat of the review. I can't tell you how many people have wished they had remembered some key thing they wanted to ask!

## II. PREPARING YOUR PORTFOLIO

**The two most frequently asked questions are:**

**How do I present my portfolio?** The most popular way to present your work is loose prints (matted or not) inside a clamshell portfolio box. Some people use interleaving paper, some matt their work, some have protective mylar envelopes over their prints, some simply have a nice stack of naked prints. If your prints are the same dimension and reasonably flat, then nicely stacked in the same size box is an excellent way to go. If you're showing book dummies to publishers and the like, you can have your prints bound into a book. A less popular choice seen at photography festivals is the portfolio book with spiral bound mylar pages, used widely in the commercial photo world. In general, reviewers like to see the actual prints. These are not the only way to present prints, but are the most common.

**What size should my prints be?** Well, the short answer is: if you can carry it, you can show it. The most common sizes are in the range of 11x14" up to 20x24". People do bring extra large work, but then you have logistics to work out (can you carry it easily to the reviews, and carry it from table to table easily?). If your work is supersized, sometimes you can lean it against a wall (or the floor) and ask the reviewer to walk over to the spot you staked out. Do ask permission from the staff before you claim space for oversized objects. Of course, people also bring very small prints and everything in between. A number of people ask about bringing framed work when the frame is integral to the work (or oddly shaped projects etc)...which comes back to the 'if you can carry it, you can bring it' comment. People do bring all kinds of stuff, primarily you need to be able to open up your portfolio and show it to the reviewer quickly and efficiently.

### ***Craig Barber:***

Present your best work and have it be a solid body of solid vision. A little of this and a little of that doesn't work. Limit your work to 18 - 25 prints. I usually present one finished body (18-20 prints) and a taste of what's to come (work in progress...6-8 prints). All work is presented in a professional manner and in a portfolio that is easy to access.

**Anonymous:**

There are many different ways to present your work. It's important that you can show your work easily and quickly, which means you must be able to carry it easily, open it up and present it quickly, and put it away and close up quickly. I think the best way to show work is in simple black portfolio cases. "Century" boxes are a good brand and Light Impressions has their own in house line. The reviewers want to see photographs, and there is no need for fancy boxes unless you have a specific reason why it suits your work. You will probably feel out of place, however, if you bring your work in cardboard photographic paper boxes or some other funky box.

I put my portfolio boxes inside a cloth zippered case. (Pearl Paint in New York carries very reasonable ones. The ones at Light Impressions are fancier and more expensive than necessary.) This gives me a lot of flexibility as to what I carry. I may bring four portfolio boxes to a review just in case, but one may never even leave my hotel room. I can carry a 20"x 24", a 16"x 20" and an 11"x14" box together in my case (my shoulder is sore at the end of the day, though).

You should show the biggest prints you can. It is very difficult to show 30"x 40" prints in this situation, and I wouldn't recommend it for your first review. 20"x 24" prints give a sense of seriousness and scale, and yet you can still carry them in a box and remain mobile. I recommend this size if you have them. If not, 16"x 20" is fine. I usually carry a second or third box with smaller prints, say 11"x 14."

Prints can be matted, sleeved in Mylar acetates or you can present them naked. I like to show just the prints for speed and immediacy. Matting is a problem as it adds a lot of weight and is not a very contemporary look. If you are showing very delicate work, say platinum prints, then small matted prints may be fine. It depends on the work. Generally color work should not be matted, B&W should only be if there's a reason for it.

Many fine art gallerists and curators want to see high quality traditional photographs, but some (more and more all the time) will look at digital prints. Publishers, editors etc. should generally be fine with digital prints. You should know your market well enough to judge this for yourself before you go.

Some people say 17 is the magic number for a portfolio, and it's uncanny how often I've seen interest lag over the last 3 prints in a box of 20. Certainly between 15 and 20 is a good number. Edit fiercely and cut it down, but carry a second box with you; many reviewers can look at photos very fast and will want to see what else you've got, if they like the first box. Or, if they aren't interested in your first portfolio, a second box with a different body of work might salvage the situation.

***Claudia Howell:***

Twenty images per portfolio is a good number. You only have 20 minutes. Edit tighter if you have more than one body of work or if you have big prints to wrestle around. If you have a second or third set of photographs, ask the reviewer what he or she would like to see. No sense spending time with photos the reviewer has no interest in.

***Brad Carlile:***

Only present your best work and seriously end your work to 15-20 images that are all part of a consistent series. Tightly focused series do much better with most reviewers. I present one finished series and have a sample of a new series consisting of about 4-8 images. Ask the reviewer if they would like to discuss the first series before asking to see if they want to see the second series.

Consider using self-produced photo books to show another series that you are working on. These can also be handy to show others outside of the review.

### **III. THE REVIEW**

***Craig Barber:***

Be polite. Be professional. Be informed. Do not make excuses about your work. Be patient, do not ask if they are going to give you a show or purchase your work. These events are a building process and generally it takes time for things to evolve...shows, purchases, etc. Sometimes they happen immediately; most times it is down the road. Asking, "Well...are you going to give me a show?" is annoying and unrealistic.

Always present your absolute best work. If you need to make an excuse you shouldn't be showing it. Approach all interviews with the utmost professionalism. Remember, first impressions are everything and you only have 20 minutes. Do not talk too much...the reviewer does not need too extensive of an introduction or for you to talk non-stop. As a matter of fact, one of the major complaints I have heard from reviewers is that the photographer talks too much.

Abide by the time rules. Yes, the time allowed is brief; however, it is rude to both the reviewer and the next photographer for you to go on and on and on. Some overlap is inevitable; however, when the 5 minute warning is called start wrapping it up. If there is more to be said, quickly make an appointment to meet afterwards: if the interest is there an additional meeting will happen.

When it is your turn to be reviewed and you can see that the review in front of you is still wrapping up, be patient, not rude, and wait until the previous session is over. If you are pushy and aggressive it does not bode well for first impressions.

**Anonymous:**

Remember, reviewers love to look at photographs, and you are here to do business. You are given 20 minutes for your interview. I try to only spend 12 (or at most 15) minutes showing the work and then I say: "Enough about me; tell me about what you do," or something along those lines to try to move the conversation toward how they may be able to help me, or how we can work together, without really saying it. Save two or three minutes to hand them your "leave behind" (a must) and make a specific agreement about what's going to happen next, if anything.

**Leo Nash:**

We meet with four or five reviewers per day, but they meet with 12-18 photographers. That takes a lot of energy. Even sorting through the conversations I have with the people I see takes time. That is why I go out of my way to get my own room in the hotel *where the event is*: so I have a place to retreat to between appointments. I can think about what we talked about, recharge and stay focused.

Take good notes. I buy an individual notebook for each event so I can keep track of whom I've met and what we talked about. Each reviewer gets their own double page spread. I paste in their business card and scribble away. Remember, you're trying to balance your viewpoint with theirs. Own your viewpoint and be willing to change as you grow. The first body of work that I showed changed 180 degrees from when I first showed it. I was relieved when it did, and am still shaping it so that it's actually in line with what I think it should be.

Ask the reviewers what they honestly think. If you get the same (negative...?) feedback from a few people, let go of needing to defend your work and see their point. Their opinion is what you're paying for. None of us are setting out to make substandard work or to have it land the wrong way with the viewer. My first time at one of these was the most valuable. I wasn't quite ready, and soaking up the criticism was just what I needed. I learned how certain peers viewed my work (one of those peers is one of my closest friends in the community today). Two years later at another review, I was exactly where I needed to be and had an invigorating experience.

The review process is not unlike being a musician: to improve, play with people who are better than you and who are at the level you wish to attain. You can emulate them, and then become the artist that you want to be.

**Brad Carlile:**

Be able to explain your work and don't talk too much. Feel free to ask questions. Take notes after each review before you forget important details. Write down everything both good and bad. Often helpful to note which images each reviewer liked the best. Provide reviewers with some sort of leave-behind – something with an image is best!

#### IV. LEAVE-BEHINDS

***Craig Barber:***

Leave a visual behind...inkjet print, announcement card, whatever. The reviewers are meeting a lot of people and it is the best way for them to remember you. Also, in addition to the hard visual, I generally leave a package with a statement, a current resume and a CD.

When the event is over, send thank-you cards and then **follow up!** There is no point in attending these things if you are not going to do follow-up. They cost too much time and money to drop the ball.

***Claudia Howell:***

Reviewers get a lot of leave-behinds to take home. The best are distinctive yet easy to carry. There are a variety of options: postcards, tri-fold cards, accordion booklets. They can be as elaborate or simple as you like, depending on your budget and time constraints. Include all your contact information in addition to the images. Ask if the reviewer wants a bio and résumé (you may be asked to send these rather than to leave them with the reviewer).

***Brad Carlile:***

Follow up with the reviewers afterward. The biggest mistake mentioned by many photographers at their second portfolio review is not following up at their first portfolio review.

#### V. FINAL THOUGHTS

***Craig Barber:***

If attending openings or parties with reviewers, that is NOT the time to push your work. It is a time to socialize...everyone needs a break at some point.

***Anonymous:***

I believe that if you have strong work and a good presentation you will create opportunities for yourself at Photolucida, but it may take time (years!) before they come to fruition. This is just your first meeting; don't expect a solo show or a book (although it can happen). I've developed long term relationships with many people in the field (including photographers) at portfolio reviews. Some of these relationships have helped me in many and often unexpected ways over time.

**Leo Nash:**

I see the down time from the meeting place as a time to enjoy each other's company and to not be focused on trying to win a reviewer over to my work. We're all in this for the long haul. Chill. It's more fun to *be* in the community enjoying our common passion for art without the elephant of needing to sell your work hanging in the space.

It's one of the most fulfilling things about all this: the people we meet and get to know. I would even go so far as to say that hanging out with other photographers is as much fun as meeting with the reviewers. My only wish for the future is that my relationships with the reviewers get to the same depth as those with my fellow image makers. Wouldn't that be great?

**Tamara Lischka:**

When you get home, update your contact list and add your newest crop of reviewers to your mailing list. Keep them updated on your work by sending them postcards when you have new shows. Don't forget to send materials out to reviewers who specifically requested more materials (slides, cd's, quick digital prints, and the like).

Fundamentally you're making new contacts, or renewing them, and forging relationships with the reviewers. Consider this a long-term investment in your photography career.

## **Many thanks to our contributors!**

The contributors to this guide have attended many photography festivals all over the US (and abroad). Photolucida extends many thanks for their input and observations, for without them, this guide wouldn't be possible.

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If you would like to be a contributor for future updates of this guide, you are most encouraged to drop us a line at Photolucida ([info@photolucida.org](mailto:info@photolucida.org)).