

# HOW TO APPROACH A SET SUBJECT

By Alta Oosthuizen

A set subject – What a great opportunity we have with these images! To me, it is the most exciting part of a club competition, as you can push yourself out of your comfort zone to improve in skills to become a better photographer every month. With a set subject, you must put on your thinking cap. Your attitude towards the set subject will definitely determine your level of success.

You can approach a set subject in two different ways:

- ❖ You see it as just another theme
- ❖ You see it as a huge challenge

The one approach is not necessarily wrong, but you will have greater success when you see the set subject as a challenge. I will now discuss the different approaches.

## Set Subject is only a Theme



With this approach, you are only going through the motions. You either search through your archives for an image that will fit into the theme, or you try and take the image only hours before closing time for submissions. You apply the minimum effort, which will definitely show in the image you produce! This is, unfortunately, the attitude of lots of senior photographers. Once they reach the 5-star level, they think they have arrived, and there is nothing more to achieve. They either believe that the line of honours behind their name gives them the title of “I am good!” They do not want to get any comments on their images and gets extremely upset if judges do not praise their images as they think it is absolutely perfect. They believe that they have to get the maximum score, although the minimum effort was applied. If you feel that 5-star level on club level gives you the “I have arrived” badge and that you do not have to work hard anymore, you have serious problems on your hands. Just because you take pictures for ages does not mean you know it all. You can ALWAYS learn, you can ALWAYS improve, and you ALWAYS have to work hard! Photography is a tool to improve. It is not only about being a better photographer and editor but also being a better person. If you stop working hard, you are not only stagnating, you will move backwards, as other people will move past you, leaving you behind.

This approach towards the set subject may bring you a gold award if you are lucky, but this will not be the winning image. However, it is not always about winning but creating the best image possible. A very important thing to remember, you can never fall back on past images, as you are only as good as your NEXT image. Past images are part of the PAST; what you produce next is more important than what you produced in the past.

## Set Subject is a Challenge



This is the attitude of successful set subject images. You think out of the box; you try and think of the images that nobody else will think of. Time and effort is the key element to the success of the image. You aim to produce an image that is exactly according to the set subject theme, an image with a strong message that will make your viewer think a little bit.

Planning is crucial, and you start doing that just after the club meeting has concluded. A month before submitting, you have to start planning your next set subject. The most important part is to understand the set subject, to know exactly what you are supposed to do. Do some research to make sure that you understand the definition, especially if it is a photographic concept/term. A set subject image that is not 100% on the theme deserves to be DISQUALIFIED!!

Say, for instance, the set subject is “Low key.”



You are very satisfied with yourself, but this is an UNDEREXPOSED image. This is NOT a “Low Key” image. This image, therefore, deserves a DQ!



Now you quickly read up and submit this image. NO, this is NOT a low key image.....this is “Rim lighting”, close but no cigar! Although it is a great image, it also deserves a DQ!



“Low key photography teaches us the manipulation of light to draw your attention to a specific part of the subject.”

This is the image you would submit.

See set subject images as the opportunity to improve your technical and editing skills, but be careful not to break yourself. Do not choose something too difficult. Challenge yourself, but

always stay realistic and build your skills step by step. Remember, it is not always the difficult composites that are the most striking images ... most of the time, "Less is more!"

*My recipe for success is:*

*Thinking + Planning = Being prepared*

*Preparation + dedication + Passion = SUCCESSFUL RESULTS*

I will now take you through my thought processes and some editing tips with one of my set subject images.

The set subject was "In a puddle". What is a puddle? A small amount of water. You feel very proud of your research and submit this image:



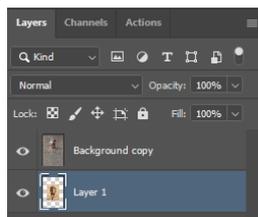
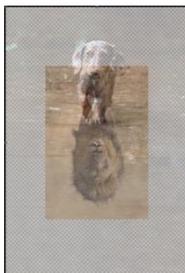
Great image, great reflection, but this is a dam. It is NOT a puddle. This image has to be disqualified!!



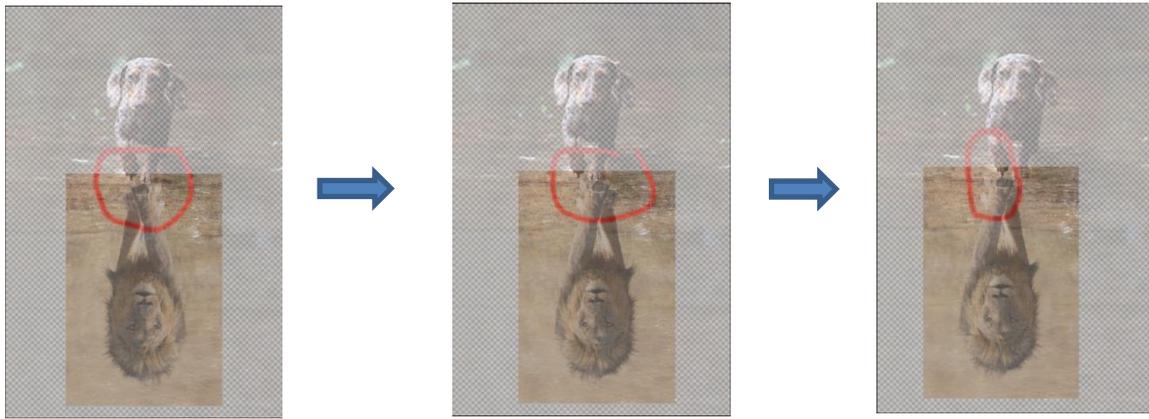
I decided to do a composite. I photographed my two doggies after a rain shower. I wanted to take one of them and have a lion reflection in the puddle. I have to decide which doggy to choose. Although the chocolate one has the personality closer to a lion, the dapple one will fit in more with the colours of a lion



I went through my archives and searched for a lion with more or less the same pose as my Doggy. I did a RAW conversion in Lightroom on both and took them to Photoshop.



Both images in Photoshop flipped the lion image vertically as it is a reflection. Make sure that the proportions of the lion vs the doggy are correct and the placement of the feet. The lion image was also flipped horizontally to align the feet perfectly.



The final product after I played around with colour filters, clipping masks and opacities.

I hope you have enjoyed this article that inspired you to approach a set subject a little bit differently. See every set subject as a challenge.

I will leave you with the following:

***“Compete only with **YOURSELF!!** Try and be better than yesterday. Remember why you do photography because you **ENJOY** it!!!”***

I do present ONLINE editing courses in Lightroom Classic CC and Photoshop. Classes are small and interactive. You get detailed notes with every course. Contact me if you are interested!

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