PHOTOGRAPHIC SOAP NOTES FORM
for image assessment and enhancement

File Name:	
Date Photographed:	
Subject:	
Location:	
Other:	

image thumbnail

The medical "SOAP note" (S.O.A.P. = subjective, objective, assessment, plan) is a form employed by doctors and other health professionals to gather all relevant information about a case, and to create and monitor a written plan for treatment. Photographers (notorious for their inability to emotionally distance themselves from their own work) can take advantage of the SOAP note formula to guide their darkroom work. Here is Jean Miele's personal SOAP note form especially for photographers. Print this and use a pen to fill it out – or make digital copies & use PDF annotation/markup tools. Let it guide your (traditional or digital) darkroom work, and use it to explore what's working and not working in your pictures – and your thinking.

SUBJECTIVE   How do I feel about this picture, and how does this picture make me feel?

1. What was the person, place, thing, or occurrence that made me want to take the picture in the first place?
2. What symbols or metaphors does the picture contain?
3. What was my experience taking the photo?
4. Did I travel far, work hard, or wake up extra-early to get it?
5. Was there an emotional investment or experience involved?
6. What is this picture about for me?
7. What's the central focus of this picture?
8. Does it seem like anything's missing?
9. Is there anything in the frame that shouldn't be there?
10. Does this feel like it belongs with other pictures of mine?
11. Is this an interesting picture, or just a picture of something interesting?
12. At the end of the day, does this look like a picture that could as easily have been made by 1000 other photographers?
13. Is this picture (circle one):
    weak - ok - good - really good - amazing

If the picture doesn't really elicit any strong feelings one way or the other, should I really be thinking about working on it?

OBJECTIVE — What are the FACTS about this picture?

1. Is there a clear, primary point of interest?
2. Does the light or lighting in this picture direct attention to the subject?
3. What's the lightest part of the picture?
4. Where does my eye go when I squint and look at the picture in its original, un-altered form?
5. Does the geometry of the picture (circles, triangles, squares, diagonals) draw your eye to a particular place? Is it the most important place?
6. Do the important parts of the picture stand out or blend in with the rest?
7. Are the important parts "separated" from the rest of the image by being: dark subject on light background OR light subject on dark background OR a different color?
8. Is the focus sharp? Does the depth-of-field of the image bring attention to the subject?
9. Does my eye feel comfortable remaining within the frame?
10. Was the picture properly exposed in the camera?
11. Are there other technical flaws that may pose problems or reduce the quality of the finished picture?
12. Are there any burnt-out highlights in areas that should have detail? Blocked up shadows that should have detail?
13. Does the file have enough pixels for the print size I have in mind?

A truly strong picture works on ALL levels. Its content, emotional impact, technical strength and composition (or structure) are all strong. If this picture isn't working on all levels, might it be wiser not to pursue it any further?

ASSESSMENT — This is a picture that… (check all that apply and elaborate in the space below)

1. works on every level, and can stand on its own. ☐
2. is worth working on and presenting. ☐
3. is almost good. ☐
4. has some interesting elements, but might not really work. ☐
5. is really good, and can be made even better. ☐
6. needs to be "fixed." ☐
7. I'm emotionally attached to, but doesn't really work on all levels. ☐
8. has really nice light, but no real subject. ☐
9. has a great subject, but is technically deficient. ☐
10. at the end of the day, is really just a snapshot. ☐

Enhancing a picture that's working on every level - taking an already good picture, and making it great - is always a much better plan than trying to "save" or "fix" a picture that almost works.

PLAN	What will make this picture stronger?	
1. How can distractions be minimized or eliminated? 2. How can viewers' attention be redirected to where I'd like it to go? 3. If this picture really deserves to be worked on, what needs to be changed to make it better? 4. Will this picture be black-and-white, sepia or color? 5. What will the color palette be? 6. Which parts need to be lighter or darker? 7. Is more or less contrast needed particular areas? 8. Are there areas of delicate highlights or shadows that need to be handled carefully? 9. Will retouching be necessary? Where? 10. Does this picture need to be cropped? If yes, to a particular shape or aspect-ratio?	

TIP: Try printing a copy of your original, unenhanced image, and making notes about your plan right on the image; or make notes by marking up a digital copy via pdf markup tools or in a layer in Photoshop.