

Preserving Authentic Photography: Understanding CAPA's Metadata Authentication Standard



generated image - Sheldon Boles

AI

Our Shared Commitment

Photography competitions exist to celebrate authentic image-making: the skill of capturing light, moment, and vision through the lens. As AI-generative technology advances rapidly, CAPA is implementing comprehensive metadata requirements to protect this tradition and ensure fair competition for all participants.

The Challenge We Face

Pure text-to-image AI outputs lack authentic camera data entirely, including as ISO, aperture, shutter speed, or lens information. Meanwhile, generative AI enhancements in photo editing software (e.g. Adobe Firefly's Generative Fill) leave distinct digital signatures in metadata that differ fundamentally from traditional editing tools.

Applications that support Content Credentials (C2PA), they provide valuable provenance tracking, but the chain of continuity can be broken when images pass through post-processing applications that don't yet support the C2PA standard. Many legitimate editing tools (including specialized plugins, older software versions, etc.) process images without maintaining or generating Content Credentials data.

This gap creates verification challenges. A photographer might capture an authentic image, edit it appropriately in compliant software like Lightroom (which generates Content Credentials), then make final adjustments in a non-C2PA application, inadvertently breaking the provenance chain. This is why CAPA requires comprehensive metadata tracking that works both with and without C2PA data, ensuring we can verify authentic photography regardless of which legitimate editing tools you use.

CAPA's Comprehensive Authentication Approach

Beginning January 1, 2026, CAPA competitions require intact metadata as the foundation of a multi-layered verification system. Our authentication process integrates multiple methods, each providing essential insights:

For all submissions:

- Complete metadata: Camera settings (ISO, aperture, shutter speed, focal length), software versions, and editing history
- Content Credentials when available: Verifiable digital provenance for C2PA-compliant workflows

For potential winners MAY be asked to provide:

- Original unretouched JPG and RAW files
- Working files when applicable

How Our Authentication System Works:

Metadata confirms camera data, software usage, and editing history, while C2PA verifies provenance chains through compliant applications. Together, they reveal what tools were used, when, and how images progressed through editing.

The submitted image and all requested associated files are subjected to comprehensive forensic analysis using multiple forensic tools. This multi-layered examination distinguishes legitimate post-processing from prohibited AI generation, ensuring fair competition for all entrants.

Addressing Common Concerns

"I don't use AI tools, so why do I need to submit metadata?"

The requirement ensures fairness for everyone and enables efficient verification. Just as competitions have traditionally requested original files, metadata serves as your photograph's documented lineage which provides its photographic origin and editing compliance without invasive processes.

"Won't this create extra work?"

Most modern cameras and editing software preserve metadata automatically. The requirement simply asks you to **retain** this metadata during export rather than stripping it out. For potential winners, you may be asked to provide your original JPG and RAW files which is a standard practice in most photo competition.

"What if I use software that doesn't support C2PA?"

This is exactly why we require comprehensive metadata beyond C2PA alone. Many excellent editing tools don't yet support Content Credentials, and we've designed our authentication system to verify authentic photography regardless of your software choices. Traditional metadata combined with original file examination allows us to track your editing history and verify compliance even when C2PA chains are absent or broken.

The Collective Benefit

This comprehensive authentication provides:

- **Protection for authentic work:** Your captured images stand on verifiable merit across multiple verification methods
- **Fair competition:** Consistent, transparent standards applied equally to all entrants
- **Efficient verification:** Judges evaluate artistry while forensic tools handle authentication
- **Defensible standards:** Multiple verification methods create certainty in authentication decisions

Moving Forward Together

These standards reflect CAPA's commitment to preserving photography as an art form rooted in observation, technical skill, and authentic capture. By maintaining complete metadata in your submissions and providing original files for winning images, you demonstrate the integrity of your work and contribute to fair competition for the entire photographic community.

The authentication system we've developed represents significant research and collaboration with international photography organizations. It's designed to protect your authentic work while adapting to the rapidly evolving technological landscape.

Support Resource Available

We recognize that these requirements may be new territory for some photographers. CAPA provides comprehensive support to ensure your success:

- **For Individual Photographers:** If you're unsure how to export images with intact metadata from your specific post-processing application, contact the Competition Director with the name of your software. We'll provide step-by-step export instructions tailored to your workflow. We encourage you to request this guidance **before** your competition submission deadline to ensure a smooth entry process.
- **Prohibited** - Camera club representatives, coordinators, or any person handling submissions must NOT:
 - a) Open submitted images in Lightroom, Photoshop, or any editing software
 - b) Re-export or re-save files "to standardize format"
 - c) Batch process files through any software
 - d) Strip or modify metadata

Files must be forwarded exactly as received from photographers.

Violation will result in disqualification of all club entries.

EXCEPTION: Technical file format conversion (e.g., HEIC to JPG) is permitted **ONLY** if it preserves all original metadata without modification. If uncertain, contact the Director of Competitions before converting.

- **For Camera Club Coordinators:** To assist clubs in supporting their members, we've developed the **CAPA Club Compliance Checklist** available in both ([ENGLISH](#)) or ([FRENCH](#)). This resource provides simplified, step-by-step guidance for pre-submission verification, helping coordinators confirm that member submissions meet metadata requirements before entry.

Your cooperation in adopting these standards helps ensure that CAPA competitions continue to celebrate genuine photographic excellence for years to come.

For questions, please do not hesitate in emailing at competitions@capacanada.ca. Visit our Updated AI Editing Criteria webpage

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