Annotation – a brief guide

“a critical or explanatory note or body of notes added to a text”  
www.dictionary.com

This is just a fancy way of saying that annotation is some notes which accompany a text, or in our case, which accompany an image. The word ‘critical’ above does not necessarily mean that your annotation criticises or finds faults in the image. It simply means ‘important’, as in “it’s critical that you hand in your homework on time!”

So annotation is simply some notes beside an image or a collection of images, but what exactly do we write? Annotation involves skilful judgement about the image, deciding **what are the most important (or critical) aspects** of the image. It then includes the use of important or ‘critical’ terms, such as *composition, lighting, exposure, highlights, tripod, tone* etc.

When analysing an image and thinking about what to write, it is often helpful to consider the categories: Medium, Subject, Style, Composition, Lighting and Feelings.

**Medium**
Is the means by which information or meaning is conveyed. For example: oil painting, sculpture in stone, **black and white photography**, newspaper, radio, TV, pencil drawing on paper, **colour photography**, digital colour photography, etc.

**Subject**
What the image is **OF**? For example: a person, an object, an incident etc

**Style**
This can seem a somewhat vague category. Think about what style means in fashion and music to give you a clue about its meaning.
In photography the *Style* tells us something about the *WAY* that the photographer produces their particular images and their particular ‘**LOOK**’.
First think about the *Genre* – is the image a portrait, landscape, urban landscape, commercial, fashion, abstract etc. Then think about the techniques and processes used to produce the image(s): Was a tripod used? What sort of a camera? Film or digital? What sort of shutter speed and aperture? Deliberately under-exposed? High or low contrast? High of low saturation? What sort of composition? Digitally manipulated? Large or shallow depth of field? Abstract or representational? Was there a specific purpose to the photograph? Does the image or images remind you of the work of another photographer? Etc etc.

**Composition & Lighting**
You might want to comment on the composition & use of light if these are important aspects of the image.
For example, does the image use lines to direct the eye of the viewer, are there any strong diagonals, how is light used - is it soft or hard light? is the image ‘flat looking’
or very three dimensional, how is the space used? are any rules of composition being followed or broken? etc
For more information on composition and the visual elements see: http://www.tes.co.uk/teaching-resource/Composition-and-Visual-Elements-6081007/

Feelings (many critics talk about ‘mood’, but ‘feelings’ is a broader concept & incorporates the idea of mood)
Do you like the image? Why? How does it make you feel? (happy, sad, excited, bored etc), Does the image or images tell a story (narrative)? Was the photographer/artist trying to get a message or particular feeling or mood across to the viewer?

OK, OK !!! .... I thought annotation was supposed to be a few notes to accompany an image or a few images, this is turning into an essay!

Here is where the real skill comes in: when you annotate an image you do NOT have to write about everything – many of the suggestions above will not be relevant. The trick is to first study the picture or pictures and then make a few notes on what you think are the most important aspects (the critical aspects).

Example 1

I really like this black & white photograph because it is so simple and yet so powerful. It is a portrait of a man in an almost deserted street lined by trees. It has been raining and he holds an umbrella. The trees create strong implied lines which draw our eye to the man’s face. He looks quite old but is smartly dressed in a dark cape and bowler hat. Perhaps he is an important politician or civil servant – he certainly looks very self-important as he gazes directly into the camera. The image makes me feel a bit sad because he looks so alone and this feeling is encouraged by the photographer’s control of contrast, giving the image a somewhat stark feel, with the man and trees standing out against the pale sky and pavement.

The above annotation does not mention much about lighting or technical camera settings because the other aspects of the image seemed more important. For another image these factors might well be the most important and should therefore be mentioned in more detail.
Example 2
Annotation By A2 Student
I am fairly pleased with this photograph as I wanted to capture the bright fun colours used on funfair notices. I used a polarizer filter to make the sky a darker shade of blue and set my camera to 1/250 so that I would not get camera shake and the aperture was f11 – chosen automatically by the camera as I had set it to shutter priority. I think that it might have been better to wait until later in the day when the light would have been more even on both sides but overall I like the image as it is bright and cheery.

Good annotation 9/10

Example 3
[The assignment was on abstract, these images were taken in a wood]

Annotation by AS Student
I swung the camera around and zoomed at the same time with the camera pointing at a tree. Then I increased the saturation and contrast using photoshop. The shutter speed was slow.

OK/fair annotation 7/10

Notes: For ‘swing’ Student means ‘rotated’ camera. Shutter speed not recorded but probably around 1/4 to 1 sec.
Example 4

Annotation by AS Student
I created this image in the darkroom using a small torch with a piece of blue plastic over the torch. The camera was set on bulb and [student name] moved nearer to the camera for some of the time.
I really like the moody effect because it reminds me of horror films and the blue is like moonlight.

Although the description of technique is not absolutely clear, the student has successfully explained how the image was created and commented on the style of image produced. 6/10

Example 5

Annotation by AS student
I saw the light coming through some windows onto the floor and really liked the pattern and shapes that it made. I used a filter of clear plastic with vaseline over the lens to make the image more interesting.
It is an abstract photo a bit like the work of Paul Strand and although I think it is a bit out of focus I like the effect produced as it is 'dreamy' and makes me think of fairytales. I am going to look for other patterns and make more images to go with it.

This annotation is almost an evaluation, but for me this is fine: the student has explained the 'what' the image is of, the 'how' it was made, has related the image to another contextual source and has used some critical terms. They have also explained why they like it and how it has inspired them to develop their own style and work. 9/10
I took this photo in London. The shutter speed was fast.

*Poor annotation (but great photo!) 1/10*

**Example 7**

**A2 Student Annotation**

I wanted to make the photo more interesting so I changed the exposure on my camera to under-expose the image. The silhouette of the column stands out against the blue sky (which wasn't that blue!)

When I saw the image I noticed the other statue and I really like the way that Nelson seems to be looking down at the horse. The composition is a bit boring with the column in the middle of the picture. If I did it again I would change it.

*Fair annotation 7/10*

*The Good Bits:*

- Technical explanation of how the silhouette was produced.
- Use of critical terms.
- Student has noticed things in the image after shooting and made suggestions as to possible improvements (although these are somewhat ambiguous/not clearly
explained).