

Visual Storytelling

Photography Foundations

Photography is the one true universal language in storytelling. It reaches across cultures, languages, and literacy. We can all understand the circumstances, story and emotions we see in a great photograph. Our goal for this workshop is to learn how to tell the best story possible in a single photo, a series of photos, or a photo supporting a written piece.

LEARN

Great photographs require technical skill, creativity and preparation. In this workshop, we will be learning photography in three stages: technique, composition and story.

Technique

Technique provides the basic building blocks that we use to create a good photograph. Moments happen quickly, so it is our goal for the basics of technique to become so ingrained that we don't have to think about them when it comes time to capture the image.

Two technical aspects must be correct in every photo: exposure and focus. While there are times when both of these can be used for creative effects, most of the time we will be looking for correct exposure and focus.

Exposure: Photography is the process of capturing light onto either film or a digital sensor. In order to achieve a correctly exposed photograph a camera must control the amount of light that reaches the sensor. There are three basic controls that will be used to set proper exposure.

ISO: The sensitivity of film is categorized by its ISO or ASA rating. Common ratings are 100, 200, 400, 800 and higher. The higher the rating, the more sensitive the film is. Digital photography uses this same rating system to indicate how sensitive the sensor will be. This means that using a higher numbered ISO will allow us to shoot in darker environments. The downside to using a high ISO is that the resulting picture will have a lot of digital noise. In order to achieve the best possible image, we will want to use an ISO that is as low as possible.

Aperture: The aperture controls the amount of light entering the camera by adjusting the size of the hole that lets in light. The wider the hole the more light that comes in. The numbers for aperture are inverse to their size, so the larger the number the smaller the hole. The side effect of the aperture is depth of field. The smaller the opening (high numbered aperture) creates a deeper focus range. This means that at f22 we may get

everything in focus from near to far. The opposite is true with a large opening. If we use f3.5 or larger you will get a smaller depth of field. This allows us to have the subject in focus while having the background blurred and out of focus.

Shutter Speed: The shutter speed is the amount of time that light enters the camera. Usually correct exposure is just a fraction of a second. 1/60th of a second is more time than 1/250th of a second. Slower shutter speeds allow more time for the exposure, but this will sometimes blur the motion that is happening in the frame. Sometimes if the shutter speed is too slow, the exposure will pick up the shaking of our hand as you are taking the photo. Long exposures will need to be on a tripod to avoid this. If we want to stop action or freeze motion we will have to use a faster shutter speed. The faster the movement, the faster our shutter speed will have to be in order to stop the motion.

Every photograph will have different settings because we will have different levels of light in each photograph. By balancing these three settings, we can take a properly exposed photograph. When we are comfortable with our camera, we will be able to make decisions based on the look that we want to achieve.

Let the Camera Do the Work: Cameras have become increasing good at choosing the correct exposure while in auto mode. The P(rogram) mode on our camera will adjust both the aperture and shutter speed for us. The M(annual) mode will allow us to adjust everything ourselves.

Two modes allow semi-manual control of your exposure. The A(perture) priority mode will allow us to adjust the aperture and it will automatically set the shutter speed, while the S(hutter) priority mode will allow us to adjust the shutter speed and the camera will automatically choose the correct aperture. In all of these modes, we will have to manually set the ISO for the shot.

Focus: In order to get a correctly focused picture, we must understand a couple of different concepts. The first is the distance to the subject. This is where we will set our focus point. Some cameras will have a scale in feet or meters on the focus ring to indicate this distance. The second important concept is depth of field. While the focus distance is to one single point, our photos will also have a distance in front of and behind this point that are also in focus. This is called depth of field. The more depth of field that you have the more the range of distance that is in focus. Sometimes the depth of field can be as short as just a fraction of an inch. This would mean that our subject's nose might be in focus while their ears might be out of focus. Other times we might have everything in focus from just a few feet all the way to the distant horizon. As we discussed earlier, aperture is one component that we can use to control depth of field. Our goal with focus control is to have all of the important pieces that we want to see in focus and everything that is extraneous to be out of focus.

Most of today's digital cameras are made to be used with auto focus. The technology has made great advances, and manual focus has been made more difficult. In most situations it is fine to use auto focus to set the focus point for our image as long as the camera focuses on the correct subject. Each camera has different options for what it selects to set the focus distance. Some options examine the whole frame to fit the most subjects in focus, and other options use a center or spot measurement to focus on the

subject. If you are using the spot focus it we may need to place the focus point over the part of the subject that you want in focus, press and hold the shutter release button half way down to capture that focus distance and then reframe the shot to our correct composition. If we are photographing people it is usually best to use their eyes as the point to use to set the focus.

Composition

Composition is the art of framing the shot. We are responsible for everything that we decide to put inside the frame of our shot and what we leave out. By using different composition strategies, we are able to direct the viewer's attention to the story that we are trying to tell.

Simplify: The most important concept to understand is to keep our frame clean and simple. If there is an element that isn't adding to the story that we are trying to tell, then it is just a distraction. We need to remove as many of these distractions as possible.

The first method that we use to simplify our frame is to frame out distracting objects. If we use a recognizable background, we need to make sure it adds something our story. When taking portrait photos it is very important to frame the shot so that the subject's head is in a clean spot. This can be a solid color, the sky, a non-obtrusive pattern or any other background that doesn't compete with the face.

Another method to simplify the frame is to blur the background. We can do this by setting the aperture to a wide setting. A wide aperture (a small number) will produce a shallow depth of field. This will allow the subject to be in focus but not the other objects in the frame.

Focus Attention: There are usually only one or two important objects in a photo. After we have simplified the frame as much as possible, we may still be left with some extraneous elements that don't add to our story. If we can't eliminate the distractions completely then we need to minimize them and emphasize our subject.

When we look at a photo, the first things that we notice are bright spots or vibrant colors, especially reds, yellow, and oranges. We can use this to our advantage, by making our subject brighter or more colorful than our background. If we have a choice between framing the subject with a bright background or a dark one, it is usually best to choose the darker background. If we are stuck with a colorful vibrant background and a subject in cool muted colors then this might be a good time to convert our picture to black and white. By eliminating color, we can keep the viewer's attention on what we want them to see.

Framing: Instead of shooting photos where the subject is in the exact center of the frame, we can use asymmetrical framing to add energy to our photos. Viewers are drawn to objects that are aligned along hypothetical line that is one third of the distance between edges of the frame, a technique known the "Rule of Thirds." The four points where these third lines intersect are the nodal points of the frame. Any object located on a nodal point has more dominance. By placing our subject on one of these points, our subject becomes the dominant part of our photo.

Varied: Always try to get wide shots to establish the scene, medium shot to show interactions, and close-ups to show details. Get shots from different angles, heights, and perspectives. Getting the best shot takes a lot of work and a lot of moving around. Preparation can be key to getting access to the right space. If possible, we should check out the location before hand, looking for good vantage points, and then ask permission to use those places if needed.

Story

Photojournalism is about telling stories with photographs. Learning the technical details about how our cameras work and different composition ideas are just tools that we use to better tell the story. By doing research and preparing, we know what story we are going to tell. Knowing what the story is allows us to make decisions that allow us to take the best pictures to illustrate that story.

Emotion: People respond to people. Faces can be the most powerful images. We identify, connect and feel the emotions shown in faces. If we can capture a genuine emotion, we probably have a photograph that tells a story. Bringing emotion out in people is a skill that takes practice to master. Sometimes it is as simple as letting them tell their story. By going back, remembering, and walking us through the emotional time, the old emotions come back to the surface. Other times it is just getting out of the way and becoming invisible. People will forget we are around and react in real ways. We are looking for the real, not just the false front that people put on in public.

Objective: We should always try to be as objective with our photography as we are with our reporting. As photojournalist, we are there to tell the truth. By using different lenses or camera angles, we can influence the way the audience experiences the event. We should always try to capture all sides of an issue in a fair way.

Perspective: We make choices in the photographs that we take. If we are at a hearing, we can shoot the speaker from the front or from the side. We can choose to include the listeners in the frame. We can shoot a reverse angle where we just see the back of the speakers head and emphasize the audience. We can choose to just get the audience and exclude the speaker. All of these choices tell a different story. While we should try hard to research our story and have a plan going in, we must remain open to the events as they happen. It is always safer to have all the options available and make the decision back at the newsroom with the help of the editor. It is better to have too many good pictures that we have to edit down, than not enough.

The Moment: At any event there are moments when the action happens. Actions make interesting photos. If we can anticipate and capture these moments we will have pictures that can best tell the story.

The Untold Story: We often see the same types of images; homeless people, sick people, speakers at a podium. If we are telling a story that has been done before, we need to look at it from a new perspective. The same is true for our photography. We should study what other photojournalist are doing, and then look for new ways to capture the image. If there is a large gathering of photographers capturing an event from one spot, it might be good to look for a different location to capture the story.

Sometimes the best way to tell a story isn't at the staged public event. If someone is giving a prepared statement in front of a PR designed backdrop, capturing that image will just tell the story of that set up moment. If we want to tell the real story, we might have to search out images that better capture how those words are going to translate into the everyday lives of people. Our viewers don't care about a speech, they care about how it will affect them.

Don't forget the importance of reactions. Some of our best shots might come from turning around and getting people's reactions to an event.

Finishing Touches

Captions: We must always include the name of any prominent subjects, along with the location and date where we captured the image. This basic information is required for all of our photos, but we should also try to add some context to the picture. By telling just a little more we can improve the storytelling of our image.

Editing: The last stage before presenting images is to do any fine tuning in Photoshop. It is always best to capture the correct frame in camera, but sometimes a small amount of cropping can eliminate some distractions that we missed in the moment. We can also do some adjustments to the image when we get back. While Photoshop allows us to make many changes in color and composition, as photojournalist we are limited to using it to just make corrections that bring the photo more in line with the real scene that we shot. We aren't trying to change reality, just correct differences that we or the camera made in the process of capturing the image. If we our picture is slightly underexposed, we can lighten the picture to the levels that were present in the scene. If our color balance is a little off, we can adjust to bring our image more inline with reality. All of these adjustments should be subtle corrections and not massive changes in our image. If the image is so incorrect that it would take a lot of work to correct, we might not be able to use it.

We never add or remove objects from the picture. We can't clone out distractions, or move things to make a better composition. As journalist, we must tell the truth. We must not edit our photographs to change what really happened.

The only drastic change that is acceptable in photojournalism is converting pictures to black and white. This comes from the limitation of the early years of film stock and newspaper printing. While most newspapers now print much of their content in color, the tradition of black and white photojournalistic images persist. Many viewers still see black and white images as truly documentary and more real than color. While most cameras allow us to shoot our images in black and white, most photographers will choose to shoot their images in color so that they have more options available when they edit later.

DO

Assignment: Go out for the next 45 minutes and practice shooting pictures that can tell a story. Use the techniques, composition and storytelling practices that we have discussed to capture an image that tells a story. Pay special attention to removing distractions and drawing attention to the subject. Most of your images should include people.

Some possible images to capture while you are out:

- Capture an image using a slow shutter speed to blur motion and one using a fast shutter speed to stop motion.
- Use a wide open aperture to blur the background in an image.
- Capture an image with emotion.
- Capture a reaction.
- Capture an action.

Selects: Come back and you will have 15 minutes to choose your best five pictures. Add any finishing touches, and place your selects in a folder with your name on it on the shared drive.

We will spend the last part of the workshop together reviewing everyone's photos.

Learn More

Photojournalism Links (<http://photojournalismlinks.com/>)

National Press Photographers Association (<http://www.nppa.org/>)

The White House News Photographers Association (<http://www.whnppa.org/>)

The Big Picture – The Boston Globe (<http://www.boston.com/bigpicture/>)

Picture Stories – The Spokesman Review (<http://www.spokesman.com/picture-stories/>)

Digital Photography Review (<http://dpreview.com/>)

D-Town TV (<http://kelbytv.com/dtowntv/>)

REVIEW

In the beginning, it is helpful to use the following table to see if we have used each element to better tell our story. With practice, these elements will become so ingrained that we won't have to think about them.

Technique					
Focus					
Exposure					
Shutter Speed: Stop/Blur					
Aperture to Control DoF					
Composition					
Simple BG					
Head Clean					
Attention Focused					
Rule of Thirds					
New Angle					
Story					
Emotion					
Objective					
Interesting					
Moment					
Untold Before					
Finishing Touches					
Caption					
Editing					