

# Telling Stories with Photographs

By Darren Rouse

There are many reasons that I love photography, not the least of which is that a photograph (or a series of them) has the ability to convey stories to those that view them.

Over the centuries people have gathered around campfires, in town squares, over meals and in other places to tell their stories and these gatherings have become central to the shaping of cultures and communities. In more recent times some people have lamented that the art of story telling has been lost amidst the rise of different technologies.

Perhaps there is some truth in this – but I also wonder if perhaps it's just the way we tell stories that has changed. One such medium for story telling in the time we live is digital photography.

A photograph has the ability to convey emotion, mood, narrative, ideas and messages – all of which are important elements of story telling.

Of course the gift of story telling is something that doesn't just happen – good story tellers are intentional about learning how to tell stories and practice their craft. Following are a few tips for photographic story tellers.

## The Short Story

Stories come in all shapes and sizes. Some are long (novels or even trilogies of novels) but others are short. Thinking photographically, these short stories might be one, or maybe two, images.

Most newspaper photography fits into this category of story telling – one image that attempts to capture the essence of an accompanying written story. They don't have the luxury of multiple frames to introduce, explore and conclude, so they almost always tell the story of a single event rather than a longer one.

Such shots need to have something in them that grabs the attention of a viewer. They also will usually have visual and/or narrative focal points that lead the viewer into the photo.

Short story photos are often shots that leave the viewer of the photograph wondering about what they are looking at – not because they don't understand it but because they intrigue and leave people imagining what is going on behind the image and what other future images of the scene might look like. In a sense these single image stories are often just as powerful because of what they don't include in the shot as to what they do include.

**Introduce Relationship** – When telling a story through a single image think about including more than one person in the shot – when you do this you introduce 'relationship' into a photo.

Having said that, sometimes carefully framing a second person OUT of your shot can add to the story you're trying to tell. Leaving evidence in the shot of a second unseen person can add questions to your viewers minds (ie a shot of a person alone at a table with two cups of coffee in front of them – or a shot of someone talking animatedly to an unseen person). Unseen elements of a photo can add a lot.

**Also think about context** – what's going on around your subject? What's in the background? What do the other elements of the photo say about your subject and what's going on in their lives? Of course you don't want to be too obvious about setting your background up – doing so could lead to clichéd shots.

## Multiple Image Stories

One of the mistakes that I find many new photographers making is that they find they need to put every possible element of a story or scene into each photograph that they take. This leads to photos that can be quite cluttered, that have too many focal points and that confuse the viewer of them.

One way to avoid this and yet to still tell a story with your images is to take a series of them. In a sense what you're doing here is a step towards shooting a movie with your shots (a movie is a sequence of many thousands of images run together to tell a story).

Series of shots used to tell a story can be anything from two or three shots arranged in a frame or collage through to hundreds of shots arranged in an album (online or printed).

A common multiple image story that many of us will be familiar with is the photography we do on a vacation. Whether we consider it or not – such a series of shots documents the experiences that we have over a period of days/weeks or even months. Other multiple shot stories might include weddings, parties, conferences etc.

## Structure

Good stories don't just happen. They take planning and some type of structure.

Before you start photographing your story consider what type of shots you might need to tell your story. Basic stories will usually include the elements of introduction, plot/body and conclusion.

**1. Introduction** – shots that put the rest of the images into context. These shots introduce important characters that will follow, give information about the place where the story is happening, set the tone that the story will be told in and introduce the themes that the story will meander through (see below for more on themes).

Introductory shots need to lead viewers into the body of the story. If you think about a good novel, it's often the first few paragraphs that determine whether people will buy and read the

book in full or not – the same is true with visual stories. Introductory shots should give people a reason to go deeper into the story.

So in a travel album – these shots might show the travelers packing, could include a macro shot of a map of the destination or of the tickets etc.

**2. Plot** – good stories are more than just empty words. They explore ideas, feelings, experiences etc on a deeper level. Plot shots will probably make up the majority of your photographic story. They show what happens but also explore themes and ideas.

So in a travel album I try to identify themes in my shots that I will revisit throughout a trip.

Types of themes might include:

- **Visual themes** – perhaps colors or shapes that come up again and again on a trip – for example a friend recently showed me his album from a recent trip to the Greek Islands that featured quite a few shots with white buildings and blue seas – very powerful.
- **Stylistic themes** – repetition of photographic techniques and styles. For example on my last overseas trip I decided to include a series of macro shots of the different flora that I saw and ended up with a series of shots of flowers from a variety of different parts of the world.
- **Location themes** – recurring photos from similar types of places. For example on a trip a few years back I decided to make ‘markets’ a theme in my shots across the trip. I sought out and photographed markets in every city and town we visited. I found it fascinating to see the similarities and differences between them.
- **Relationship themes** – shots that focus upon a person or people over time. On a travel story this might document the moods of a person as they go through the highs and lows of travel or could document the development of a relationship between friends, lovers, siblings etc over time.

A photographic story might just focus upon one theme or could intertwine a number of them. Not every shot in a travel album will probably fit in with themes but I find that when you work to build them into what you do that there is a real payoff.

Sometimes themes will emerge while you’re on the go but many of them are things that you need to consider and plan for. For example my ‘market’ and ‘flora’ themes were things I had to build into my trip. I sought these shots out and put myself in places where I’d get the shots I was after.

Some photographers write themselves a ‘hit list’ of shots that they want to get in a given day while others do it more informally in their mind – but most good photographers have the ability to not only take good spontaneous shots but also are quite intentional about getting the types of shots that they need.

**3. Conclusion** – good story tellers are quite intentional about the way they end their stories. Last impressions count and it’s worth considering what lasting image you want to leave with the viewer.

By no means do you need to tie up your story neatly (good stories sometimes leave people feeling unsettled and wanting resolution) but do consider how you want to end.

To continue our travel story example, concluding shots could be anything from the clichéd sunset shot (I think it's been overdone personally) through to airport shots, unpacking shots, plane shots, some shots from the last meal at the destination, signs to the airport etc etc etc.

## Editing

I have a number of friends who are in the publishing business and they tell me that novels rarely go to press in their original form. They generally take a lot of reworking and editing to get them into a form that will work.

The same is usually true with photographic story telling.

Editing happens on a number of levels and ranges from the editing of single photos (cropping, sharpening, enhancing of colors etc) through to the editing and presentation of the overall series of shots.

When presenting your images as a series it is important to be selective with the shots you include (and leave out). With travel albums I generally put together two for each trip. The first one is the story album and is the one I show to most people. The second one is where I keep all of my photos – generally in the order that they were taken.

In this way I don't overwhelm people with the hundreds of photos I take on a trip but select the best ones and arrange them in a way that best tells the story of the trip. Sometimes in the editing process the chronological order becomes less important as the story and the themes within it are more dominant.

---

After reading this article, please answer the following questions on a sheet of paper, and turn in when finished.

1. Why would you want to include more than one person in a photograph when telling a story?
2. Why is it important to think about **context** when telling a story?
3. What is one mistake many new photographers make?
4. What are the 3 main parts of the structure of a story?
5. What are introductory shots supposed to do?
6. What kind of shots should make up the majority of your story?
7. What are the 4 types of plot themes mentioned in this article?
8. Why are conclusion photos important?
9. Why is it important to spend time editing your photos?
10. Brainstorm: write down 5 story ideas that could be told through photographs. Think about what story you would like to tell for our project.

