

The Photo Essay

The term 'photo essay', sometimes referred to as the 'picture story', describes a loosely prescribed and systematic method for creating a visual narrative with a sequence of images, often though not exclusively for editorial outcomes. Although to many the classic age of the photo essay passed with the demise of the great picture magazines such as Picture Post in the UK and Life magazine in the US, it is still the case that photojournalists all over the world are using the practice of the photo essay to communicate meaningful stories across editorial and, increasingly, web-based platforms.

The skills of photo essay construction are also applicable to a number of picture-making situations. Photographers working independently use these skills to increase their chance of publication; the discipline giving them a framework on which to construct a meaningful series. The skills exercised in the photo essay – research, visual investigation, negotiation, subject knowledge, a visual overview, editing etc. – can be applied to many scenarios in photography including corporate, advertising, social and PR photography.

Over the years, the formulae of photo essays have been discussed and written down to the extent that magazines such as Life, the epitome of the picture-led magazine, issued photographers with a guide, a checklist of images to get that would increase the photographer's chances of publication¹

Here it is:

Overall:	A wide shot to establish the story
Medium:	Focus on one activity or group
Close-Up:	One element, a hand, a detail
Portrait:	Tight headshot or environmental
Interaction:	People in conversation or doing something together

¹ Provided in Ken Kobre's *Photojournalism: The Professional's Approach*, pp.146/147

Signature:	Summarises the situation with all or many of the elements
Sequence:	How-to, beginning, middle and end; creates a sense of action
Clincher:	An image that closes the story

Now, apart from the fact that this may seem overly conventional - leaving little room for creativity - in the hands of a good photographer, the essay should at least convey a meaningful sense of the subject and at best, a powerful portrayal - the life of the images reaching beyond the page.

Another, simpler version of the principals of the photo essay was devised by the Magnum photographer, David Hurn²:

1. A person working, doing something
2. A relationship: an interaction of two people or relationship imposed by the photographer on people, people and objects or two objects
3. Establishing picture or general view (GV)
4. A set-up: portrait, studio shot etc.
5. A Close-up – often a small detail that may surprise when enlarged on the page

The first three of these images are 'observed', the latter two 'directed' or constructed. Hurn saw this as equivalent to learning the basic syntax of documentary practice: if the aim of photography is to communicate you need to speak the language.

Daniel Meadows refers to the work of Stefan Lorant, a Hungarian publisher who influenced Hurn's ideas. Lorant's training was as a cameraman and director: look at the five-point-plan in relation to filmmaking practice?

² Quoted in *Set Pieces* by Daniel Meadows, p. 54

Another way of looking at the photo essay is from the picture editor's point-of-view. Ken Kobre lists the Washington Post's Hierarchy of Pictures³

Informational:	Reporting the facts
Graphically Appealing:	Using technique to create interest in boring situations
Emotional:	Elicits an emotional response from the reader
Intimate:	Takes the reader as close to the subject as possible, to empathise

Images may exhibit one or several of these factors at once. Joe Elbert, the assistant managing editor for pictures at the Washington Post, devised the hierarchy and believes that photographers who don't have an emotional connection with the subject are incapable of making emotional or intimate pictures, the two most important types in the hierarchy.

Some other issues

Informational pictures are often referred to as point pictures: they are not intrinsically interesting but move the story along; they will often be used small.

Shoot horizontal (landscape) and vertical (portrait) – this gives the page designer more choice. A front cover will be portrait format or a vertical crop into a horizontal image.

The hierarchy of pictures, however interpreted, will result in appropriate picture use: front cover, establishing shot, double page, single, half-page etc.

Variety is also maintained with different shooting distances, angles, shooting positions, lighting, selective focus, shutter-speed choice etc.

³ Kobre, *Photojournalism, The Professional's Approach*, p. 196 and 198

When making the work, be aware of magazine usage: just as a cover shot should be portrait format, an image good enough to be a double page may be problematic with an awkwardly placed central element disrupted by the magazine's 'gutter', or an establishing shot without space for the overlay of text.

It is useful, when you have a reasonable number of possible pictures – and with your final edit – to print them small and use these small prints to edit and sequence. Selecting images can be fine on screen, but the final edit is easier with prints.

The rules are made for breaking but can only be successfully broken once learnt.

Exercise - As part of the project I would like to see the following (in your visual diary):

Find a photo essay in a newspaper or magazine and analyse it using the aforementioned criteria.

Analyse your own photo essay project through the prism of all the ideas listed.

Mock-up a layout in your visual diary justifying each usage; include a front cover, double page establishing shot and the other images in your final selection.

Look at appropriate photojournalism websites e.g.:

www.magnumphotos.com

www.viipphoto.com

www.agencevu.com

www.panos.co.uk

www.foto8.com

www.reportage.org

www.mediastorm.com