

Photography: Composing a Narrative

Photography is a great way to express ideas and sell products. However, photographs are no more “real” than paintings. Remember that the photographer chooses exactly what you get to see. He or she uses images to convey a message much like a writer uses words. A well composed photograph is very similar in structure to a well composed narrative (story). As an effective viewer, you need to be able to “read” this message critically.

The first step in “reading” a photograph is establishing the subject, setting, and situation/event that is presented to the viewer. To do this the viewer must consider the techniques the photographer has used to compose the image. These techniques are very similar to those used by a writer composing a narrative. Both the writer and the photographer use action, colour, point of view, “*context*”, emphasis, relationships, personal connections, and patterns/symbols.

The Reader’s Checklist

Remember

1. Photographs and narratives are about something. The subject of a picture is a person, place, or thing.
2. All photographs and narratives have a setting. A setting includes time and place.
3. To compose an interesting narrative or photograph there must be something happening. Either there is an identifiable event or an action that is being presented to involve the viewer.
4. A photographer and a story teller points the audience in a certain direction. The photographer uses the camera angle and distance to inform and influence the viewer. The writer uses narrative point of view to do the same job.
5. There are emotions stirred in the viewer. The mood of a photograph or narrative help convey the information and build emotional connections and relationships.

Keep in Mind

- Has the photographer used action, colour, pattern, or focus to move your eye to a particular object or person?
- What kind of a personal connection with the subjects in the photograph does the photographer want the viewer to feel ?
- What is in or out of focus? > Does this create emphasis?
> Does it create relationships?
- What surrounds the subject?
> What is in the foreground or background?
> This is called "context."
- What are the suggested relationships between different objects and / or people in the picture?
> Consider the direction the subjects are facing.
> Why are they facing that way?
> What is beyond the edges of the photo?
> Has the photographer chosen *not* to show you something?

Consider the Angle of the Shot

The positioning of the camera has a great effect on how you feel about the subject.

- > A low-angle shot looking up at the subject often emphasizes, its size, strength, or power.
- > A high-angle shot, aiming down, can suggest smallness, weakness, and vulnerability.
- > A shot from above can also provide a sense of power.
- > Close-ups suggest a more intimate relationship between the subject and the camera (audience).

> A long shot suggests being distanced from the subject, and so gives a sense of objectivity.

Consider the Mood

Lighting and colour allow us to "feel" the picture rather than just see it.

> How much colour and light is in the photo?

> Is there action or movement in the photo or is there stillness?

> How does this movement or stillness effect the viewer?