

Exploration: Photography and videography 101



Background: The art of visual composition

Expensive equipment doesn't have to be an access barrier to taking photos or making videos. Many people today have smartphones or access to a tablet, which are equipped with basic cameras, and there are free applications and software that you can use to edit and share photos or videos. There are also places where you can borrow or rent a camera, if you want to learn more about photography or videography. Taking a photo or recording a video is easy, but creating something that engages people is not as simple as pressing a button.

Good visual storytelling relies on composition techniques to arrange the visual elements in such a way that appeals to the viewer. There are no hard rules, but there are elements and guidelines that can make a photo (or video) more interesting or visually engaging. When composing a shot, it's important to think about how you want to present the subject of your photo, whether that's a person, animal, plant, building, or natural feature.

Composition techniques can be used in various ways: to draw attention to the subject; to guide the viewer's eye through an image to a focal point; to provide structure, dimension, or depth; to frame the subject or create interest; and to create atmosphere, set a mood, or evoke an emotion. These various composition techniques can help you to think more creatively about how to share your story with audiences.

Activity 4: Identifying composition techniques

Introduce students to the basic elements of composition with a mix and match activity. Students will match a description of a composition technique to a photograph. At the beginning of the activity, remind students that photos could make use of more than one composition technique and that they should simply choose whichever photo they think is the best match. Also, inform them that there may be multiple example photos for one description. This activity can be completed in one of two ways:

- 1. Class option:** Display all of the photo examples provided for each composition technique. Read out the descriptions of the different composition techniques one at a time and have students suggest which photos they think best match the description.
- 2. Individual option:** Divide the class in half and provide one group of students with the descriptions of composition techniques and the other group with the photo examples. Have students work together to correctly match the descriptions to the photos.

At the end of the activity, discuss any differences between students' answers and the correct options. A photograph can rely on more than one composition technique to create interest or to draw the viewer's eye.

Overview

Students will learn basic photography and videography skills, specifically focusing on composition and planning. They will practice composition techniques through a series of activities. Students will also explore examples of photography and videography to better understand visual storytelling.

Time

2 class periods



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Activity 5: Practising photography composition

Next, have students practice various composition elements and guidelines by handing out the Photography Bingo card. This activity can be completed in one of three ways:

- 1. As a game:** During class (over a short period of time, such as 20-30 minutes), students can take photos around the school or school yard using the prompts on their Bingo sheet. The first student or group of students to complete a vertical, horizontal, or diagonal line on their Bingo sheet wins the game.
- 2. As a virtual scavenger hunt:** Instead of providing print copies of the Bingo sheet, have students complete the activity online during class time. Students can research photos that fit the prompts.
- 3. As an assignment:** Students can complete the Bingo sheet on their own time or at home, using the prompts to take photos. Afterwards, students can share their results in class and have a discussion. Guide discussion using the following questions:
 - a. Which prompts were your favourite?
 - b. Which prompts were the most difficult or made you stop and think?
 - c. What did you learn or find surprising?

Background: How to put it all together

Now that students have become familiar with various composition techniques, they will take the next step in learning about visual storytelling. A single photo can be powerful on its own, but a photo essay can tell a complex story or reveal a more nuanced picture of an issue. Similarly, a good video vignette (i.e., an episode or an account) is often composed of several camera shots that come together to tell a story.

But how do photographers and videographers go about creating a visual story? To craft a cohesive photo essay or a compelling video narrative it is important to consider the kind of shots you want to gather so that the end result is not just a collection of random photos or video clips. Photojournalists or documentary filmmakers are often covering unfolding events or real-world issues, but that doesn't mean that they are improvising as they go. Most professionals working in photography or videography will plan out a shot list or a storyboard.

Photo essays could be loosely grouped into two categories: narrative and thematic. A narrative essay tells a story of a subject, essentially following a character. This can be a person, an animal, an object, or even a place. For example, a photo essay could follow the life cycle of a plastic water bottle from creation to the landfill. A thematic essay is a collection of photos around an issue or a topic. For example, a photo essay could look at the effects of deforestation on an area.

A shot list is a list of the photos or camera shots that you want to capture. Professional photographers and filmmakers create shot lists to help them stay organized and keep in mind what they want to achieve when working on a shoot or for an assignment. In videography, it's also important to consider what kind of B-roll video (secondary footage used to support your story, usually to provide context, set the tone, or act as filler) you want to gather to help illustrate your story. It is often better to take lots of photos or shoot more content that you need so that you can edit it down later, but photographing or filming without a basic shot list might mean you gather a lot of content that isn't useful or relevant to your story.

Although it isn't always necessary to plan everything out ahead of time, creating a shot list or jotting down some ideas can help you think creatively about the story you want to tell. It's important to understand that a shot list isn't meant to be restrictive — the story you're telling may unfold differently than you anticipated or there may be perspectives you hadn't considered — but it is an organizational tool. Similarly, a storyboard (i.e., a series of drawings) can help you visualize how your video story will unfold.



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Activity 6: Breaking down the elements of a good story

Have students work in small groups or individually to explore the following examples of photo essays and video vignettes by filling out the accompanying worksheets. Ask students to select one example from each category to explore in depth. Encourage students to use the websites in the additional resources to help them in their analysis. Once students have completed their worksheets, have a discussion about what makes a photo essay/video vignette effective and powerful. Ask students to use examples from the stories they analyzed.

Photo essay examples

- [A voyage into Antarctica](#) by Nick Walker with photography by Javier Frutos
- [A voyage through the Northwest Passage](#) by Michelle Valberg
- [I am Mutehekau Shipu: A river's journey to personhood in eastern Quebec](#) by Susan Nerberg with photography by Christian Fleury
- [Inside the Royal Alberta Museum's mammoth move](#) by Harry Wilson with photography by Amber Bracken
- [Life aboard a Great Lakes freighter](#) by Sabrina Doyle with photography by Thomas Fricke
- [Life as a heli-skiing guide in the Skeena Range](#) by Bruce Kirkby
- [Life in the park at the edge of the world](#) by Alexandra Pope with photography by Matt Law
- [Life inside the Tsá Tué Biosphere Reserve](#) by Sabrina Doyle with photography by Angela Gzowski
- [Life on board HMCS Yellowknife](#) by Ian Coutts with photography by Peter Power
- [One heli of a hike](#) by Doug O'Neil with photography by Javier Frutos
- [Ontario mountaineers recreate legendary first ascent of Bugaboo Spire](#) by Ivan Petrov
- [Point Pelee National Park at 100](#) by Zach Baranowski
- [The Calgary Stampede celebrates 105 years](#) by Sabrina Doyle with photography by Javier Frutos
- [The Mingan Archipelago: A land shaped by time](#) by Zach Baranowski
- [Via Rail returns to Churchill, Manitoba](#) by April Carandang

Visit the [Placing the Pandemic in Perspective website](#) to access the video vignette examples. To view the videos, click on the video icons on the map.



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Additional resources:

- [Shotkit: 22 Essential photography composition techniques for better photos](#)
- [PetaPixel: 28 Composition Techniques That Will Improve Your Photos](#)
- [Twisted Sifter: 10 Composition tips with award-winning photography Steve McCurry](#)
- [Adobe: The basics of photography composition](#)
- [The Lens Lounge: Photography Composition](#)
- [Photography Life: Learn Photography](#)
- [Digital Photography School: How to Compose Photos](#)
- [PetaPixel: How to Create a Photo Essay](#)
- [Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at CUNY: The Photo Essay](#)
- [The Digital Trekker: The photo essay: Give it your best shot](#)
- [Masterclass: How to Create a Photo Essay: Step-by-Step Guide With Examples](#)
- [Shotkit: How to create an engaging photo essay \(with examples\)](#)
- [Digital Photography School: How to Make a Photo Essay: 5 Tips for Impactful Results](#)
- [Adobe: An introduction to camera shot types](#)
- [Adobe: How to make a shot list](#)
- [Shotkit: How to create a shot list \(+template\)](#)
- [Shorthand: How to create compelling video for multimedia stories](#)
- [Masterclass: Learn About B-Roll Footage](#)

