

# Create your own photo essay

## Preparation

### Subject

The most important thing to consider when preparing a photo essay is your subject. That's the first thing you have to think about. The purpose of a photo essay is to convey information of a human, social or economic nature, most often illustrating the story of a person or group of persons. How you approach your character(s), how you contact and introduce yourself to them, affects how you will convey your message and the impact it will have. In presenting someone's story, you are standing as a witness to their situation.



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### Context

Each story exists in a particular context. Presenting someone who is grappling with the recession, for example, requires you to understand how the economic downturn is affecting that person's region, work and family. The only way to tell the story well is to be familiar with the context so that you can efficiently obtain the most relevant information that best sums up the situation.

### Equipment

What equipment you use is not really important. It's not that it doesn't matter, but the technical side is much less important than the informational side. It isn't the type of equipment you use that makes the difference, but how you use it. These days, many cameras on the market are of suitable quality, and most portable sound recorders too. A single-lens reflex (SLR) camera is still the best bet, as long as you've mastered the concepts of lens aperture, film speed/sensitivity and shutter speed. An SLR camera gives you maximum detail, letting you capture the atmosphere of the setting in a realistic way.



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## Production

### Introduction

The participants in a photo essay must have a clear idea of the project and its goals. The atmosphere must encourage them to open up and talk about themselves. Results depend on the relationship the photographer develops with his or her subjects. And that takes time. But taking the time to get to know your subjects is the key to being able to present them accurately.

## ***Photos***

When taking your photos, keep in mind that they will be seen by people who don't know the subject's story and its context, physical setting and atmosphere. It's a common mistake to focus on the subject(s) while ignoring their environment. The context helps viewers understand the story.

The images describe and situate the subject(s). A good technique for a photo essay is to use wide-angle shots more than close shots or zooms. A zoom lens considerably reduces the information contained in the image, isolating an element and removing it from its context. A wide-angle lens does the opposite. But it's tricky since a wide-angle lens requires you to be close to what you're shooting. At the same time you want to be as invisible as possible, to be forgotten by your subject(s) so as not to interfere with the shot.

That's also where the artistic aspect takes centre-stage, letting the communicational aspect aside. It's the art that conveys the atmosphere and appeals to the sensibilities—of the photographer who perceives the atmosphere of a setting in his or her own way and of the people who will watch the photo essay.

## ***Interviews***

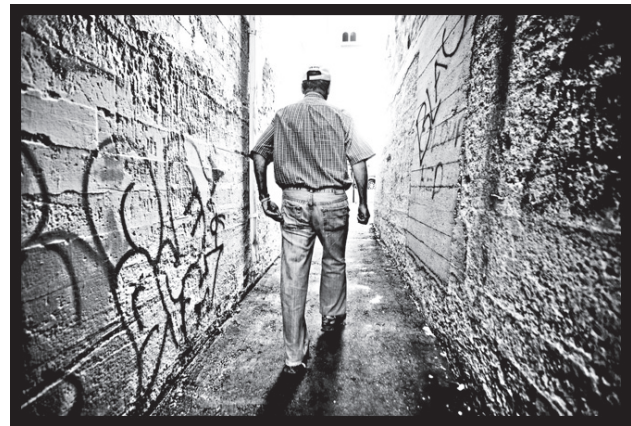
The interview must first answer the questions: who? what? where? why? how? It should consider the past, present and future and, most importantly, should illustrate the personality of the subject. You have to let your subject speak, occasionally guiding the discussion to get to the point while always remembering that silence is important.

Sound doesn't end with the interview. Though, in the same way in which the photos should provide context, the sound serves to insert the subject(s) in their environment. So keep an ear out for ambient sound you could include.

## ***Editing***

### ***Selection***

Once you've gathered your material, you now have to choose. You have to make choices because you don't have the time or room to include everything, but also in order to construct your story, your account of the character's situation. You have to take the time to listen to and look at all the elements you have before you start editing. That will give you an overview of the material.



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### ***Editing***

To edit the sound clips and assemble the photos, you can use whatever software you like (for example, iMovie on Mac or Windows Movie Maker on PC). When doing a photo essay, I suggest you start with the soundtrack. That will help you construct a narrative and develop a rhythm for your material.

Don't forget to let the editing breathe. Leave pauses so you don't overload your photo essay. Use ambient sound and sound effects to make the soundtrack richer and more evocative.

Once you've completed the editing, all you have to do is to export it as a QuickTime file—and that's your photo essay!