Tutorial Two

Eight Rules for Effective Photojournalism

By

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This tutorial explains the eight rules I have always followed when shooting picture stories for newspapers and magazines worldwide. A video of the tutorial can be found on this website.

One: Start by devising and shooting your 'key shot'. This is an eye-catching picture that grabs and holds the wandering gaze of a casual viewer.

My practice was to start by conceiving and shooting my key shot rather than hoping to find one once all my photographs had been taken.

Here is one such photograph, together with how it appeared in print, which draws you into the story and encapsulates its key elements.

I discuss shooting key shots in more detail in my third tutorial.

My key shot for a story about a team of stunt drivers and how it appeared in print.

Two: Once you have decided on your ‘key shot,’ the next step is determining the best way to take it.

What content, camera angle, and framing best catch the viewer’s eye and arouse sufficient interest to invest time in it?

Here’s an example from a story I shot on aircraft firefighters

To take this shot, I fitted a wide-angle (28 mm) lens to my Nikon and sat beside the driver as he sped towards an ancient bomber whose inner starboard engine had burst into flames on landing.

By framing the dramatic scene with the fire-tender’s windscreen, I could direct the viewer’s attention to the blazing aircraft while setting the background for my story.

Three: Rather than always taking pictures with the camera at eye level, choose angles and distances that add more drama to your photographs, especially when taking the ‘key shot’.

When filming trials of a gravel-pit arrester designed to prevent runaway aircraft from overshooting the landing strip, I placed a radio-controlled Nikon directly beside the arrester as a Lightning fighter thundered to a halt in the pit.

In the event, the aircraft struck the camera and somersaulted it several metres across the track.

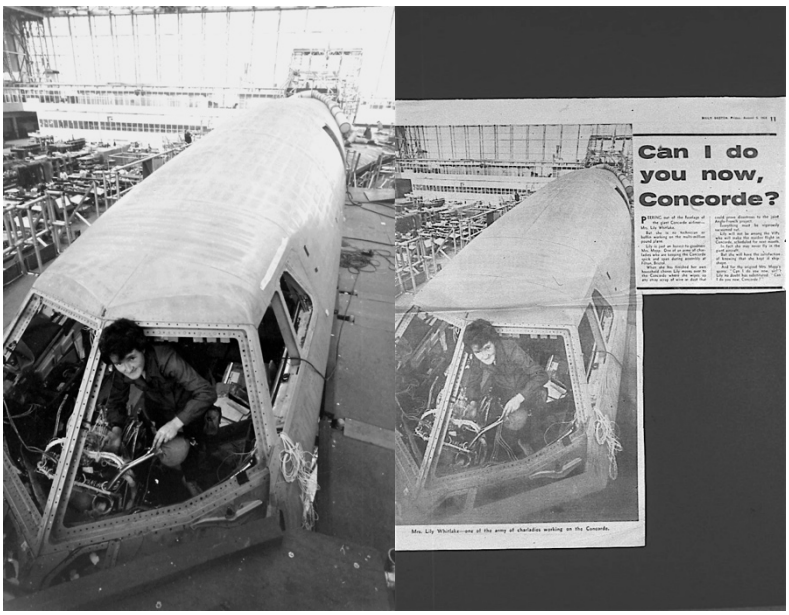
The good news was that both the camera and the image survived.

In another story about an artist who liked to blow up old cars and paint the remains, my remotely triggered camera came within inches of being struck by a flying room. Again, no real damage was done, and the resulting picture provided a perfect key shot.

Four: People are interested in stories about others, their hopes and fears, dreams and desires, successes and setbacks.

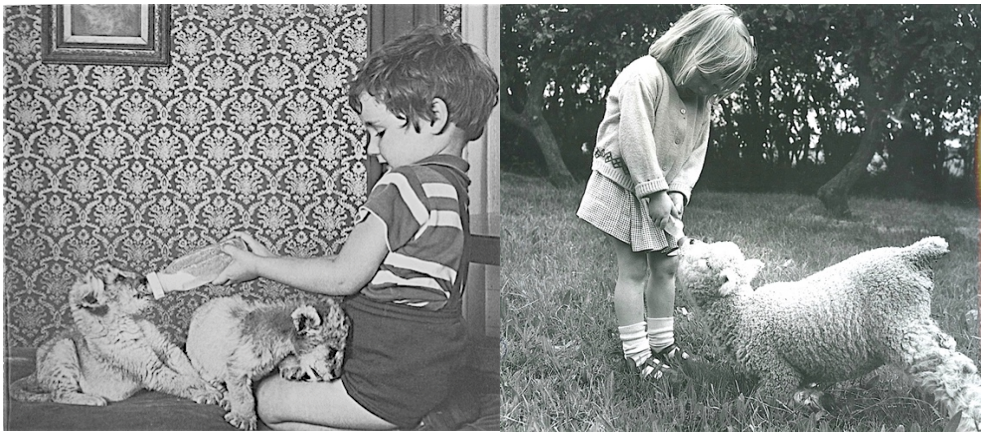
While covering the construction of Concord, the world's first faster-than-sound commercial airliner, I spent much time in a giant hangar at BAC's Filton plant.

The story that caught the eye of many more editors worldwide was less about technology than the very human tale of a middle-aged woman named Lilly Whitlake, shown here with one of the publications that used the story.



Lilly's task was vacuum cleaning the aircraft's interior to ensure no scraps of wire or other material were left behind to interfere with the smooth running of the equipment.

Five: It may seem commonsense for the photographer to notice the foreground more than the background of a shot, ensuring their subject is sharp, correctly lit, and properly exposed. Attention to the background is equally important since it can spoil the sales chances for an otherwise exciting picture.



These two photographs, shot for a book I wrote on animal photography, illustrate the point.

The fussy background in the first, which shows a boy feeding his pet lion cubs, reduces the chances of selling an otherwise charming picture.

The second has the subjects standing out from the background, making the shot more saleable.

In Tutorial Four, I shall discuss ways of removing or reducing the impact of distracting backgrounds.

Six: Whenever you can, shoot a series of linked pictures rather than taking a single shot. Not only can this add visual impact, but from a commercial point-of-view, it increases the financial return on your photographs.

The sequence of the baby and the lion cub shown here illustrates this.

How baby Nicky lost the lion's share of his feed to a cub called Lulu

Taking milk from a baby in three easy stages. First an envious glance. Then a pounce. And, at last, Lulu gets the bottle.

WHEN it comes to getting the lion's share at feeding time, Lulu the lion cub knows a trick or two—as baby Nicky Deller found out.

This is what happened.

Nicky, who is just a year old, was sitting there minding his own business and drinking a bottle of milk.

Lulu, who is just two months old, was sitting there feeling a bit peckish. And as soon as she spotted Nicky's feed, the law of the jungle reigned in the Deller family's living room at Lemsford, Herts.

Stealthily, the little lioness crept nearer and nearer until she was within grabbing distance of the bottle. By the time Nicky realised what was happening, it was too late.

With one pounce, Lulu took over the bottle. And while she savoured her triumph, Nicky burst into tears. Rather sad that. But Nicky's mother, Mrs. Pat Deller, wasn't too upset. Mrs. Deller, who trains animals for films, is trying to groom Lulu for stardom.

If the cub goes on showing this sort of expertise, she should find those movie parts quite easy—as easy as taking milk from a baby, in fact.

Lulu laps up the milk, and Nicky sobs as his drink goes down the wrong hatch.

How the sequence appeared in print.

Notice how I also ensured Rule Five was followed by covering the brightly patterned area on which the child and cub were placed with a black cloth. Over two hundred magazines, newspapers, and books have published these pictures worldwide.

Seven: While time is of the essence when shooting for newspapers when working for magazines, it is often possible to spend days, weeks or even months planning shots for long-lead time magazines.

For example, when covering a story on corporal punishment in British Public Schools, I spent three months planning a photograph that was shot in 1/15th of a second.

On another occasion, photographing pictures for a book on the life of mathematician and philosopher Bertrand Russell, I learned that the body of his father, the radical thinker and atheist Lord Amberley, had initially been buried in a cave in the grounds of his stately home.

When I first visited the cave on a sunny July afternoon, the light was bright, and the cave was just a cave. It had no atmosphere and lacked the drama to match such sombre occasions.

Since I had plenty of time to get the shot, I could wait until late October before revisiting the location. When I arrived, at first light, an Autumn mist rose, enabling me to take the ethereal image below.

The cave on the grounds of his stately home was where Lord Amberley was buried at first.

Eight: Your photographs, whether as part of a photo essay, illustrated article or picture sequence, should have a powerful start, a well-developed middle, and an end.

When photographing a story about family heartbreak among East and West Berliners living in their divided city during the 1970s, I opened with a shot of a crudely constructed viewing platform overlooking a rain-swept Potsdamer Platz. From this precarious position, West Berliners cut off from family and friends in the East could wave to one another across the Wall.

A crude viewing platform overlooking Berlin's Potsdamer Platz.

I developed my story about living in a divided city, with shots of the border posts between East and West by night and covertly shot pictures of a tunnel being dug in the Communist Zone.

My closing shot was of a memorial to one Bernd Lunse, a 25-year-old who, on October 4, 1961, had been shot in the back by East German border guards as he attempted to flee to the West. Bernd was one of the many East Germans, young and old, gunned down as they made their frantic bid for freedom.

Memorial to Bernd Lunse close to the Berlin Wall, where the 25-year-old died.

Although I developed these eight rules for successful photojournalism at a time when taking and processing images were very different, they are no less relevant in the age of digital photography.

By following them, you'll ensure your photo stories are powerful, compelling and meaningful.

In Tutorial Three, we'll return to key shots and examine ways to ensure that all you shoot captures what the great French photojournalist Henri Cartier-Bresson called 'un moment de verité', a moment of truth.

For details about my various assignments, how they were conducted, and what they reveal regarding the fundamentals of photojournalism, read *People I Shot*. It is

available on Amazon or from www. photojournalism.uk in an edition autographed by the author and with FREE UK postage at the same price.