

Tutorial Three

Creating the Perfect Key Shots

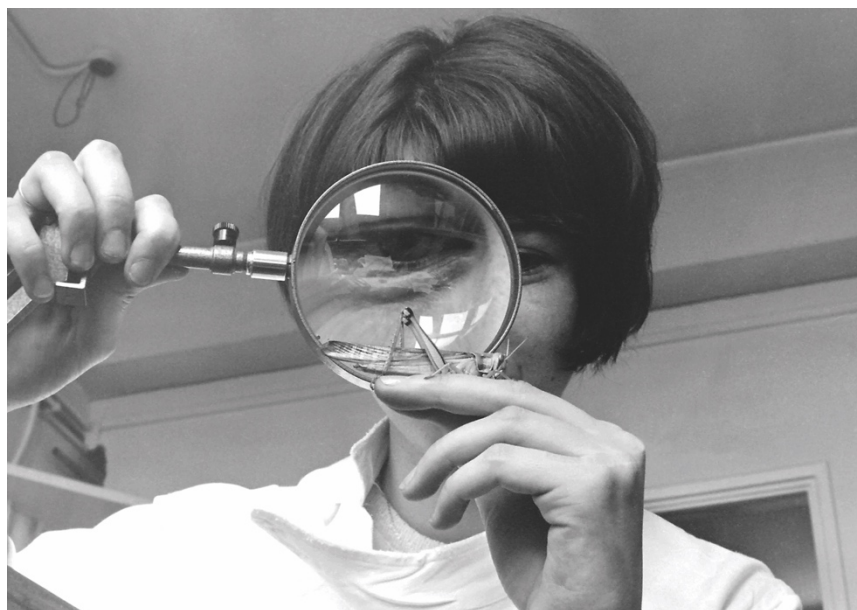
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In this tutorial, I will explain how to shoot eye-catching and attention-grabbing images that capture key elements of your overall story. Shots sufficiently powerful to stand alone when an editor wishes to use one of the images from your photo story or as an attention-grabbing start to a complete photo story. A video of this tutorial can be found on this website.

This key shot is from a story about a locust research laboratory that studies these predacious insects, which decimate crops and initiate famines.



Although the scientists' work was interesting, it was not sufficiently visually impactful to catch the attention of a general magazine editor or their readers. By concentrating on this image of a single insect and a young researcher, I could take a photograph of broad appeal and one published by more than a dozen magazines worldwide.

Or this picture of a hippo having its teeth cleaned by a keeper. When visiting the zoo, I learned that such dental care regularly occurred, although in a somewhat less visually dramatic way, as shown here.



To make the tooth-cleaning story relatable to general readers, I persuaded the keeper to use an instantly recognisable domestic brush and tube of toothpaste.

These pictures illustrate that your key shot sometimes requires ingenuity and a little poetic licence. It can also take careful thought and, on occasion, rehearsal.

Take this picture, which I have shown you in previous Tutorials, of a car bursting through the front of a removal van.



One of the many spectacular stunts produced by Destruction Squad, an organisation I covered for several years and which yielded many action stories as they smashed their way through thousands of old cars, vans, lorries, motorbikes and busses.

The angle from which I took this picture was not a matter of chance but the result of planning and rehearsal. Away from the vast crowds who flocked to see their shows, the team would practise on disused airfields, offering me ample opportunity to identify the best camera position and lens combination.

One position from which I could have shot this flying car sequence was with the camera facing the line of vehicles on which the vehicle would come to rest. This enabled me to follow the whole sequence from when the vehicle burst forth from the removal van to landing upside down on the other cars.



Although these images captured the complete story, they lacked the impact needed for a successful key shot, and I decided to use a more frontal position, using a 135mm lens and shooting at four frames per second.



Sometimes, ingenuity will be needed to capture your key shot.

When covering the story of Diana, a young female contortionist, I took pictures of her demonstrating her extraordinary physical flexibility around the home. For example, she helped her mother wash up by holding the plates between her toes and playing her favourite music.



But for the key shot, I needed something more eye-catching.

When I learned she would often go to auditions concealed within a suitcase carried by her muscular boyfriend, I decided this would make the perfect key image, provided viewers could see what was happening.

To ensure this, we cut a small window in the side, through which we could see her thigh and raised thumb, thus demonstrating that she was ‘in the bag.’



A more complex and potentially dangerous challenge was photographing the story of a group of stunt flyers who had developed a new aerial bombardment game involving a Tiger Moth biplane.



In this game, one would fly the elderly aircraft while the second stood precariously on the wing and threw bombs at the third as he sprinted across a nearby field.

My first challenge was shooting a picture that would capture the entire scene, showing the wing walker and the target as they ducked and weaved directly beneath the low-flying aircraft.



I bolted special plates onto the aircraft's tail to support a remotely fired camera. A long cable draped along the fuselage connected to a microswitch on the pilot's joystick—you can see it trailing along the fuselage—enabling him to take pictures as he dived in on the fleeing man.



To get a shot of the bomb exploding near the target, I dug a pit in the field to give the camera and myself some protection. This was a perilous position as if the biplane dipped very slightly as it approached the camera, and both could end up in a damaged state.



This happened to a cinematographer friend on the WW1 flying movie Blue Max when a replica of German fighter planes struck the camera and the photographer as it dived towards the ground.

In the event, all went fine, and the picture sequence ended up in several magazines worldwide.



Another story that required a little staging was of a Destruction Scored stunt in which the driver attempted to fly over a wide river. The picture would have far more impact if it flew over an angler we had seen quietly fishing on that river.

Squatting on the side of the river bank beside the stunt arranger Joe Weston–Webb, we heard the car churning across the nearby field towards the jumping ramps. 'Is he going to attempt it?' I asked Joe.

'I hope not,' Joe replied, 'he can't be going more than 40 miles an hour, and he needs to be going at least 60 to clear the river.'

The saloon came into sight at that moment, leaving the jumping ramps and flying over the water.



As Joe had guessed, it could not cross the river, landing with a colossal splash less than a yard from the unfortunate angler's boat.

Taking no chances, the terrified fisherman dived over the side when the car hit the water.



Unhurt, the driver climbed through the open window of his floating vehicle and stood on the roof as the rest of the stunt team applauded him.



Determined to get revenge for his unexpected ducking, the furious fisherman clambered onto the car, punching the driver on the chin and sending him flying into the river, providing me with a great, if unexpected, closing shot.

Here's the way the story was reported in a Swedish magazine, one of over 60 journals and newspapers that published these images.



On several occasions, I had to work quite hard to capture a compelling key shot, sometimes when covering subjects that seemed to offer many opportunities.

A bomb disposal school where soldiers are trained in this dangerous and highly skilled work would provide many opportunities. However, while the subjects, such as the table with a host of deadly devices or soldiers practising defusing bombs on railway lines, the images were all somewhat static.



Toward the end of the day, while discussing bomb-making developments with a sergeant, I had an opportunity for a compelling key shot. He told me about a new type of Molotov cocktail being used by terrorists. Rather than having to light a fuse just before throwing the device, a formula was developed to ensure the bottle of flammable liquid would explode immediately on impact.



Although the light was falling fast that late October day, this was the shot I needed. I placed a camera beside the brick wall of the old heart and fired it remotely. The sergeant flung the bottle as close to my camera as possible, giving me a shot with impact.



The take-home message is that when conceiving and shooting a key shot that will have maximum impact and the best chance of publication, either on its own or as part of a series of related images, follow these three rules.

First, whenever possible, choose your shooting angle and lens carefully, keeping in mind the background—which I will discuss in my next Tutorial.

Ensure the image captures the essence of the story without trying to say too much. It should tease the viewer with a promise rather than overwhelm them with information. Use ingenuity, where necessary, to give your visual message impact and clarity.

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.

