

Tutorial Six

Setting Up Assignments

By

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As I explained in my previous Tutorial, the type of camera you shoot with, whether a smartphone or a top-of-the-range Nikon, matters far less than being in the right place at the right time.

This, in turn, depends on your ability, having spotted a photo story with international appeal, to set up and shoot that story.

In my sixth and final tutorial of the current series, I will explain my approach to this challenging task by describing the background of three different assignments. A video of this tutorial is available on the website.

My first rule was to avoid other photographers.

Unless you are working on commission or manage to capture an image every other photographer misses, such photos are unlikely to find publishers.



If you ever face intense competition, try to find a new and original angle that rival photographers miss.

Let me give you an example.

In the early 'seventies, a civil war, euphemistically called 'The Troubles', was fought in Northern Ireland. Buildings were bombed or set ablaze, and people were gunned down in the streets.



The international press corps descended on the streets of Belfast to photograph and report on the bloodshed.

I took a different approach by photographing not the fighting but the everyday lives of poverty-stricken children in the drab slum terraces of Catholic Falls Road and Protestant Shankill Road.

I arrived in Belfast without any contacts and spent several days meeting and chatting with politicians, community leaders, social workers, and, especially, local people.

Amongst them was Dr Jim Ryan, with whom I shared many pints in a local hostelry. A slum GP, Jim took care of the medical needs of patients on both sides of the religious divide.

I learned that, in his youth, Jim had been a member of the IRA and served time in a British prison. He even invited me to a meeting of the Old IRA, those active during the 20s and 30s, where I took this picture of a group of eminently respectable lawyers, business executives and doctors who, between them, had served hundreds of years in English prisons.

When I was later abducted by the same group, as described in my book, *People I Shot*, Jim provided me with a 'get out of jail card' and almost certainly saved me from a severe beating, a kneecapping or something far worse.

With his assistance, I was able to photograph the lives of many of his patients, like this single mother-of-two who was raising three beautifully turned-out children in a slum lacking a bathroom and with only a dinghy slit for a kitchen.



The lesson here is never to hide behind your camera's comfort blanket but to spend time talking with and, above all, listening to other people.

Now, for an assignment that required detailed preplanning and negotiation.

I found a brief article in a medical journal about a six-year-old boy who, blind from birth, had his sight restored in a pioneering operation. I knew this would make an excellent picture story with international appeal.



After some detective work, I tracked down the child's mother and persuaded her to let me photograph him. She agreed, but only on the condition that no flash be used, as his eyes were still susceptible to light. This meant all my pictures had to be taken by the light of a 15-watt bulb and only the dullest winter's day of the year.

Since the boy had already had both eyes operated on, showing the eye surgeons at work would be photographing another operation. This proved far more challenging and time-consuming, but persistence, as it so often does, paid off and suitably gowned and masked, and with my camera encased in a sterilised bag, I was allowed to photograph the entire, intricate operation.



When searching for stories, search printed material online or in the press. Local newspapers, websites, small circulation specialist magazines, and even advertisements can prove fruitful hunting grounds. The more local the publication, the less likely a story is to be picked up by competitors.

This was brought home to me when I found an article in a small-circulation local magazine about a stallion named King who enjoyed dropping into his local public house for a beer with his owner, Bill.

A few telephone enquiries later, I was chatting with his owner, Bill Foyle, a butcher who had been instructed to slaughter the young horse whose owner considered him 'uncontrollable'.

A Western enthusiast and horse lover, Bill quickly realised the stallion's aggression was due to boredom. With patience and training, King soon settled down and revealed a love for playing football.

Every Saturday, the two would play soccer at their local football pitch, followed by a trip to the local pub.



Bill was only too pleased for me to photograph their story, which appeared in more than two dozen magazines and newspapers worldwide.

Every article or picture story starts with an idea.

This may have been dreamed up by an editor and given to a staff photographer or freelancer.

When a freelancer develops an idea, it can be presold to an editor or developed into a finished product on spec.

It is ideal to work with an editor from the start. That way, you can produce the type of coverage they want, and publication is virtually assured.

But this type of relationship takes time to build. At first, most freelance contributors work on a speculative basis, shooting their pictures hoping to be published.

Help yourself by answering these six questions:

- Will my story be new? Will it tell people something they do not already know? If the answer is No, don't proceed.
- Can I get all the pictures needed to tell my story? If the answer is No, don't proceed.
- Will my story be so technical that it only appeals to a specialist audience? If so, avoid it unless you are a specialist yourself.
- Can the story be sharply angled? If not, don't proceed.
- Are there several markets which will be interested in my story? If not, proceed with caution.
- Can I cover this story with a reasonable investment of time and money? If not, proceed with caution.

When dealing with people, I always tried to follow these rules.

- Be completely open and honest about your intentions. In general, always distinguish the true purpose of your story and where it is most likely to appear.

That said, there have been a few occasions when I had to act covertly to obtain the pictures needed. One was while secretly photographing a British boy held in a Turkish prison, and another on a story about brutality at a Public School. You can read accounts of these and other assignments in *People I Shot*.

- If a written story accompanies your pictures, let those involved see what you have written about them and allow them to challenge, although not necessarily change, anything they consider incorrect or unfair.
- Get written clearance from your human subjects before using their images in your story.
- Always keep your promises. If, for example, you agreed to provide a set of pictures, be sure to do so.
- As in many careers, developing and nurturing your contacts is essential for success in photojournalism.
- Building a career in photojournalism is as much about psychology as it is about photography.

That concludes my six tutorials on successful photojournalism. I hope you found them and the accompanying written notes interesting and valuable.

While photojournalism is filled with rejections, setbacks and disappointments, it is also one of the most fascinating, thrilling and enriching careers you can follow.

You can become a witness to what has been called the 'first draft of history,' capturing feeling moments and preserving memories that would otherwise be lost forever.

I wish you the best of luck on every assignment you undertake.

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](http://www.photojournalism.uk) in an edition autographed by the author and with FREE UK postage at the same price.

