

## Ten Practical Principles for Photojournalists

*Photojournalism is about people doing things.*

### 1. Get in close.

Your photos will often be published on -quality newsprint for a bored audience easily diverted. Detail gets lost. Photos strong enough to break through the media competition focus on a single, frame-filling center of interest. usually no more than two or three people. No more than a few objects. A clean, contrasting background. Sometimes photojournalists call this the "poster effect." This is why telephoto or zoom lenses are the workhorses of photojournalism: many photojournalists don't even use a normal perspective (35-50mm) lens. If you can't get in close, crop ruthlessly.

"If your pictures aren't good enough, you're not close enough."--[Robert Capa](#), one of the century's top war photographers

### 2. Find unusual angles.

If you're sitting or standing like everyone else, you're probably going to take back some photos. Kneel. Climb on a chair.. Lie down. Shoot down a stairway. Get off your butt. Good photojournalists are always moving.

*Corollary to this rule:* If forced to take photos of, say, a speaker at a stage (not an attractive option, but too often necessary), never sit in the chairs with the rest of the audience. Think you'll be too noticeable? Everyone already knows you're taking pictures--so what? If you're too shy to move around in front of an audience, become a copy editor.

### 3. Get identification.

All subjects easily identifiable must be named. Journalism is about people, not abstract art. Most editors will reject photos without identity, unless they are used as generic illustrations. Beginners are intimidated by walking up to strangers, but it's not really very hard. Simply say some variation of, "Hi, my name is iqra, with this *field*. I just took your picture, and I wonder if I can have your name? Can you spell that, please?" Write names in your *Reporters' Notebook*. Few people will turn you down: Pakistani love to be in pictures.

### 4. Burn pixels.

Move in, move out, move high, move low, and keep on clicking. You'll have more to choose from, and you'll more likely have a strong image. Unlike studio photographers, photojournalists have to walk off with action as it's unfolding, so at least to some extent are forced to trust on luck to bring back

good pictures. The old film rule used to be to shoot one roll (24 ex.) minimum at any event you're asked to cover, even a speaker at a stage. You can interpret this in the digital age. Half a football game should bag you 75 photos at least.

*One caution:* Anything worth doing is not necessarily anything worth overdoing. Don't just leave your camera in burst mode thinking you'll edit those 1,580 images later. It's a nightmare. I read a few years ago about a guy who took more than 2,000 images of a thunderstorm.

### **5. Go away from the formula.**

How many photos have you seen showing people talking on a phone? Working at a computer? At a desk with books in the background? In a mugshot? Shaking hands ("grip n' grin")? Making a lay-up to a basketball hoop? For goodness' sake, promise yourself NEVER to take a photo like this again! Assigned a mugshot of a faculty member? Ask the person to meet at the lab, engage her in her research for a photo.

### **6. Avoid clear affectation.**

sometimes you have to ask people to stand someplace or do something, but that still doesn't mean they have to just smile into the camera. Try to make the scene appear natural, as if the subject were involved in something and the photographer just happened to come by. Photojournalism aims to cover people doing things, not people posing. That's for the studio photographers.

### **7. Add light, but don't make it noticeable.**

Available light is ideal, but usually its quality is hardly that. Especially when you're shooting color, you need to control the color balance of garish green difficult combinations of artificial and natural light. In some cases, light comes from ugly angles (such as nearly every standard classroom or office), or is so weak you can't even get close to stopping the action.

The normal approach is to carry a portable electronic flash, but NEVER to merely attach it to the hot shoe and blast away. That looks 'way too artificial. Solution: bounce. Aim your electronic flash straight up. Tape a piece of white cardboard at an angle so the light bounces up and off the cardboard. Adjust for your available light exposure, perhaps underexposing a stop. The added flash will fill in the ugly shadows, but still maintain a feeling of natural light.

This is harder if your light is primarily florescent, as your bluish flash will clash with the greenish ambient light, but you should be able to adjust most color cast problems fairly easily in Photoshop. When all else fails, at least

take your flash off your camera, hold it a few inches away, and shoot directly.

As an added note, good photojournalists carefully analyze the light falling on their subject, and find an angle which best enhances the scene. For instance, if a subject is bending over, the face may be in shadow. Wait until he stands. If a subject is seated next to a window, wait until she turns toward this attractive light source.

### **8. Focus faithfully, stay steady.**

You just cannot use a blurry photo in a publication: any slight fuzziness will be enhanced by poor quality paper and fast reproduction. Most fuzzy photos can be blamed on camera movement. If you're naturally jittery, get help: buy a mini tripod and lean it on your chest, or buy a monopod and lean it on the ground. In a pinch, lean against a tree or wall. Rule of thumb: any shutter speed more than one stop lower than the size of your lens will produce a fuzzy picture, unless you use a mechanical aid. This means If you're shooting at about 50mm or equivalent, you can't hand-hold anything slower than 1/30 second. If you're shooting with a zoom set at 200 mm, 1/125 is the limit. And this really is the limit: you must make like a rock to get sharp images even at this speed. (The older you get the harder that gets, by the way. I used to hand-hold 1/15 second. Not anymore....) Photoshop's blur filter can sharpen pixels, but can do only so much (or usually not so much) with pictures that were originally blurry.

Image stabilization in some modern lenses may help steady your camera for slower exposures. But don't forget to pay attention to your auto focus. Is it actually focusing on the center of interest? I have found auto focus to give me the wrong setting at least a quarter of the time, and it hardly works at all in low light.

Conclusion: automatic cameras are wonderful devices, but you need to be aware of your settings, shutter speed, f/stop and focus.

### **9. Dump poorly exposed photos.**

Got a great shot, but the guy's face is in deep shadow? Got a great expression on that cute kid, but a telephone pole is growing out of her head? What about that nice little blurry photo of the sorority sisters' car wash? DO NOT submit poorly exposed photos for publication, no matter how much you like the image. On the other hand, BE CAREFUL to expose correctly. Automatic cameras are usually smarter than we are, but not always. Study principles of proper exposure. It's still hard to fix up poorly exposed images, even with Photoshop software: you can't add detail when nothing's there to begin with.

**10. Have spirit.**

Walk up to 10 people on the street, snap their picture, ask for their name, write it down. Get a floor pass to a rock concert (and wear earplugs!). Walk as close to the sports action as you dare--get a press pass if you need one. Look for interesting expressions after the posed shots are done. Get out there and shoot! Photojournalists are to a person not to be counted among the timid. Sure, you can overdo this--harassing paparazzi spring to mind--but a courteous, assertive demeanor is nothing to be ashamed of.