

Beginners Guide to Photo Essay Creation

Guidelines presented here relate to production of an essay for an NBCC show. Essays for personal use have greater flexibility.

Pick the Software to Use for Essay Development

There are now several different software options for essay production. The NBCC Essay Committee's recommendations are Photopia for PC users and iMovie for Mac users. These programs have the greatest capabilities.

- Essay Software options
 - Mac-only options – iMovie, Aperture, Photo, and others; iMovie recommended.
 - PC-only options – ProShow Gold or Producer
 - ProShow (no longer available to purchase, but if you have it, you can use it)
 - PC and Mac options
 - Lightroom Slideshow Module (limited but ok)
 - PowerPoint (limited but ok)
 - Photopia Creator for both PC and Mac (comprehensive)
 - Photopia is an improved successor to ProShow (same development team)

Formatting Requirements for NBCC Essays

- The aspect ratio for an NBCC show is 16:9 (1920 x 1080 pixels), which is like a widescreen TV and is now a standard HD format. This ratio **should be set** when you begin your essay.
- The finished file format must be submitted as a Video (mpeg4) file, 1080p (full HD), 30 fps High Quality (recommended).
- Total photo essay length – 4-6 minutes.

Choosing a Theme – What is Your Essay About?

The first step in developing an essay is to decide on a theme or concept. The choices are many, but the goal is that the viewer understands the story you are trying to tell or the experience you are trying to share. What is your objective – Is it to educate, to inspire or to entertain? A variety of past photo essays are available on the NBCC members-only website; they illustrate the diversity of possible essay topics. (For more detailed info, see “How to Create Photo Essays”, by Gordie Corbin, Tom Field, and Judy Switt on the NBCC website.)

Like an Artist's Statement for a body of work, you will be asked to submit a written paragraph about your essay. Writing this paragraph as soon as you begin essay development may help you to focus on the theme or story you want to tell.

Choosing the Photos – Creating a “Body of Work”

The next step is to choose about 40-50 photos that closely relate to your theme, convert them to JPEG format (resolution at least 1920 x 1080 pixels) and put them in a separate folder on your computer.

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The selection of photos is very much like the creation of a “body of work” for a photography exhibit. Each photo should be a well composed photo. But most importantly, the photo must relate to and augment your theme. Sometimes, there is a wonderful photo you would like to share but it just doesn’t work as a part of this body of work – it is a photo to share elsewhere.

Historically only still photos were included, but short video clips (5 -10 seconds) may now be added.

- Because the show will be displayed with a 16:9 aspect ratio against a black background, horizontal photos work best because they fill most of the viewing area.
- Vertical photos can be used but they may appear small surrounded by empty black space. Consider pairing two or more vertical photos together in a frame if they are complimentary and work well together.

Sequencing the Photos in the Essay

The sequence in which images appear in the essay is essential both to the story telling and the aesthetic appeal of the essay. Therefore, thought should be given to the order of the images as you introduce them into the software and rearrange as necessary.

- Does the slide progression lead the viewer through the story or is it too random and confusing?
- Are the colors and tones complimentary one slide to the next?

Essay Titles and Credits

Essays need an introduction and an acknowledgement of credits. An essay introduction can be a voice narration continued over a few introductory slides or it can be a typed title slide. Title text can be inserted into a photographic image or applied to a plain background. Fonts chosen should be easy to read and suitably sized for easy viewing on the screen. Text should be brief enough to be easily read during the slide’s screen time.

The essayist’s name and any applicable music credits need to be included in the essay. Like a movie, music credits usually go at the end of the essay while the author’s title can be included in a typed introduction or with the music credits.

- **Example of music credit:** “Appalachian Spring” by Aaron Copeland

Written and Oral Forms of Narration

Photo essays are not usually fully narrated or text heavy. However, additional short narration or typed subtitles (like in a travel essay) work if they help the viewer understand the narrative. This is first and foremost a photographic essay and the emphasis should be on the images.

Slide transition

Slide transitions are the way in which one slide moves to the next. You should experiment with the options available. Slide transitions are a stylistic element that can influence the mood of your essay. For

example, a slide may slowly fade out while the next fades in or a slide can cut sharply or “jump” to the next slide. Different transitions convey different feelings to the essay.

- **Example:** An essay about a fireworks display might work well with quick cuts to the next slide, while a walk along a canal or in a forest may favor blended fade in and outs.

Programs like Photopia include multiple types of transitions. Some can be distracting. For NBCC essays, the emphasis is on the photography as opposed to the “special effects”. For personal-use essays the sky is the limit.

Slide Duration

Slide duration or slide time is the amount of time a slide is on the screen and transitioning from the screen. In Photopia, the default screen time for an image is 3 seconds full screen and a 3 second transition (total 6 seconds/slide). Slide duration can be manipulated in many apps.

It is important to note that not all slides require the same duration, and some slides may require longer slide times. The addition of any type of motion effects (zooming or panning) to a slide requires a longer viewing time and greater image resolution. Similarly, pairing of vertical photos in a slide or a text slide may require longer viewing.

- **Example:** One programmed “style” in Photopia involves a 3-photo panel which zooms into the images. The app recommends a slide time of 8-10 seconds.

Adding Motion Effects

Still photos are static, but the addition of motion effects create a dynamic essay. Two of the most applied motion effects are zooming and panning.

- **Zooming** – It is the act of moving into or out of a part of a photograph while it is on screen. This action highlights some aspect of the photo; a single photograph can feel like two separate images.
 - **Example: Starting Image:** Child gazing at balloons in the air in a public square (**Zoom in**)
Ending Image: Close up of child’s face and his look of amazement
 - **Example: Starting Image:** Zoomed in to just the faces of a sad man and woman (**Zoom out**).
Ending Image: Full image reveals the couple is standing amidst tornado devastation.
- **Panning** is a technique that creates a feeling of forward motion or movement through a scene.
 - **Example:** An image of birds in flight moves from left to right across the screen, capturing a sense of the birds flying
 - **Example:** A panoramic nature scene zoomed in and moving slowly across creates a sense of the vast scale of the scene and brings attention to its details.

Adding Music

The addition of a suitable soundtrack can make or break a photo essay. The musical score and the tempo have a significant impact on the overall mood of the essay and should be considered carefully. Musical lyrics need to relate to the theme or mood.

If the essay exceeds the length of a piece of music, more than one song may be used. Software like Photopia allows the user to control basic functions of the audio like volume, fading out and timing. Photopia also can sync the soundtrack to the slides (but this results in slide times being determined by the software – which many times is not desirable)

- From experience, the Committee recommends that you design your slide show first and then add the desired soundtrack. So that the music fits the photos – not the photos fitting the music, in most circumstances but not all instances.
- With respect to the use of music, copyright issues arise. The club's position has been that the use of music for personal, non-commercial use is not a problem. However, if an essay is to be used on a public website or YouTube, etc. problems can arise.
- Photopia and ProShow include access to a collection of royalty-free soundtracks, in various genres, which may be used on a website or YouTube
- There are additional sources for obtaining copyright-free music or paying a minimal fee for a license to use a soundtrack.

Example: Royalty Free Music: [Pixabay.com/music](https://pixabay.com/music/)

Example: Music license site: [Pond5.com](https://pond5.com/)