How to Create Photo Essays
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Purpose: create a multimedia presentation using music and photographs.

Introduction

A photo essay is a series of photographic images synchronized to music. Traditionally these were called "slide essays" or "slide shows." The more sophisticated ones were projected from 35mm color slides using multiple projectors and complex dissolve equipment.

Now such photo essays can be created with relative ease, using a desktop computer and slide show software (not covered in this article). Software has reduced the technical work, but the artistic challenges of creating an appealing photo essay remain, and are the subject of this article.

Applications of Photo Essays

Why would you want to create a photo essay? The overall motivation is to share your photographs and to create a work of art that others can enjoy for many years. You may have made any number of fun, interesting, or artistic photos. But if they are sitting around in boxes or computer folders, no one gets to enjoy them – what a shame!

There are countless applications of photo essays, and we list just a few here:
- DVD gift commemorating an anniversary, birthday party, family reunion, or even someone's entire life;
- memory collection from a vacation, presented in an artistic way;
- time-lapse sequence illustrating nature in a way we humans can't usually perceive;
- teach others about your hobby or other interest using instructional narration;
- present a body of work comprising your best photographs on a subject;
- illustrate a story or song to share with children or adults;
- create a multimedia family tree by scanning in ancestral photographs;
- document your child's life, and present the disc to their spouse as a wedding gift;
- celebrate a passion by creating a themed essay, such as a patriotic message.

After completing your essay, you can burn it to a video DVD or CD to share with friends, even if they don't own a computer. With HDTV becoming more common, we're seeing the potential for very high quality photographic presentation on conventional audio-visual equipment. The same disc can include a program that displays your slide show in high quality on computers. You can even choose to include all of the original photographs on the disc, so family and friends can make their own prints of favorite shots.

To reach a wider audience, you can publish your photo essay on the World Wide Web (but don't infringe copyrights by redistributing licensed music). And after perfecting your essay, it's an easy next step to self-publish a book of the images. These books are inexpensive and they make exceptional gifts.

Getting Started: Choosing a Theme

First you must decide on a theme for your show. We listed a number of examples above, but don't stop there. There are no limitations, and part of your creative task is to develop a story to tell. Think about your objective: to inspire, to educate, or perhaps just pure entertainment. Often your theme will be derived from a review of your available images, but you can also create an excellent photo essay by shooting new images to illustrate a chosen theme (based on the lyrics of a song, for example).

Selection of Images

At this point, you should have your theme and a collection of images which fit the subject. Review your images with the points below in mind, and be tough: eliminating images is the hardest part of the job! Don't rule out the possibility of making a few more photographs to better support your theme or to fill in some blanks.

- **Cropping**. Remember that most electronic viewing today (especially standard video) is much lower resolution than most digital cameras and film scanners. You may be able to crop an image quite severely and still have sufficient detail for an electronic photo essay – even though you couldn't make a large print at this reduced resolution. Don't discard that image with composition problems until you consider whether cropping might salvage it.
- **Flaws**. Repair such image flaws as you can, but eliminate those with obvious and irreparable flaws such as focus or depth of field problems. With slides, this review is best done by projecting them. For electronic images, you should scrutinize them in detail on the computer if you don't have access to a digital projector.
- **Stick to the Theme**. Remove any image that does not contribute to your theme, no matter how beautiful and photographically perfect it is. As the photographer, we get emotionally attached to certain images, not realizing the audience will have none of that attachment. You may need to resist your tendency to keep images that hold strong memories for you, or get objective help in reviewing your selection to best tell your tale.
- **One of a Kind**. When you have similar images, carefully select the best and eliminate the rest. It is tempting to include all those good images. But redundant images will degrade your essay, and unnecessary images will dilute your message. Don't let your fine work become tedious and less meaningful for the audience. Stay on theme!
- **Options**. Retain multiple versions of images, such as variations in composition and orientation (horizontal vs. vertical). Later, as the essay is refined, select the one version that best fits the rest of the arrangement (see below). It's easier to compose a pleasing essay when most of the images have the same aspect ratio.
- **Clean-up**. Examine electronic images against a black background to catch problems (like white edge scraps from cropping and rotating). Also clean up dust spots and scratches, and rotate to fix camera tilt (sloping horizons, leaning buildings).
- **Export**. Create a JPEG copy of each image specifically for the photo essay. See suggestions on How to Prepare Electronic Images for Projection using Photoshop. This process applies to electronic slide essays viewed on a computer monitor or television as well as digital projection.

We recommend creating a unique folder to hold all of your images and music files for a single essay. These can be copies of the original files so the images aren't missing from your regular

organization. Having all these files in one place can simplify work on the essay now and might prove essential in the future, should you return to edit the project.

Sequencing and Arrangement

After selection, the next task is to arrange the photos into a pleasing and meaningful sequence. With slides, this is best done by laying them out on a light box. With electronic images, you'll sequence the images in your slide show software (typically drag 'n' drop thumbnail images). However, we find it very effective to print a contact sheet of the images, cut them into cards, then arrange them on a table. Typically, you might put 12 to 20 images on a page. Make the images oriented all the same direction ("rotate for best fit") so they are easier to cut apart. This may seem like a troublesome extra step, but it can really help in perfecting the essay composition. Once the sequence is finalized with the contacts, then enter the images in the software.

First, sort the images into groups according to their **subject matter**. If you are doing a general show, put similar images together, such as animals, landscapes, buildings, etc. If you are doing a travelogue, you may want to sort them by location. Important: ignore the chronological order at this point, and arrange your images in the most pleasing order instead. For most essays, the audience will not know the original order anyway, so why not go for the more pleasing arrangement?

Next, attempt to sort images within groups according to **color**. This might be the subject color or the background color. For example, put together images with blue backgrounds or subjects, then red, then orange, etc. This will introduce a pleasing color harmony and add continuity to your show.

You can also build continuity using **dominant shapes**. Similar shapes, even if different sizes, make good dissolves (slow fade from one image to the next). For example, a round object dissolves into another, larger round object. Apply these tips if you can without degrading the most important factor: telling the story.

Avoid the distraction of a dark slide followed by a light one, or visa versa. And always try to **minimize orientation changes** by sequencing several (three or more) horizontal or vertical images together. Frequent changes between portrait and landscape are distracting to the viewer. When you finally change to the other orientation, try to find "bridge" images with dark backgrounds so the change will be less noticeable. Color can also make a good bridge: a red vertical into a red horizontal subject makes a less distracting change. You could bridge using similar subjects such as horizontal buildings into vertical buildings. Such "bridge" images do not need to be outstanding compositions on their own, but rather they contribute to an outstanding essay composition by taking the viewer's eye pleasingly from one subject to another.

Sequencing together (cross-dissolving) color images with monochrome versions can add interest and emotion to an essay composition. This is easily done by creating a monochrome version of the color image in Photoshop (using your choice of B&W conversion methods), then putting both images in the slide sequence.

Use of Transitions

Another way to bridge between dissimilar images is to use special transitions in the slide show software. The traditional and still most common transition is a simple cross-dissolve, where one image fades out as the next fades in. But there are many new choices in the electronic photo essay world. While some new choices may seem overly distracting, others can be quite useful, such as easing the viewer between images that might otherwise cause a jolt. You can also select transitions to draw attention, to produce a climactic ending, or to spice up an upbeat or humorous show. Thus, judicious use of transitions can help unify your essay composition while allowing you to focus a bit more on the other, also important, aspects of image sequencing.

An effective method to test your experimental transition is to slow it down to about 9 seconds. Study the effect of the transition as it gradually unfolds on screen. It's much easier to evaluate the result at this pace than watching at full speed (typically 2 seconds). Try different transitions until you get the effect you want. Then return the transition to full speed. As you become adept with the slide show software, this manipulation of the timing should become quite easy.

In the final essay, transitions shouldn't be extremely slow unless the two images blend together very well. One useful application of long dissolves is during a musical introduction or slow passage.

We've probably all seen slide shows (let's not call them "essays") that randomly use every special transition the software can offer. This is a novice mistake you should not make. You should use special transitions deliberately and only for a specific reason.

Final Sequencing

It is very important to set the tone of the program your viewers are about to experience from the beginning. In order to get your audience's attention, it is a good practice to **begin with a strong series of images**. However, your best images should usually be held for a **climactic ending**, leaving your audience with a feeling of enjoyment and wanting more.

You can execute the mechanics to put together a basic slide show in five minutes. But a great photo essay will require considerably more time and effort. It may require less time once you've gained experience, because you can apply lessons learned to achieve results faster. Even then, you may spend hours or even days tweaking your show until it delivers what you're after.

After each pass at sequencing your photo essay, leave it for a day or more and then work with it again. Fresh perspective and new creative energy will help you evolve it into the best show you can make. Allow yourself enough time to implement many changes as you revisit your essay – it's simply part of the creative process. We recommend saving a new working copy of the essay when you make new changes. Then if you decide later that you prefer things the way they were, you can revert to the earlier version.

We always begin and end every show with a black slide of a couple seconds duration. This is analogous to matting a photographic print: it gives the first and last images some neutral space

so they can have a full impact on the viewer. For example, you don't want your final climactic slide to fade to black and immediately cut back to some computer desktop view. And providing some quiet black at the beginning of the essay prepares your audience to enjoy that first image. It also lets their visual memory of the computer screen or menu fade away, and in some cases causes the beginning of the show to play smoother.

These sequencing suggestions are not rigid rules. There is no single best way to put together your images, and the sequence must be a product of your creativity. The objective is for you to tell your story in the way you think best. After all the rearranging is finished, your essay must still convey meaning to the audience as you intended.

Selection of Music

Images and music together make a photo essay. Music sets the mood for your show, controls the emotion, creates atmosphere, and sets the pace. (And cynically speaking, if folks don't like your photos, they may like the music.)

Assuming you've selected a theme and already have most images, try to find music that compliments them. If the music is not the right length, you can excerpt passages or combine several pieces to fit your desired essay length.

It's also possible that you select your music first, and use that as a theme before creating the photographs to support it.

In music selection, one theory is that you should choose bland or unobtrusive music which does not intrude upon the images. But rather than being ignorable, we prefer music that enhances the images. Avoid music that is overly familiar. For example, "Chariots of Fire" has wonderful music, but the theme song may evoke scenes from the movie (such as men running on the beach). Is this vision compatible with your essay?

Songs which contain lyrics are generally only useful when you are trying to illustrate the song (otherwise the lyrics may intrude and distract). Creating the photographs to match lyrics in a special song can be a challenge, but quite rewarding if successful.

The effect that music has upon your images is difficult to imagine. You just have to try your essay with different pieces and see what works best. Such trials are made easy with modern software, so don't hesitate to experiment. Study how the musical selections create feelings as you watch the images. You may even think your slide show is a loser until you see it with the appropriate music.

You should consider a variety of music genres. Remember, your audiences will have to listen to it also so avoid music they won't find appealing. Classical, New Age, and movie theme music are all types to consider. Most recordings are protected by copyright. According to Elinor Stecker, author of Slide Showmanship, "No one is going to fine you for using copyrighted music in the privacy of your home, or even the PTA, Garden Club or other local groups, but when you show your work to larger audiences, whether or not they pay an admission fee, it's prudent to stay within the boundaries of legality and morality." In

particular, posting your essay on the World Wide Web could constitute distribution to the public, so make sure you have the proper music rights before publishing.

Besides music, you can add other audio to your sound tracks. Modern slide show software makes this a relatively easy task, and even helps by "ducking" the background music track whenever your voice-over narrations or sound effects occur. Be sure that custom narrations are high-quality recordings, and don't let sound effects become a gimmicky distraction. A script is definitely needed for any narrations, and you may have to narrate several times until the words are perfectly synchronized with your images and background music.

Timing Your Show

If you have chosen a particular piece of music to illustrate, you will already know the length of your show. Knowing this will help determine the number of images you will use. Or if you're illustrating the lyrics, there should be no question about how many images are needed.

As a rough guide, estimate the length of your show by allowing 5 seconds per slide (12 images per minute). For a typical song length of 3-1/2 minutes, you would need approximately 42 images which may include your titles and credits.

Music with a strong beat tends to dictate that images change in time with the beat. If your chosen music doesn't have a strong beat, you can simply divide the duration evenly between images. This is automated and quite easy with slide show software.

The time each image needs to be on screen depends somewhat on the image content – how quickly can the audience "read" the image? Some photographs are very graphic and can be absorbed almost instantly. Others may require time to understand the detail. You can ask someone unfamiliar with your images to look at the show and see if they think the images go by too fast, too slow, or just right.

After you assemble your images with the music, try it and see how the pace feels. You may decide to eliminate or add images so they sequence faster or slower to span the music. For longer essays, you may find you need to add more music. Some experimentation is normally required, and you should expect to spend some time getting just the right feel.

Slide show software may allow you to "rehearse" the timings, so you control when image changes occur while the music plays through one time. Afterwards, you can manually edit these timings to perfect them. Or you may find it easier to select the entire block of images and manually enter the timing until they visually line up with the beats or overall music duration. A timeline display of slides and audio waveforms makes this process straightforward.

Titles and Credits

Because titles of your photo essay are usually the first and last thing your audience sees, they become very important. They announce to the audience the subject matter of your show, but they may also convey the quality and creativity of the show to follow. Because of this, there should be just as much pre-planning and effort in making your titles as you put into the rest of the show.

Generally, keep the wording simple and to the point. The typeface should be appropriate to the theme and the font size large enough to be read easily by the farthest viewer. Keeping titles toward the upper part of the screen will ensure that they are not eclipsed in the back rows by tall heads in the front rows. Modern slide show software allows for animated titles that dance onto the screen or otherwise draw attention. These can be effective, but use them with caution – the distraction can endure with the audience and detract from the following several images.

Many people use simple color or black backgrounds for their titles and credits. This may be best for some essays, but another option is to integrate text with images (as with magazine covers). When you're shooting, consider shooting special title slides that leave room for text and "set the scene" for the essay. You may even want to shoot some special backgrounds for titles (e.g., colors that can contrast with text, textures out of focus, etc.). Be creative! You can even photograph your titles from hand-made art or other sources. Just bear in mind how the title sets the tone of the show, so the treatment should be appropriate.

Give full and fair credit for the music you have used. Music credit can be given before, during or after the music ends. As a courtesy to your audience, be accurate and complete in your citations (e.g., which orchestra), so viewers can purchase the music themselves.

In The Field: Photographing for Essays

Essays are a philosophy that best begins when photographing in the field. Here are some suggestions. First, shoot both vertical and horizontal orientations, so you have a choice when composing your essay. After you shoot a scene, come in close for more detail – these pairs of shots can be used very effectively in essays. Bring home some scene setting images (including signs) that can help orient the viewer at the beginning of the essay – these may not be award winning shots, but they can be a key part of the storytelling. Again, look for a few shots that would be good title slides, or backgrounds for end credits.

Make some photographs of yourself on location, like you'd see on the jacket flap of a photo book. These can be used in your credits, or in author introduction videos.

And don't forget music: when you are in a special place, such as a foreign country, a mountain music region, etc., consider buying some local music from the gift store. It's much more likely you'll find characteristic music on location than after you return home. Later you may choose not to use it, but at least you have the choice.

Conclusion

Photo essays are a wonderful way to enhance and share your photography. With your prepared images and low-cost software, a draft essay can be completed in minutes. Experimentation is easy and perfection is so rewarding. So get started and create some of your own essays. Seek some critical feedback from knowledgeable colleagues. Before long your family, friends, and others can be enjoying your amazing work – and so will you!