Working Assumptions

LESSON PLANS

Photography Tips

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workingassumptions.org

Working Assumptions is a cultural non-profit that explores the everyday give-and-take of family and care through visual storytelling, encouraging reflection and dialogue.

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Overview

The photography process doesn't begin and end at the moment you take a photograph. Photographs require some amount of preparation beforehand and often require work afterward (whether that means writing titles and captions or retouching the image itself). In this sense, great images are made, not taken.

The tips in this lesson cover some fundamental photographic concepts, some or all of which you may already be familiar with. Each of these concepts comes with a set of conventions, but so many factors go into making a photograph—like your subjects' moods, what is happening around you, etc.—that it's important to trust your instincts and know when to go beyond or break these conventions.

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Being Deliberate

Being deliberate about taking pictures means not leaving things to chance and making a photograph look as you intend it to. Professional photographers suggest visualizing a shot before taking it. This allows you to work with a specific outcome in mind and pushes you to slow down and make a conscious choice about the photograph you are about to take. It can also be helpful to narrate the scene in your head.

Sometimes, though, you can't plan for every shot. Unintended moments happen and spontaneous situations can demand that you're ready. In those instances, being deliberate can mean making a habit of always carrying your camera with you and being alert to your surroundings. Then, when that spontaneous moment arrives, you're ready.

Do you think the photograph on page 4 was staged or spontaneous?

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Kirsten Pacotti, *Harvesting*, 2018

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Framing

Look around the space you're in. There are thousands of possible photographs that could be taken here. As a photographer, it's up to you to decide which photograph you want to make, which story you want to tell.

One of the choices you make is about framing—what to keep in the photo and, just as important, what to leave out. Do you want to include the subject's hands? That dog in the background? A slice of sky? How would your photograph change if you did? If you didn't? It can be difficult to consider everything in the frame in the moment of taking a photograph so you should experiment with framings for each scenario.

How does the framing of the photograph on page 6 impact the narrative it conveys? Would it tell the same story if it had been taken up close? From a different angle?

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Ian Matenaer, Grade 9, *Breakfast Time*, 2018

"Breakfast time is usually a time when my dad and I have time to connect and eat together. But today he had to work which interrupted our family time. You can also see our dog Tick begging for food."

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Composition

Because our vision is sharpest right in front of us, it's tempting to take photographs with the most important information in the middle of the frame. But you can make your photographs more dynamic and engaging by playing with all of the shapes and lines in an image or considering how elements at the edges or corners of your frame might connect, reinforce, or complement one another as well.

The arrangement of those lines, shapes, and other elements in a piece of visual art is called composition. When you are setting up the composition of your image or looking at someone else's, pretend everything that you see is just a shape: heads are ovals, plates are circles, computers are rectangles. How do those shapes and lines and their placement in the frame impact the overall composition of the photo?

Where are your eyes drawn first in the picture on page 8? How does the image direct your eyes? In what ways does the image encourage you to keep exploring other areas of the photograph?

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Michaela Burpee, Grade 12, *Untitled*, 2015

"This photo is of my dad coming home and parking his work truck in front of our house after a long day at work. I wanted to show that even though his work day is over he still brings home a piece of work with him every day. When I took this photo, I was thinking about how the light reminds me of how my dad leaves before dawn and then comes home when the sun is setting because he works hard every day to support his family. I wanted the photo to give the feeling of closure and the relief the end of the day brings."

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Lighting

The word ‘photography’ is a combination of the Greek words for ‘light’ and ‘writing’. Lighting is a critical part of photography. You can use light to create mood, meaning, and emphasis in your images.

Work and family life often happen indoors where there may not be a lot of light. Make sure you have enough light to take a clear photograph and look for unexpected light sources. You could try a flashlight, open some curtains, use light cast by a computer or television screen, or use your flash. Experiment with lighting: try different times of day or lighting your subject from behind or the side.

How many sources of light are in the photograph on page 10? What kind of mood, meaning, and emphasis has the photographer’s lighting choice given the image? How?

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Madelynn Niles, Grade 9,
The Messenger, 2019

"As my mom reviews her last emails of the night, my dad checks in from the house to inform her that dinner is ready. Although she is hard at work now, she will soon be inside with us, laughing, watching an episode of The Office or the Spurs game that is on and talking about the stories of her day."

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Point of View

Your choice of point of view, or where you position your camera, changes the feeling and meaning of your photograph. Bird's-eye view, worm's-eye view, and kid's-eye view are all ways to mix up your photography approaches.

A bird's-eye view photograph can make your subject feel smaller and more connected to the environment they're in. A photograph taken close to the ground, a worm's eye view, can make your subject feel big, intimidating, or important. And a kid's-eye view photograph where your subject is partly obscured by objects can make the scene feel busy and encourage the viewer to search different parts of the image.

Try moving around while you photograph: up, down, side to side. Experiment and figure out what the right point of view is for your photograph.

What point of view is the image on page 12 taken from? How did that choice impact the meaning of the photograph?

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Monica Carson, Grade 10, *A Child's Routine*, 2019

"When my mom works late, I have to make sure that my little sister does her homework."

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The Decisive Moment

Photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson coined the term “The Decisive Moment” to describe the instant when everything in a situation—movement, gesture, expression, composition—comes together to reveal the essence of the scene.

How might the photographer have captured the photograph on page 14? How would it have been different if taken a few seconds earlier or later?

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Sarah T. Slaten, Grade 10, *Far Fetched*, 2018

"In January, we got my dog, River. She has become the 4th most important member of our family. We all contribute to taking care of her and a lot of our family time is spent with her."

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