

Taking Photos for UNHCR: A very basic guide for public information officers

*"I don't consider myself a photographer. I consider myself a story-teller."
--Jimin Lai, Malaysian photojournalist*

Before you even pick up a camera, think. Why are you taking the photo? What story do you want to tell? None of us sits down with a blank Word document on the screen and hits keys on the keyboard at random hoping that a good story or report will emerge, but far too many people think if they take enough photos haphazardly, someone else can clean them up with PhotoShop and produce a respectable photo.

So taking a good photo begins with preparation. A truly good photo really doesn't need a caption. Or at least it does not depend on a caption to tell you what is going on. It should speak to you and connect you with the people or scene and complement the story it is illustrating.

For PI officers, this means you should be able to visualize, in a general way, the end result before you even set off to take photos, just as you have a working idea of what your story will be before you go off to do interviews.

This does not mean going with preconceived notions. You need to strike a delicate balance, to be open to what the scene tells you when you get there, and be flexible if your original idea is not correct. A good photographer does not even take out the camera in the first half hour (or longer) upon reaches a scene, but observes and feels the place, lets it speak to him or her. However, if you do not go with *some* idea of what story you want to tell – even if you change your premise later, you are unlikely to come away with good photos.

Professional photographers normally start an assignment with a shot list. This might be a shot list for a story about a refugee:

- Refugee with family
- Refugee at work
- Refugee silhouette
- Refugee hands working close up
- Refugee portrait -- smiling and not smiling
- Refugee at clinic
- Refugee in UNHCR tent
- Refugee subject with other refugees
- Wide shot of refugee camp landscape

Preparation

1. Read the manual for your camera and practice using the camera so you understand the functions. This sounds basic but too many people don't know how to get the most out of their camera and run into obstacles when they are in the field and there's no way to recover.
2. What is the story? What approach are you going to take?
3. Visualize the end result. For example, for a web story, you want candid photos with people not looking at the camera. For fundraising, it is more effective to have people looking directly into the camera.
4. If you know what kind of photo you want to take, look at some examples of professional photographs for inspiration. Professional photographers freely admit they study books of great portraits, landscapes, photojournalism before particular assignments. [List of recommended websites in the Annex]
5. Make a shot list as above. If your story is about a school teacher, this could include the teacher in the front of the classroom, tutoring a student, cleaning the blackboard, etc. Making a list in advance helps you focus on all the pieces you need to tell the story.
6. Anticipate the situation. What gear should you bring? How should you dress taking into account weather, cultural norms, whether you will have to hike or take off your shoes 10 times a day. Find out in advance what activities are planned for that day so that you get there before or with the subject. You don't want to miss key events or find out about them when they are already underway. Also find out if anything really interesting is going to happen that has never been photographed, such as a special tribal ceremony.
7. Logistics, security

"I try to be as discreet as I can. My whole thing is to be invisible. You get more natural pictures that way."

— Bill Cunningham, legendary New York Times photographer of street fashion, still going strong (in 2012) at age 83

Your Attitude and Behaviour

1. Don't walk into a setting and start snapping. Take time to understand where you are, who's there, where the best angles are, and who the people are. You'll get better photos and people will be more comfortable with you.
2. Survey the area. Look for opportunities. See the shot you want before it develops. Envision the rule of thirds [see annex] in the setting. This will help you anticipate and frame the shot in advance.
3. Respect the people you are photographing. With refugees (or other people we serve), you can simply explain that you are taking photos to get more money to help them.
4. Ask permission to take photos of individuals. If a refugee doesn't want to be photographed, even after you've explained why, move on to someone who does. If they do give verbal permission after you have given the above explanation, this constitutes informed consent.

5. When photographing an individual for a story, you may waste 20-30 frames before the person gets comfortable enough for you to get the candid photo we're after. Candid and un-posed photos are always better than photos of people lined up looking like they are facing a firing squad. Candid photos should do more than prove the person exists – they should tell something about the subjects that relates to the story. [If you are the reporter *and* the photographer, one trick for getting a candid photo is to ask your interpreter or another staff member, possibly your driver, to talk to your subject, and ask the subject to ignore you as you take the pictures. If you are alone, ask the person simply to do something they would typically do – prepare a meal, sew a garment if she's a tailor – and not to look at the camera.]
6. Don't be afraid to move in as close to as you need to, to get a good photo. Fill the frame with your subject. Even in a large meeting, people aren't watching you as much as you think. They'll usually ignore you after a few seconds. Good photographers master the art of blending in. This includes setting your camera ahead of time so you don't have to fiddle and draw attention to yourself. I'm always astonished that people who are at UNHCR events, taking photos of the Representative, at the request of the Representative, are still shy about moving to the front of the room to take the very photo the Representative wants.
7. Deliver the photo. No excuses. We cannot use a web story without a photo. So do what you have to to take the photo and do everything humanly possible to get it to Geneva on time.

Some basic technical details

1. For now, UNHCR wants you to take the photo with a camera (not a cell phone or other hand-held device), although these devices are rapidly improving.
2. If the picture is to accompany a web story, it must be in a horizontal or landscape format. For technical reasons, the website cannot use vertical pictures, so they are only useful for library stock. If you want your web story used, send a horizontal photo.
3. If you have a semi-professional camera, set it to RAW plus JPG large (fine).
4. If you have a point-and-shoot camera, set it to the largest file possible (read the manual for settings). Sometimes we get photos that are well-composed and attractive, but the files are just too small to use.
5. Turn off the date mechanism on a point-and-shoot camera. We cannot use photos with a date stamped on the photo. (However, do make sure the date is set correctly in your camera; this can be helpful if you ever need to know when the photo was taken for. It could even be important for legal or protection reasons.)
6. As an annex to this document you will find basic information about apertures and ISOs. ISO refers to the film's or sensor's sensitivity to light. A high ISO is very sensitive to light and is useful in low-light settings but can produce "noise" or graininess in the photos. A low ISO is less sensitive and can be used outdoors in sunlight and produces

sharp images. In general, it is better to shoot by natural light without a flash. But if you are not an experienced photographer, you are not likely to get good photos inside a dark refugee shelter. Simply ask the person to step outside into a moderately-lit location. This does not mean direct overhead light at noon. On a sunny day, try a shaded spot (be sure it's solid shade and not dappled shade).

7. Advanced advice: If you're in a dark tent or room, try to take a photo using a very high ISO (you will need to be on a manual setting or try "aperture override" with the widest or lowest-numbered f-stop you have). Hold very still when taking this picture and make sure the subject isn't moving. If you try this, please also take a back up picture in better lighting. This works best with more sophisticated cameras.
8. Make sure the sun or light source is at your back. Taking photos into the sun will yield a silhouette, which can make a good protection photo (where you are trying to obscure someone's face), but is generally not our intention.

"If your photos are not good enough, you're not close enough."

--Robert Capa, 1913-1954, one of the all-time great war photographers, a founder of Magnum Photos

Composition and Elements of a Good Photo

1. Strive for simplicity. Eliminate distracting elements. Edit in your viewfinder. Do you really need the heap of garbage next to your subject? Is there a flagpole growing out of her head? Keep moving until you have gotten rid of the distractions in the background. (If it's candid, or a news event, you move until you've changed the background. If it's a portrait, you can also ask the subject to move.)
2. Don't photograph everything from the same height and angle. Try taking some photos close up, some far away, some squatting down, some from high up – whatever is best for the subject. Be aware of the different effects. For example, photographing children from above can give the effect of dominating them and can inadvertently make them look scared of you even if they are not. It is usually better to get down to their eye level.
3. Photos are often more interesting with a mix of foreground and background.
4. If you are going to play around with the techniques listed above – **be sure to get your one good "insurance" shot first**. For the web, this means a horizontal shot, in focus that illustrates your story. Then experiment.
5. Another way to describe the "safe" shot or "insurance" shot is an "environmental portrait." This shows a person in their own setting and the details in the photo tell something about the person. Examples would be a baker in her bakeshop, a tailor at a sewing machine, a mother taking care of her children, a doctor examining a patient, a refugee on a hill with a sea of UNHCR tents behind him or her. For more see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Environmental_portrait

6. It can't be said often enough – move in close to get the shot you need. Fill the whole frame with your subject.
7. Photograph people from the front (not with their backs to the camera), unless there is a compelling reason that their identity has to be hidden.
8. Capture the telling moment. If it's a photo in a market, get the instant the customer hands the money to the merchant, or the merchant hands the weighed goods to the customer (not the merchant standing stiffly behind the stall). If it's a food distribution in a refugee camp, capture the moment someone is handed a bag of rice, or lifts it onto their head.

The formula for a good shot (with credit to Nikt Wong and Jimin Lai):

- What is the story you want to tell?
- Choose your subject
- Place your subject (that does not necessarily mean pose them – you may need to move)
- Choose your background
- Place your background (you move if it's not right)
- Compose your shot
- Follow the rule of thirds (see annex)

Ethics:

You should not interfere with the scene. You can move a water bottle that is in front of someone you are photographing, but you should not replace it with a wine bottle -- especially if the subject does not drink wine. This also means you should not ask someone to pose doing something they would not ordinarily do. A photo should be an honest representation of the situation as you found it, even if you ask someone to pose.

When taking photographs of people in public places, the law usually does not require you to ask their permission, but good manners and prudence may. The resulting images (even close-ups of people) can be used for almost any purpose except product advertising commercial products.

Most professional photographers operate by the rule of “shoot first and ask questions/permission” later. This can be a good guideline if asking permission is likely to alter a situation. In public news situations – especially if outside news photographers are there – it is not appropriate to ask permission and the “real” news photographers may even get angry with you for interfering with the scene.

Challenging Situations

1. Protection photos – Sometimes we photograph rape survivors, trafficked children, asylum-seekers at a refugee-status determination interview, or others whose faces cannot be shown. There are many artistic ways to get around this -- by shooting them from the rear talking

to a UNHCR staff member whose face can be shown, shooting them in half profile, shooting over their shoulder and only showing their hands, etc. It's not impossible.

2. Group photos. If the photo is to be used for publication, insist that you get a clear shot, where you are the only one taking the picture, and have everyone look at your camera. Tell everyone else to put their camera away and don't let them distract your subject. There's nothing worse than 20 cameras going at once and everyone in the photo is looking at a different spot. They all need to be looking at your camera.
3. Photos of meetings – these can be deadly, but often we need them. Try to be inventive. Go to the front of the room and shoot the audience (not their backs) looking attentively (not asleep) at the speaker. Use the angle of a conference table or the line of water bottles. Use foreground and background – blur the speaker's name card but focus on the face of the speaker.

Editing your photos and sending them to Geneva

1. Go through your photos ruthlessly and select the three or four that best illustrate different aspects of your story. This does not mean three variations of the same shot.
2. Don't be afraid to crop your photos to make them better. Just make sure they are still high enough resolution to be usable. This is a good reason to shoot large files (and RAW) if your camera permits and you have the software to edit RAW.
3. If you have more photos that are good and you think will be useful for reports or other purposes, please send them on a CD to the Photo Library in Geneva. But these still should be carefully edited and have captions (see next two points).
4. We have the world's largest library of photos of refugees and your photos can potentially be used for years for many purposes if you send the Photo Library the proper information to go with them.
5. This means: write good captions that tell fully where and when the photo was taken and identify not only the people in the photo but where all places mentioned are, and in relation to main cities or other landmarks. Photos are useless unless we receive detailed captions and photo credits. Remember, these photos may be used by people who have never heard of your country or caseload – or may be retrieved years later when the refugee camp has closed down. [FYI these complete captions for the photo library form the basis for the shorter journalistic captions that later appear under photos on the website.]

Examples of good captions:

TIMANAN VILLAGE, Mindanao Island, Philippines, 58 km south of Cotabato City – UNHCR staff provide training on their rights to a group of indigenous women displaced by the long-running conflict on Mindanao Island. Nearly 300 members of the Teduray tribe were forced to flee their ancestral homeland in June, 2010, after unidentified gunmen killed two farmers. When UNHCR

asked them what they needed, all they requested was training on their rights so they could advocate with the government. In this photo, UNHCR is distributing booklets about their rights prepared for them. Photo taken July 8, 2011. ©UNHCR/R. Arnold.

NYAPARA REFUGEE CAMP, Bangladesh -- In a kitchen attached to her airy new shelter in Nayapara refugee camp in Bangladesh, Hosan Jamal prepares lunch for her family of eight on a ceramic environmentally-friendly stove as her youngest child, three year old daughter Noor Sumi, looks on. Photo taken May 2010. ©UNHCR/K. McKinsey

6. To send photos to Geneva it is best to use WeTransfer (www.wetransfer.com). WeTransfer is also useful for sending our photos to journalists.
7. The addresses to use for the Geneva Photo Library are: hopper@unhcr.org kellnera@unhcr.org and asamoah@unhcr.org The people behind these addresses are our photo editor, Suzy Hopper, Photo Clerk Anne Kellner and Tessa Asamoah, a consultant in the library. They are all extremely helpful if you have any questions.

A final word: in UNHCR we are often privileged to work with some of the world's greatest photographers. They are usually very generous with their knowledge and technical advice. You can learn a lot by just observing them at work and even more by picking their brains *during their down time*. Don't interrupt them while they are working, but use the opportunity in the evenings or over meals to ask their advice if they seem receptive. As one great photographer once told me, "the only danger is that if you ask me questions, I might never shut up because I love talking about my craft so much."

ANNEX

Websites to study for good photography:

On the UNHCR website, **photo galleries** by Hélène Caux, Greg Constantine, Zalmi, Boris Heger (photo galleries are on the top right-hand side of our home page)

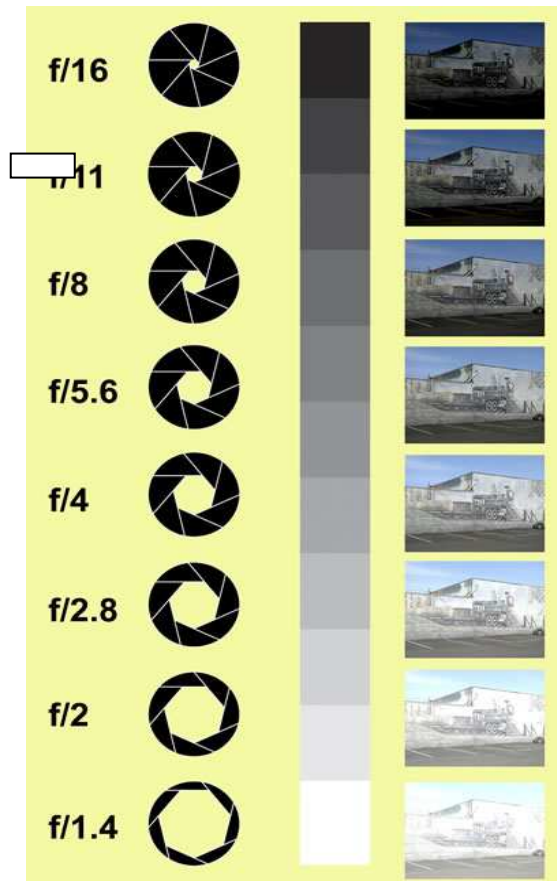
<http://inmotion.magnumphotos.com/essays>

<http://www.reportagebygettyimages.com/>

Highly recommended: Bill Cunningham New York, a very entertaining 2011 documentary film from The New York Times. Watching this amazing, energetic man will give you a lot of pointers about how to be unobtrusive and photograph people in public without annoying them. You will probably also be inspired by the energy of the working 82-year-old and 98-year-old

photographers in the film. You can rent it from iTunes or buy it from Amazon.com.

Apertures, f-stops and all that technical jazz

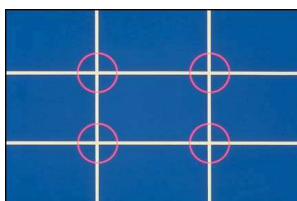


This chart shows results produced by different aperture settings. The amount of light entering the camera is controlled by the aperture and the shutter speed. The f-stops on a SLR camera indicate how much light is coming through the lens and hitting the sensor in a digital camera. Think of f/16 as a small hole and f/1.4 as a big hole. The correct exposure is the right combination of ISO, shutter speed and aperture. These readings are found at the bottom of your viewfinder.

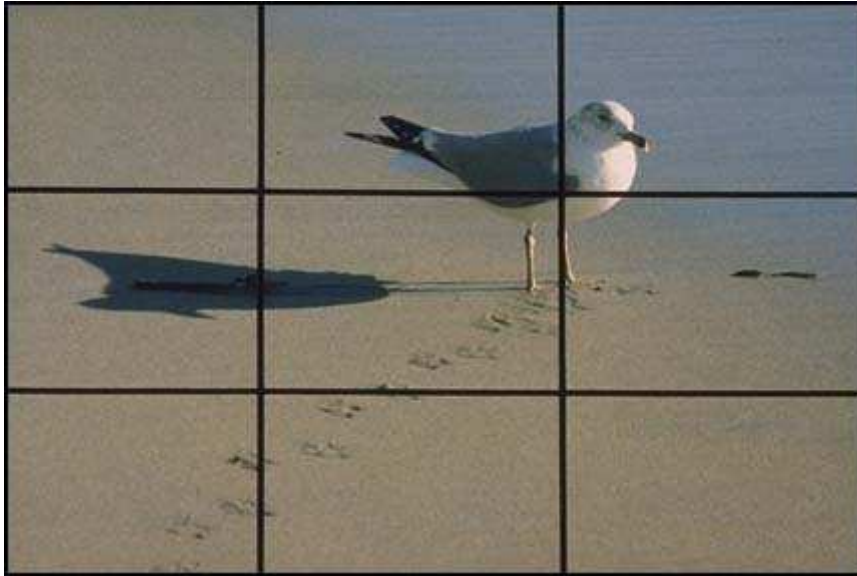
Chart taken from:
photographylesson.org/photography-lesson/

The following information taken from:
http://photoinf.com/General/KODAK/guidelines_for_better_photographic_composition_rule_of_thirds.html

Composition: the Rule of Thirds



Before you snap the picture, imagine your picture area divided into thirds both horizontally and vertically. The intersections of these imaginary lines suggest four options for placing the center of interest for good composition. The option you select depends upon the subject and how you would like that subject to be presented.



Kodak picked the upper-right position for this subject to show the full shadow and most of the tracks that lead to the seagull.



The lighthouse seems well placed in the upper right just because the rest of the scene fits nicely into the format.

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