Storytellers

A Photographer's Guide to Developing Themes and Creating Stories with Pictures

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Framing: Pointing a Finger

It's not difficult to see the usefulness of framing when it comes to storytelling. Compositionally, framing lets the photographer point a finger directly at what he is trying to show off in an image. Framing is often the most intentionally used compositional element available, while at the same time frequently absent due to either the environment's not offering a framing mechanism or the photographer's lacking thought toward using a frame when one is available. Regardless, framing is a powerful tool to have in your cache of storytelling techniques.

Framing does not always have to occur completely around the main subject, either. Some of the most successful frames are relatively subtle and incorporate themselves naturally into the flow of the image. A leaning tree or the legs of parade walkers can be just as useful as framing mechanisms as, say, mirrors or doorways. Sometimes, frames can be overt and large within an image, or they might be as minimal as the change of a color in the background. Either way, they subconsciously direct the image's viewer to where you want them to go.

A good frame is not to be wasted.

Storm clouds provide an ominous frame for a centuries-old tower in Madrid's Plaza Mayor.

Canon 5D Mk II, 50mm, 1/5000 sec., f/2, ISO 100

DEPTH OF FIELD: SETTING THE STAGE

There's no tool like it. From razor-sharp expanses of mountains and rolling hills to soft-feeling abstract images of Moorish doors and isolating portraits, the aperture is perhaps the most used and quite possibly the most taken-for-granted tool our cameras have to offer. Controlling the amount of focus into a frame is a powerful way of saying what is important, to emphasize composition and to create aesthetic interest and attraction for an audience. In terms of storytelling, it holds quite a bit of sway over what features are actually, ahem, brought into focus (don't mind the pun). Along this same line, it's appropriate to look at depth of field as the tool that allows photographers the ability to contextualize or decontextualize a frame and its corresponding subjects.

Images with varying amounts of depth of field each say something different, and when first jumping into photography, we often learn the typical instances in which we employ specific amounts. The most depth of field for wide landscape shots and the exact opposite for portraits and other images involving people is the go-to train of thought for many (if not the majority) of photographers, including me.

If this extreme principle is followed each time, though, we may be robbing ourselves of images that

say something more than what f-stop was used. Instead of thinking about depth of field in a landscape or portrait mentality, we're at more of an advantage if we simplify this line of thought to what depth of field value will allow us to best exhibit the important subject matter in the frame. Considering shots of all kinds in this manner prevents us from missing out on images that we would otherwise not see or else just walk by.

Large amounts of depth of field (f/16 to f/45) can result in very busy images if you just want to emphasize a particular aspect of an environment, such as the dewdrops on the leaves of a plant in the middle of a forest. At the same time, portraits made at f/1.2 to f/2.8 can be extremely decontextualized, enough so that an environment that could help further tell the story surrounding a particular person cannot be discerned. Perhaps lessening the depth of

Parade band marchers' bodies frame an enthusiastic boy and his attentive mother in Madrid.

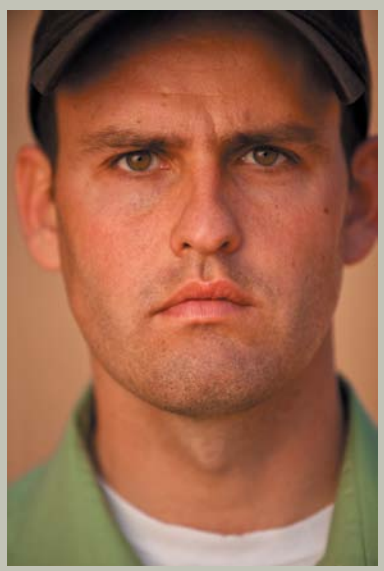
Canon 5D Mk II, 105mm, 1/100 sec., f/4, ISO 400

Although the depth of field is not infinite in this frame of the Rio Grande National Forest, it offers enough detail to provide the viewer a context to enter at the same time it drives initial focus to the dew-covered skunk cabbage (above).

Canon 5D Mk II, 24mm, 1/60 sec., f/8, ISO 200

Intricate Islamic engraving decorates a door of a cathedral in Seville, Spain (right).

Canon 5D Mk II, 50mm, 1/250 sec., f/2, ISO 400



Head shots are great images to make for any story. At times, though, the lack of depth of field used can decontextualize the environment. This is often an intentional stylistic choice (far right).

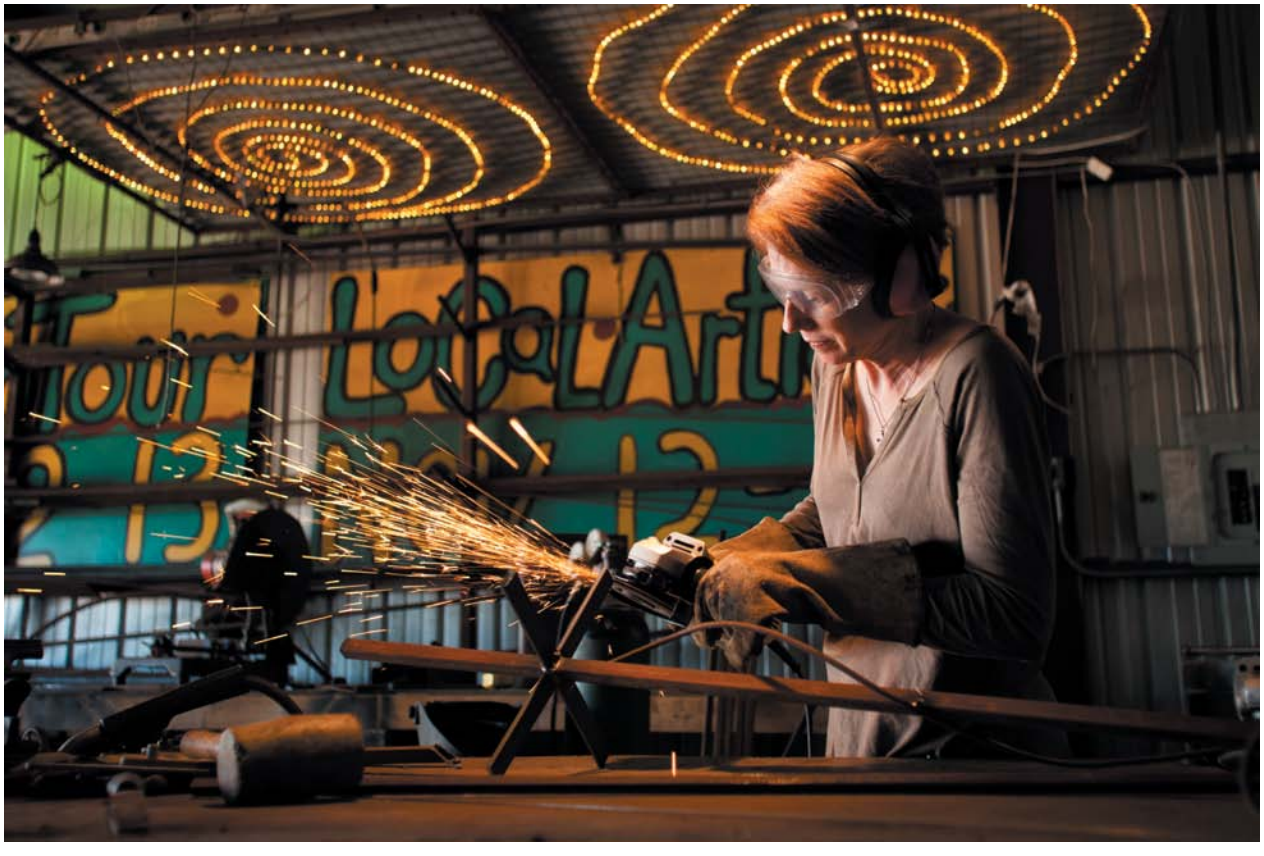
Canon 5D Mk II, 200mm, 1/800 sec., f/2.8, ISO 200

field in the forest shot will allow those drops to be more noticeable at the same time you hint at the environment surrounding the plant. Increasing the depth of field from f/2.8 to f/5.6 for the portrait may bring in just enough of the surrounding context to help tell story without interfering with the significant amount of focus given your portrait subject.

There is no universal "correct" amount of depth of field for any type of shot. There's only the photographer's choice to add or take away depth of field in order to say something more distinct with her images. Depth of field is, like other elements of photography, intentionally used to draw attention to or away from a subject or many subjects. Considering why you are using a certain amount of depth of field is a healthy way of building storytelling images. If what you are envisioning requires that the background be thrown out of focus with an aperture value of f/1.2, then by all means, go for it. Knowing why is the best reason to make these types of decisions.

At 35mm, f/2.8 still offers enough depth of field to showcase the storytelling environment, framing metal artist Charise Adams without making it a distraction.

Canon 5D Mk II, 35mm, 1/100 sec., f/2.8, ISO 400



EXERCISE APERTURE PRIORITY

Depth of field is something we photographers often take for granted. We frequently float on the extremes of aperture ranges, either shooting wide open or stopped down all the way. At the same time, it's one of the most useful tools residing in our camera gear. It helps us focus attention directly toward significant subject matter, it takes care of busy, distracting backgrounds, and it increases our ability to see every bit of detail in a shot and all variations in between. As storytellers, our familiarity with the means to complete this task is akin to a master carpenter knowing how to use his tools and technique, and the aperture is our set of drill bits. It's beneficial to know when to use which bit.

Here's a quick exercise that will help you become more familiar with how depth of field can make a story surface (or get in the way):

1. Create an environmental portrait of a friend, neighbor, or family member using only a standard lens at 35mm and an aperture value of f/16 or higher. Make a full body shot, a waist-up (or medium) shot, and a bust portrait, all in the intent of telling that person's story with his surroundings. Beware of extremely busy backgrounds at the large amount of depth of field you'll achieve at such aperture values even when you move in tight.
2. Shoot the same three environmental portraits with the same lens, only this time you're only allowed to use an aperture value of f/5.6 or lower. The busy background that you noticed in the first round of portraits will begin to diminish in distraction as you move tighter, perhaps to the point of nonrecognition—potentially a faulty choice when creating an environmental portrait.
3. After you're finished with steps one and two, put a telephoto lens on and shoot at 200mm (if you have the one standard lens, then just shoot at the longest focal length available). Repeat everything you just did for steps one and two with the new focal length.
4. Put all the images you shoot in this exercise on your computer after you are finished and select the 12 images that best represent the different aperture values and lens combinations used. Study these images to determine which level of depth of field strongly conveyed the story you wanted to tell in the portrait. There might be two or three that you feel do a great job, but you're likely to have more that don't speak as well as those two or three. Not taking into account composition, one of the reasons these images may not work well for storytelling is either the distractedness or ambiguousness of the environment created by certain depths of field.

This is not an exercise that will help you identify the ultimate aperture to use with every lens in every situation. The purpose is to help you begin to see which depth of field might be more helpful than others in developing a story for a particular frame. Depending on your choice of lens and your distance from the subject, one aperture value may seem better than any other to say something that might provide clarity to the story you are trying to tell. That doesn't mean, however, that there is only one depth of field value for each photographic instance. Indeed, you can tell story with the same subject and a slew of aperture values. Your job is to determine the best one for your way of telling story at that moment. ■

EXPOSURE: IS 18 PERCENT GRAY REALLY THE POINT?

This is where I get to be the curmudgeon for a bit. I started out shooting film. My real passion for film was color (not that there's anything wrong with black and white), and like many photographers, I just couldn't get enough of Fujichrome Velvia. The colors were vibrant, and the contrast was perfect for those early-morning or late-evening shoots. The inkiness of the shadows and the blacks were probably my favorite part of the film.

I digress, though. To me, the most intimidating part of starting out shooting film was making good exposures. You know, the types of exposures you initially approached with a gray card, taking scrupulous notes about the shutter speed, aperture, and ISO used for each shot. You continually stressed over how much you compensated when there were no neutral gray tones available, knowing that the film's latitude would just eat you up if you missed your exposure.

Sunlight shining through large cloud structures in central Scotland spotlights a small tree on the rolling hillside, throwing certain parts of the frame into deep shadow.

Canon 5D Mk II, 200mm, 1/250 sec., f/5.6, ISO 100