

Introduction: The power of visual storytelling

Background: Visual storytelling

Imagination and the desire to create is at the core of what makes us human. Crafting narratives, whether orally or visually, is intertwined with the way in which our species has evolved, helping us forge relationships and build societies. We've been sharing stories with each other and our descendants since the days of cave paintings and campfires.

In today's modern age of smartphones, social media, and AI-based apps, there are more tools at our fingertips than ever before to help us create and share stories. Photography and videography have become arguably the most popular mediums of storytelling. Whether we're watching funny videos, following the latest news stories, or sharing photos on social media, we're constantly surrounded by visual stories.

Warm-up discussion: What catches your eye?

Have students think about the photos and videos they encounter in their daily lives. As a class, brainstorm and create a list of places and instances where students regularly encounter visual storytelling. Use the following questions to guide and encourage discussion:

- What do you pay attention to online or on social media?
- Are there photography or video accounts that you follow (aside from friends)? Why do you like those accounts?
- What makes you stop and watch a video/like a photo rather than scroll past?
- What types of videos do you watch? How do they differ depending on where you're watching them (e.g., Netflix, TikTok, YouTube, Twitter, CBC)? Consider length, style, and content.
- How do you learn about what happens in the world? What role do photos and videos play in that?
- Do you find it easier to express yourself using photos and videos?

Activity 1: Curating a collection

Break students into small groups. Using the discussion as inspiration, have each group research and create a list of recommended sources/accounts (e.g., a top 10 list) that employ photos or videos, such as documentaries/mini-docs, video blog (vlog) accounts, or photography accounts, to examine a theme. Ask students to be specific (e.g., top Canadian nature photographers, top Canadian documentaries, top cultural vloggers) and provide reasoning for each account they choose to include in their recommendations (e.g., organization style, colour scheme, humorous tone, look and feel, transparency of information). For broad examples, refer to *Rolling Stone's* [100 Best Instagram Accounts](#) or *Vogue's* [The 78 Best Documentaries of All Time](#). Afterwards, have groups share their lists with the class so that everyone can find some new inspiration.

Overview

Students will be introduced to photography and videography. They will consider how they learn about the world and what captures their interest and attention online. Through a series of activities, students will explore the power of visual storytelling, in particular photojournalism and documentary photography.

Time

2 class periods

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Activity 2: Exploring the diversity of subject matter

There are many different types and subtypes of photography out there, but a simple way to group all these different types comes down to three categories: nature, people, and human-made. For example, wildlife and landscape photography would both fall under nature; portrait and sports photography would fall under people; and architecture and food photography would fall under human-made.

It's important to note for students that these various types of photography aren't rigid and that a photo can transcend genres. A photo of a storm cloud over a grain elevator in Canada's Prairies could be considered both nature and human-made. Or a wide shot of people white-water kayaking on the Ottawa River might straddle the line between nature and people photography.

Provide students with the following list and have them choose a type of photography to explore (alternatively, they can propose a category not listed here):

- Wildlife photography
- Event photography
- Landscape photography
- Macro photography
- Astrophotography
- Portrait photography
- Sports photography
- Travel photography
- Still life photography
- Architectural photography
- Street photography
- Food photography
- Abstract photography
- Fashion photography
- Underwater photography

Students can work individually or in small groups to research their chosen type of photography. Have students research the following information:

- **A description/definition of the photography type:** What are the defining characteristics?
- **The category this type of photography fits into:** Does it fall neatly into one of the three main categories (nature, people, or human-made)? Why or why not?
- **Examples of this type of photography:** Have students find 5-10 photos, from different sources, that fit into this photography type. Why are these photos good examples of this type of photography?

Once they've completed their research, each group can share their findings with the rest of the class, either in a presentation or as a gallery walk (or even using an app like PicCollage). Remind students that these categories are simply a way to group photos, not constrict them to a rigid category, and encourage students to discuss any differing opinions they may have on the definitions.



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Activity 3: Understanding the stories behind the visuals

Now that students have had time to think about what draws their eye, take a deeper dive into how photography and videography can be used for storytelling, specifically stories about the real world. Introduce students to the topic of photojournalism and documentary photography:

- **Photojournalism** is a type of photography where photos are used to capture events, usually unfolding in real-time. A photojournalist uses photos to capture the reality of a situation, acting as a neutral observer to document a scene. This type of photography is focused more on short-term storytelling.
- **Documentary photography** is related to photojournalism, but this type of photography focuses on long-form storytelling. Documentary photography can be thought of as capturing visuals that are relevant to a broader context or a historical understanding of events. These can include scenes from everyday life and can be captured over a longer period of time, such as weeks or even years.

In geography, there are three questions that are often used to encompass the complexity and broadness of the field: What is where? Why there? Why care? Good visual storytelling aims to answer the same questions by providing a setting/context and connecting audiences or viewers to the subject matter. Photographs offer a glimpse into a story or an issue by evoking strong emotions and creating an immediate and lasting impression.

Have students work individually to find a few photographs that resonate with them or that they feel are powerful. Ask them to note down the context or captions that go with the photographs. Use the categories from the previous activity (nature, people, and human-made) to encourage students to find a variety of images. Many media and news organizations will often publish a year-in-review or a top selection of photos on a certain theme — students can use the following websites for their research or for inspiration:

- [The Globe and Mail: A century caught on camera](#)
- [CNN: 25 of the most iconic photographs](#)
- [CNN: 100 Photos that defined the decade](#)
- [The New York Times: The Decade in Pictures](#)
- [World Press Photo: Collection](#)
- [Reuters: The Wider Image](#)
- [TIME: Top 100 Photos of 2022](#)
- [The Guardian: The best photographs of 2021 and the stories behind them](#)
- [National Geographic: 14 best photographs of the decade](#)
- [National Geographic: 15 iconic images from the National Geographic archive](#)

****Important: Review the websites before sharing them with students as some of the content may be too sensitive for younger students.****

Once students have chosen their photographs, gather the class together to discuss what they have found. One student at a time, ask for volunteers to share one of their photos with the rest of the class. Use the following questions to generate discussion:

- How does this photo make you feel? What impression does it leave you with?
- What do you think was the photographer's intention in capturing this scene?
- What can you learn from this photo (e.g., where and when was the photo taken, who or what is shown in the photo)? What story is being shared in this photo?



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- Do you have questions from looking at this photo?

After each discussion, have the student explain or reveal the context of their chosen photograph to the rest of the class and ask the class if this changes their perception of the photo. Repeat this activity for each student volunteer.

Extension activity: Exploring video content

Video was once the domain of Hollywood and TV news channels, but home movies started to take off in the 1970s, becoming very popular over the next couple of decades with the invention of the camcorder. When smartphones and social media platforms came along, video content experienced a huge boom. Today, creating videos and posting them online is easier than ever before. Content creation for social media and other sharing platforms has resulted in a diversity of video styles and storytelling.

Have students choose a documentary, a mini-doc, or a video series from a content creator to research. Have students answer the following questions in a reflection piece:

- What attracted you to this documentary/video? How did it make you feel?
- What visuals stayed with you after you finished watching or what did you find particularly memorable?
- What did you learn from this documentary/video that you didn't know before?
- Did this documentary/video leave you with new questions?
- Do you think this format (i.e., video) was the most effective way to tell this story? If so, why?

Additional resources:

- [Photography Life: 23 Types of Photography You Should Know in 2023](#)
- [Art in Context: Types of Photography – Examining Different Photography Styles](#)
- [Shotkit: 114 Different Styles & Types of Photography To Try in 2023](#)
- [Petapixel: Photojournalism: A Complete Guide](#)
- [Adobe: Explore many different types of photography](#)
- [Adobe: The business and practice of photojournalism](#)
- [Adobe: Explore the purpose & history of documentary photography](#)
- [World Press Photo: Visual literacy — See the Story](#)
- [Magnum Photos: Finding Your Documentary Photography Style](#)
- [Masterclass: Photojournalism Explained](#)
- [TATE: Documentary Photography](#)
- [CBC Docs](#)
- [CBC Gem](#)
- [National Film Board of Canada: Documentary](#)
- [Hot Docs: Docs for Schools](#)
- [The New Yorker: 62 films that shapes the art of documentary filmmaking](#)

