

Beyond the Lens

How Photography Uses Narrative Techniques to Tell Stories

ICM 518 · Visual Storytelling | Written by Angelie Ragnauth

Introduction: A Photograph Is More Than a Moment

A photograph freezes a fraction of a second, however the story it tells can extend far beyond that moment. A portrait might communicate confidence, uncertainty, or even sadness before the viewer knows anything about the subject. An event photograph can preserve a lifetime memory. The camera captures what we want it to, but as photographers, our priority is choosing that moment in which it becomes a documented memory. That distinction is what makes photography a form of storytelling rather than simply a recording.

Visual storytelling depends on intentional choices. Composition basics and framing establishes what belongs inside the story and what remains unseen. Lighting can make a scene feel intimate, dramatic, or even just ordinary. Color changes atmosphere, while perspective shapes the viewer's relationship to the subject. Timing matters just as much. The difference between a hand reaching for something and a hand resting afterward can change the meaning and intention of an image.

Seth Gitner's discussion of multimedia storytelling tells us about a useful foundation for considering how visuals communicate across platforms (Gitner, 2022). Ellen Lupton's *Design Is Storytelling* similarly encourages designers to think about sequence, experience, and the way audiences encounter information (Lupton, 2017). When applied to our photography, these perspectives suggest that a photograph should be understood both as an individual composition and as part of a larger communication process.

This paper argues that photographic narratives emerge through the intersection of composition, emotion, timing, and sequencing. By pulling from course readings, personal photography experience, and researched publications, this paper examines how images guide attention, invite emotional responses, and communicate a story. Original portrait photographs are used as visual case studies, alongside examples from documentary photography and photojournalism. The goal is not to claim that every photograph tells the same story to every viewer, but to show how intentional choices give viewers meaning from which stories develop.

Figure 1. Beyond the Lens: Aiden
Photograph by Angelie Ragnauth.



Composition: Deciding What the Viewer Sees

Composition is often introduced through general rules such as the rule of thirds, leading lines, and framing. Yet these tools matter because they influence what a viewer notices first and how information is processed. When a face fills most of the frame, the image invites attention to expression. When the subject occupies a smaller part of a wider scene, the background can become part of the narrative. The photographer is not simply choosing something cool, but they are deciding what visuals deserve priority.

Visual perception helps explain why this works. People do not examine every part of a photograph with equal attention. Differences in contrast, scale, placement, and separation from the background can establish visual hierarchy. Gestalt principles describe ways viewers group elements and separate figures from their backgrounds (McLeod, 2026). These ideas become important when a photograph includes several competing details. A cluttered background may distract from a meaningful gesture, while careful positioning can make that gesture easier to recognize.

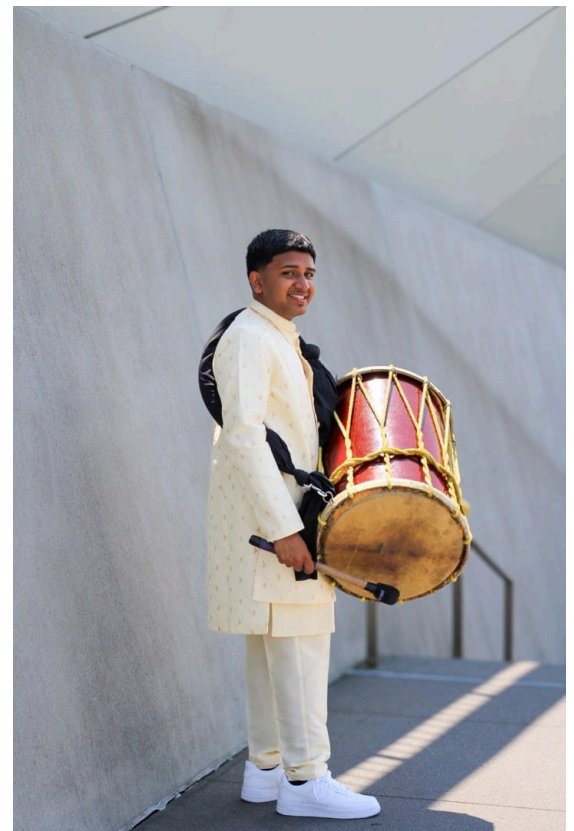
Leading lines offer a specific example. In a setting, a railing, pathway, shadow, or arrangement of objects may encourage the eye to move toward a subject. Research using eye-tracking methods has investigated how such composition based structures influence viewing behavior (Chuang, 2024). The implication is not that every viewer follows the same route, but that spatial arrangement can shape how a story is encountered and perceived.

Perspective also affects meaning. A low camera angle may make a person look powerful, while an overhead view can emphasize distance. Depth cues help viewers interpret the spatial relationships among the foreground, subject, and background (Northern Michigan University, n.d.). These principles can be seen in Figure 2, which shows Aaiden standing near a waterfront railing with his drum in front of him. The contrast between his light colored clothing and the darker elements of the background helps establish separation, allowing viewers to identify him as the primary subject. The railing and distant skyline also create depth cues that distinguish the foreground from the surrounding environment. Rather than functioning only as a portrait, the photograph uses composition to communicate Aaiden's identity as a musician while providing a sense of place. This demonstrates how Gestalt principles and spatial organization can guide attention while contributing to a larger photographic narrative.



**Figure 2 & 3
Perspective &
Composition
Angles in the
Aaiden portrait
series**

**Photograph by
Angelie Ragnauth.**



Light, Color, and the Feeling of an Image

Lighting and color can completely change how a photograph feels. A bright photograph might feel welcoming and energetic, while a darker image can create a quieter or more serious mood. Even when the subject stays the same, changing the lighting can influence how viewers understand the moment. This is especially important in portrait photography, where the goal is not just to show what someone looks like, but also to communicate something about their personality or story.

Different types of lighting create different effects. Soft natural light can make a portrait feel relaxed and personal, while stronger shadows can add drama and draw attention to certain features. Backlighting can help a subject stand out from the background, and directional lighting can emphasize details that might otherwise go unnoticed. These choices help photographers decide what viewers notice first and how they experience the image.

This can be seen in the photographs of Aiden, where natural outdoor lighting helps create a relaxed and personal atmosphere. Rather than using dramatic studio lighting, the portraits rely on the light available in the environment. This gives the images a more authentic feeling and allows Aiden's expressions, clothing, and drum to remain central to the story. The lighting also works with the surrounding environment, helping the photographs feel connected to a real moment rather than a staged advertisement.

Color plays an important role as well. Warmer colors can make an image feel inviting, while cooler colors may create a calmer or more distant mood. However, these reactions are not the same for everyone. Norman and Ortony's work on emotion and design explains how people's responses to visual experiences can be influenced by both design choices and personal interpretation (Norman & Ortony, n.d.). Research on color and image enjoyment also shows that factors such as saturation can influence how people respond to photographs (Lin, 2024).

Editing gives photographers another opportunity to shape these feelings. Adjusting contrast, brightness, or saturation can help emphasize certain details or create a more consistent mood across a series. In Aiden's portraits, keeping the colors and lighting relatively natural helps maintain the documentary feel of the photographs. Heavy editing could make the images more dramatic, but it could also distract from the story being told.

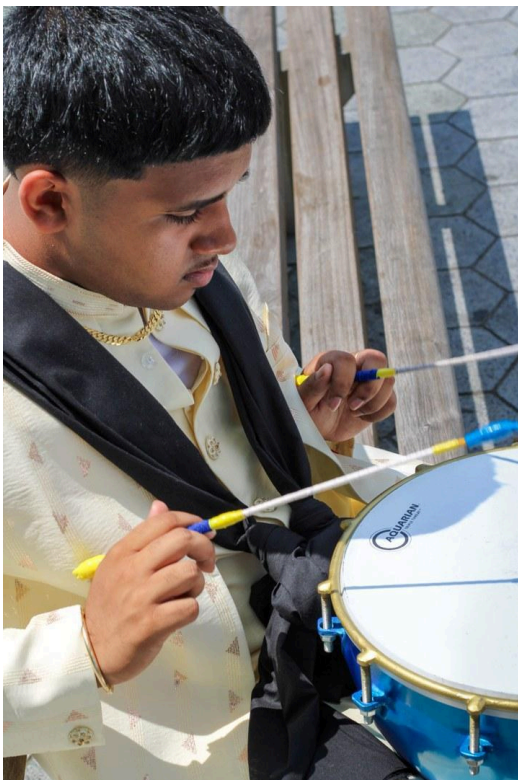
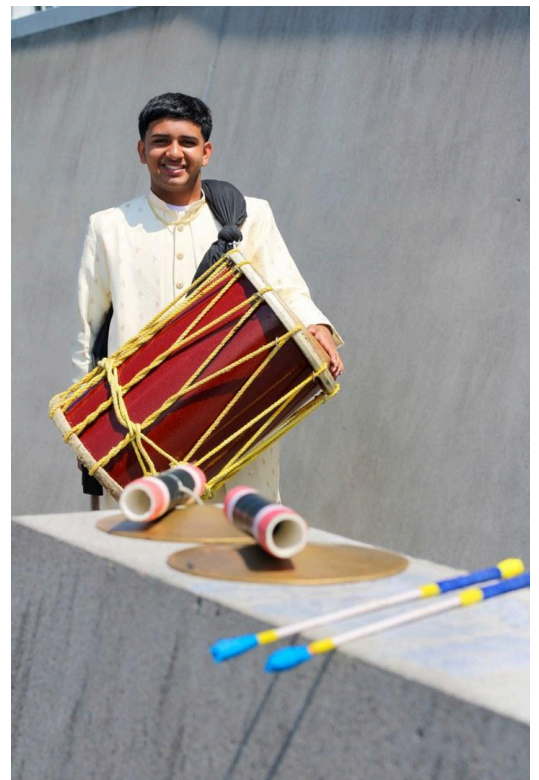


Figure 4. Light Direction & Tonal Contrast in the Aiden portrait series. Photograph by Angelie Ragnauth.

Figure 5. Mood, color, and expression in a portrait of Aiden. Photograph by the author.



Timing and the Decisive Moment

Sometimes, the most meaningful part of a photograph is the exact moment it was taken. A small gesture, a facial expression, or even a pause can communicate something that a perfectly posed photograph might miss. Photography allows us to freeze these moments, but it also encourages viewers to imagine what happened before and after the image was captured. This is one of the ways a single photograph can tell a much larger story.

Timing is especially important when photographing people because their expressions and body language are constantly changing. A photographer has to pay attention to what is happening rather than focusing only on camera settings or getting the perfect composition. Gitner discusses the importance of using visual details to communicate a story, which connects to how photographers choose moments that reveal something about their subjects.

Aaiden's photographs are a good example of this. Some images show him looking directly at the camera, while others capture him interacting with his drum or looking away. Although the photographs were taken during the same session, these differences help communicate different sides of his personality. The more posed portraits introduce him to the viewer, while the less structured moments make the series feel more personal. Together, they suggest that his identity as a musician is not limited to performing, but is also reflected in the quieter moments surrounding it.

However, a candid photograph is not automatically more authentic than a posed one. Both can communicate something meaningful depending on the photographer's intention. A posed portrait might show confidence or how someone wants to present themselves, while a candid image might reveal a more relaxed expression. What matters is how the photograph contributes to the overall story.

The relationship between the photographer and the subject also plays a role. When someone feels comfortable during a photoshoot, they may be more willing to express themselves naturally. Taking time to communicate, give direction, and allow moments to happen can lead to photographs that feel less forced. This shows that capturing the right moment is not only about pressing the shutter at the right time, but also about creating an environment where meaningful moments can happen.



Figure 6. Gesture and timing in the Aaiden portrait series. Photograph by the author.

Figure 7. A second moment from the portrait session, for comparison with Figure 6. Photograph by the author.



Sequencing: When Several Images Become One Story

One photograph can tell part of a story, but a series of photographs can give viewers a much bigger picture. When images are arranged in a certain order, they begin to connect with one another. Viewers notice differences in expressions, settings, and details, which helps them understand what is happening. This is what separates a photo essay from a collection of nice photographs. Each image should contribute something to the overall story.

The order of the photographs matters just as much as the photographs themselves. A series might begin with a wider shot that introduces the subject and location, followed by closer images that focus on smaller details. The final photograph can leave viewers with a particular feeling or idea. Lupton discusses how design can guide people through an experience, which connects to the way photographers organize images to create a beginning, middle, and end.

This approach can be seen in the photographs of Aaiden. The series can begin with a portrait showing him with his drum, giving viewers an introduction to who he is and what the instrument represents. From there, closer photographs of his hands, expressions, and interactions with the drum can reveal more about his connection to music. Ending with a quieter portrait creates a sense of reflection. Even though the images come from the same photoshoot, their sequencing allows viewers to experience the series as a story rather than separate portraits.

Changing the order could also change how the story feels. For example, opening with a close up shot of the drum might create curiosity before revealing Aaiden in a wider portrait. Starting with a quieter photograph could create a more reflective mood. These decisions show that storytelling does not end when the photographs are taken. It continues during the editing and selection process.

Professional photographers use similar techniques in their work. Jim Goldberg's *Coming and Going* combines photographs with personal materials to create a story that develops across multiple images. Rather than relying on one photograph to communicate everything, the project allows meaning to build as viewers move through the work (Gale, n.d). This demonstrates how sequencing can connect individual moments into a larger narrative. Strong sequencing should make the story easier to understand without changing what the photographs are really showing.



Figure 8-10. Portrait from the Aaiden series, visual sequence. Photograph by Angelie Ragnauth

Authenticity, Context, and the Viewer's Role

Photography can tell powerful stories, but it also comes with responsibility. Every time a photographer takes a picture, they make decisions about what to show and what to leave out. These choices can influence how viewers understand a person, place, or event. A photograph might capture a real moment, but that does not mean it tells the entire story.

This is especially important in documentary photography and photojournalism, where audiences often expect images to represent real experiences. World Press Photo emphasizes accuracy and responsible image making in its contest code of ethics. Photographers need to consider how their framing, editing, and captions might affect the way a subject is represented. Adjusting brightness or correcting colors can improve an image, but changing important details can create a misleading impression.

Another important part of ethical storytelling is understanding that the photographer and the subject might see the same image differently. Harper discusses photo elicitation, a research approach that uses photographs to encourage conversation and explore people's experiences. This connects to portrait photography because an image that seems meaningful to the photographer might hold a completely different meaning for the person being photographed.

In Aiden's portraits, for example, viewers might interpret a serious expression as concentration or a relaxed pose as confidence. However, those interpretations do not necessarily reflect what Aiden was thinking or feeling at that moment. In fact, he felt quite the opposite. The photographs can communicate aspects of his identity and connection to music, but they cannot explain his entire experience. Including accurate captions and allowing the subject to have a voice in how the images are presented can help create a more thoughtful representation.

Photographers also need to consider how their images will be shared. A photograph posted on social media might reach an audience that knows nothing about the subject or the circumstances surrounding the image. Without enough context, viewers may form assumptions based only on what they see. Ethical photographic storytelling means thinking beyond how an image looks and considering what it communicates, how it might be interpreted, and whether it represents the subject fairly.

Figures 11 and 12 show how posed and candid portraits can communicate different sides of Aiden. In Figure 11, he is focused on his instrument, creating a moment that feels less directed by the camera. Figure 12 presents him smiling and looking more aware of being photographed. Although the second image is more posed, that does not make it any less meaningful or authentic. What makes this comparison interesting is that viewers might associate the candid photograph with concentration and the posed portrait with confidence, even though neither tells us exactly what he was feeling.

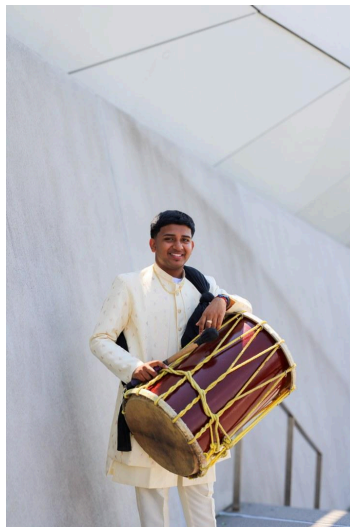


Figure 11-12. Portraits of Aiden Series

Expression and Presentation vs. Perceptions of Authenticity.

Photograph by Angelie Ragnauth

Conclusion

Photography is more than capturing a moment. Through composition, lighting, timing, and sequencing, photographers can communicate stories that go beyond what is immediately visible. Each decision influences what viewers notice, how they feel, and how they understand the subject.

Aiden's portrait series demonstrates how these techniques work together. Wider photographs introduce him and his surroundings, while closer images highlight his connection to music. The combination of posed and candid moments adds another layer to his story, showing how different photographs can reveal different perspectives.

As Westergren (2013) says, meaningful photography goes beyond creating an attractive image. Adobe also explains how visual emphasis helps direct attention, while Parry and Butler (2011) explore how images contribute to narrative meaning.

Overall, strong photo storytelling is about making intentional choices while respecting the subject's story. A photograph may not reveal everything, but it can encourage viewers to look closer, make connections, and understand a moment in a more meaningful way.

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