

# The Shot List

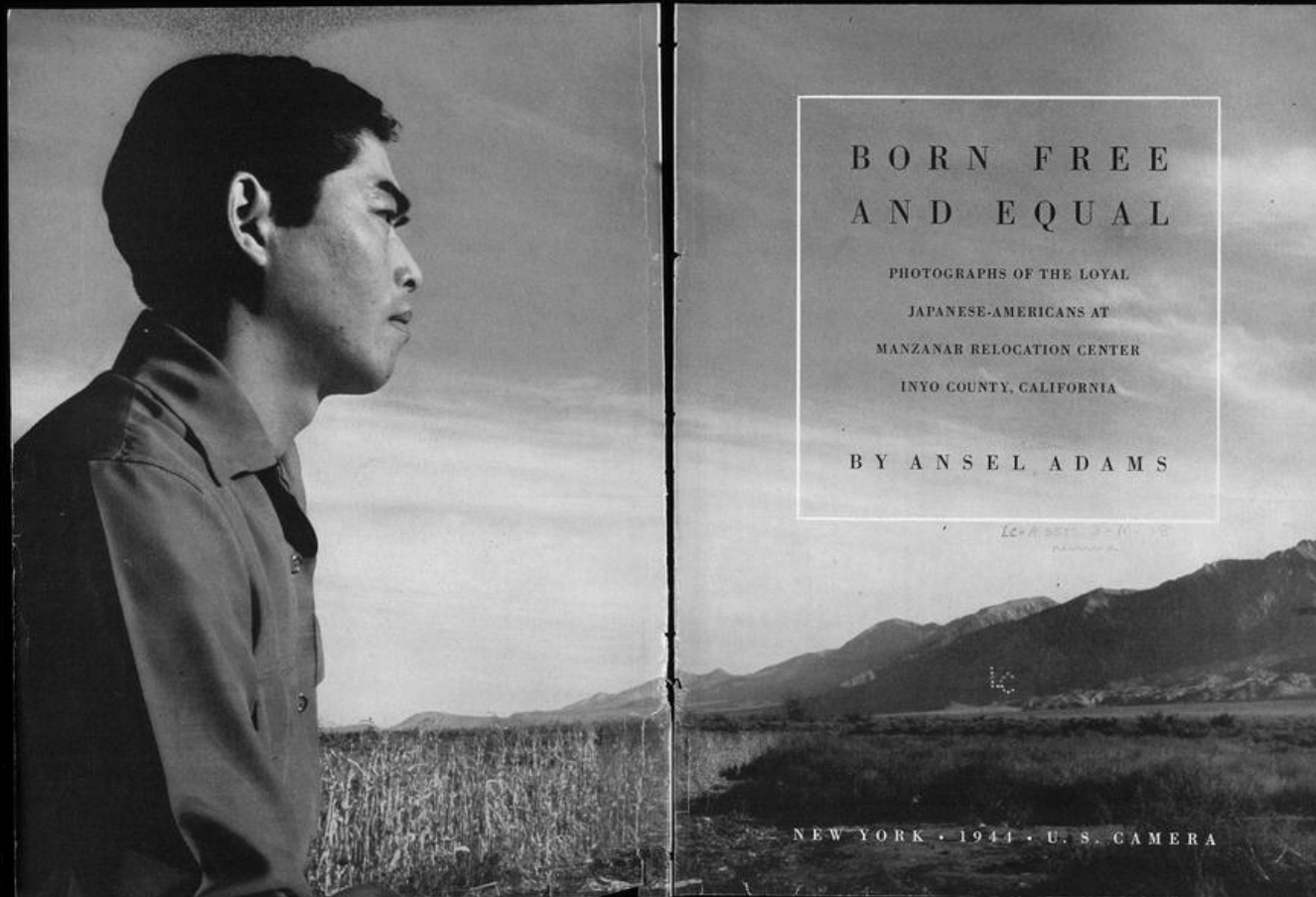
How to compose a photo essay

# The Establishing Shot

**First photo viewer sees; the introductory photo**

**A wide-angle (sometimes even aerial) shot to establish the scene of the essay**

**The establishing shot gives your viewers a sense of where they are going. If your photo story takes your viewers on a journey, then this shot allows them to understand the rest of the story in a geographic or thematic context.**



Ansel Adams. Cover photo of *Born Free and Equal*. 1944. Library of Congress.



Dorothea Lange.



A boat adrift in the reeds on the Inland Sea. Japan. 1961. © Burt Glinn | Magnum Photos

# The Signature Photo

**A photo that summarizes the entire issue and illustrates essential elements of the story; often the second photo in the essay, but doesn't have to be (depending on the way you've organized your essay)**

**This might be a photo of woman or man — maybe your main character — illustrating an action typical of your topic. Ideally, you'd be able to frame the shot to provide some context, maybe other people or objects relevant to the topic.**



**“It is my constitutional right to own a gun and protect my family.”  
Mike, father and gun owner. Dallas, Texas. © Zed Nelson**



Abraço Espresso in the East Village. 2011. Dima Gavrych.





**American Faces on a Paris Bus. 1952. Gordon Parks  
The LIFE Picture Collection / Getty Images.**

# The Close-Up

**A detail shot to highlight a specific element of the story.**

**Close-ups, sometimes called detail shots, don't carry a lot of narrative meaning. But while they often don't do a lot to inform the viewer on a literal level, they do a great deal to dramatize a story. It's ALWAYS a good idea to shoot lots of close-ups.**



Daniel Green, 21. Gun shot to Thigh. 11:50 pm Saturday night. Dallas, Texas.  
© Zed Nelson



**Bodies of German soldiers strewn across the bottom of a trench. Thiepval, September 1916. National World War I Museum, Kansas City, Missouri, USA**



... And His Ribbons. (Overseas Service and Citation Ribbons Are Worn by Many Nisei Soldiers.) Ansel Adams. 1944. Library of Congress.

# Portrait

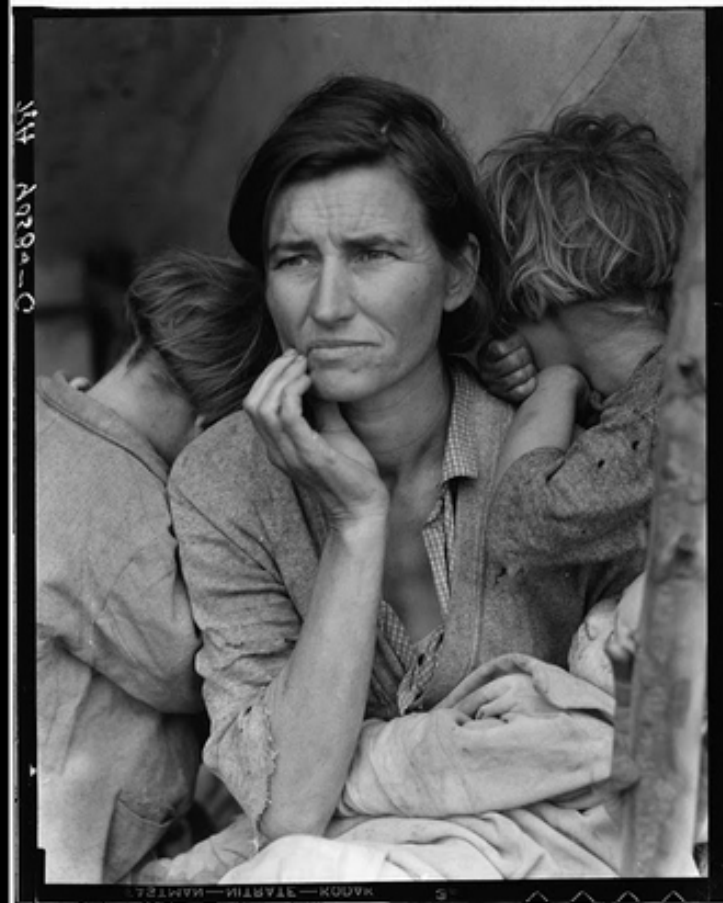
**This can be either a tight head shot or a more environment portrait in a context relevant to the story.**

**Photo essays are frequently built around characters. You need to have a good portrait that introduces the viewers to the character. Always shoot a variety of portraits, some candid and some posed.**

**If your main focus is not a person or people but an object or objects, remember that you can always give an object the status of a “character” in your essay by shooting it from the portrait angle.**



“Wild Eye,” The Souvenir King. Frank Hurley | National Media Museum



Migrant Mother. 1936. Dorothea Lange. Library of Congress.





French look gives Fred Perregaux, from Connecticut the reputation of being “a character.” 1952. Gordon Parks. Collection of LIFE Photographs | Getty Images



**“Old Man With His Pet Bird in Ritan Park,” Beijing, China 1984. Thomas Hoepker  
Magnum Photo Archive**

# Interaction

Focuses on the subject in a group during an activity. Images of your character interacting with others — kids, others in the city, animals — all help give a human dimension to your character.



**On the Champs-Élysées, seven American Girls stop for some Cokes. 1952. Gordon Parks. The LIFE Picture Collection | Getty Images**



**Jam Session in shadowy cellar of Vieux Colombier attracts a crowd of Americans. 1952.  
Gordon Parks. The LIFE Photo Collection | Getty Images**



An airplane ride at a carnival, in the midst of cherry blossoms. Nara, Japan. 1961. © Burt Glinn | Getty Images

# The Clincher

A photo that can be used to close the story, one that says “the end.”



Local sign to the Columbine High School shooting massacre, where two teenage gunmen went on a shooting rampage, killing twelve fellow pupils and a school teacher. Columbine, Colorado. © Zed Nelson.





**A coffin containing the body of an unknown British soldier in Westminster Abbey shortly before internment in its final resting place, London, 11 November 1920. Horace Nicholson. Imperial War Museum.**



Courtyard, Cass tech Highschool. Andrew Moore.

# Credits

Ansel Adams, *Born Free and Equal*, 1944. [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=gdc3&fileName=scd0001\\_20020123001bfpagdb](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=gdc3&fileName=scd0001_20020123001bfpagdb)

Andrew Moore, "Detroit," 2008-2009. <https://andrewlmoore.com/photography/detroit/>

Dima Gavrych, "New York City Coffee Houses," 2011. <https://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/01/17/new-york-city-coffeehouses/>

Gordon Parks, "American Teenagers in Paris," 1952. <https://time.com/3659717/american-teenagers-paris/>

Zed Nelson, "Gun Nation," 2016. <http://www.zednelson.com/?GunNation>