
TIPS FOR TELLING A HOLIDAY STORY WITH PHOTOGRAPHS

Quick Guide
Written by Leanne Cleaveley



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Flipping through old photographs is a not-so-guilty pleasure of mine. There is something very special about those holiday photos from when we were children. They give us a glimpse into moments and even help build and solidify memories.

I have an older photo. In it, I am about five years old, sitting under the Christmas tree with a couple of gifts. I shared it with my girls and they marveled over the fact that some of the ornaments on the tree in the photo now adorn our own Christmas tree. They query me on the gifts: what did I name the teddy?

Those photos are like digging up artifacts. They are like gold in our family. They are often an invitation to storytelling.

Most of us cherish photos taken over the holiday season. Whatever holiday you celebrate, you should include all the elements that do those special days with family and friends justice.

In this guide, I would like to offer some of my tips and tricks for getting holiday photos that will become part of your family's story. You will also learn the following:

- How to plan to get all the holiday shots you want
- How to create a “photo story” of holiday events or activities
- To be aware of and utilize light in different settings and make the most of your camera equipment, indoors and out
- Considerations for candid and posed holiday photos
- Some fun tips and tricks for capturing some unique photographs, while utilizing all that the holidays have to offer



Recommended Reading: Want to learn how to make your photos stand out from everyone else's? Grab a copy of Photzy's premium guide, [Effective Storytelling](#).

PLANNING

All great stories start with a plan. Planning ensures that you have all your equipment ready and a good idea of the type of photos you want to take.

So charge up those batteries, get your lenses cleaned and organized, and dig that tripod out.

The other part of planning is making a mental or literal list of the shots you would like to get. Sometimes writing them down helps ensure that you don't find yourself thinking, "Oh, I wish I had gotten a shot of that!" when the holidays have ended.

I have photos that we take every year. I call them milestone photos as they often show the growth of our children and of our family. I have my father to blame for the traditional "camera on the tripod, timer set, and RUN!" photos that we still take.

THE PLOT

One way to tell a story through photos is to create a series of photos that show different aspects of an event. Your photo story can include any number of shots – three or twenty!

Photo stories are great for showing the sequence of events. For example, one story I like to tell through photos is our annual Christmas tree hunt. I try and get shots of "the hunt" (looking for that perfect tree), photos of my hubby cutting it down, and pictures of the kids decorating it (see the image set on the next page). The story changes a little every year and it is fun to catch those special moments.

Photo stories are also great for showing different aspects of the same event. It can be fun to catch the expressions on the faces of the kids as they decorate Christmas cookies. But it is also nice to get a detailed shot of those tasty treats, and of course someone enjoying them.

During the "planning" phase, think about some of the annual traditions that you have that would be fun to share through a photo story and put that plan into action!



Photographs by Leanne Cleaveley

SETTING

Many of the shots I take over the holidays are taken inside. Setting can affect how effectively your camera and equipment works and how your shots turn out. It is also important to take your setting into account, so that you can make the most of available and created light.

NATURAL LIGHT

Whenever possible, I try and use natural light. But that isn't always easy during a time of year when it is cold outside and the days are short.

We have a large picture window in our living room that allows in a nice amount of light. I often try and situate people so that I can use that light when taking photographs. The light is soft and flattering and the photos taken in that light are often my favorites.

 **Key Lesson:** The benefits of natural light, like the light through a large picture window, are that it is often diffused, creating a softer, more natural look for your subjects. If the sun is glaring in, throw a white sheet up to create that look yourself.

THE FLASH

Often, my indoor photos during the holidays are taken with a flash. The on-camera flash can work in a pinch, but it can be unflattering as it shines straight at your subject and can create harsh shadows.

An off-camera, or external, flash allows for more flexibility in how you use your light. Use your diffuser or look for a white wall or ceiling and try "bouncing" your flash off that surface onto your subject. The "bounced" light will be more diffused and softer, creating a more natural look.



Key Lesson: Rather than aiming your flash straight at your subject, try turning it toward a white surface and bouncing it off onto your subject. The diffused light looks more natural and helps you avoid harsh shadows and overexposure.

Take care to adjust your white balance when shooting indoors with a flash. This ensures that your whites look white and not tinged blue or yellow. If there is other light around, you may need to consider which is more dominant.

We have fluorescent lights in our kitchen and even with a flash, the fluorescent lights dominate. So I always make sure that I set the white balance to the fluorescent light setting, so that my photos don't look too yellow.

Christmas lights can affect your white balance too. If your subject is sitting close to a tree full of red lights, you may need to adjust your settings to account for that.

 **Key Lesson:** Figure out what kind of light dominates in your shot and adjust your white balance setting on your camera accordingly. If you don't know what kind of light you are dealing with, take a test shot and look at it on your camera viewfinder.

Yellow/green light usually means you are dealing with fluorescent light.

Orange/yellow light usually means you are dealing with incandescent light.

THE GREAT OUTDOORS

If you are taking photos outside in the cold over the holidays, you will have another consideration to keep in mind. The elements can be hard on our equipment, so head outdoors prepared.

One thing to think about is battery life. If it is very cold outside, your battery life will be much shorter than it would be shooting in warmer conditions. So be sure to check that your battery is fully charged and have a spare handy. That goes for batteries in your flash as well.

Another thing to consider is how to free up your hands but keep them warm enough while shooting. I like to use fingerless gloves when the temperature isn't too cold. I put heat packs in my gloves as well. They keep my fingers from going numb and buy me a little more time outside with the camera.

One last consideration is for the glass on your lens. Those of you that have glasses will relate to the issue of fogged-up lenses. One way to prevent fogging on the glass is to keep your lens covered when going in and out of the house.



Photograph by Leanne Cleaveley

If it is cold enough for your breath to show as water vapor, then you will want to be careful that it doesn't create haze in front of your lens when shooting. I have had a few photos ruined by this and have learned to "hold my breath" for a couple of seconds before taking a photo.

Winter Outdoor Shooting Checklist:

- Batteries fully charged
- Lens cap on when entering/exiting buildings
- Fingerless gloves for better access to camera controls
- Avoid haze by being aware of exhaling water vapor



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CHARACTERS

You can't tell a story without characters, and your holiday photo story is no exception. The characters that get photographed the most around the holidays are the kids. There is something special about those looks of pure delight and surprise that come with special visits, glittering ornaments and, of course, gifts.

It is always nice to capture special moments with family members that we see less often as well. The holidays are a great time to bring people together and catch some shots of your loved ones.



Photograph by Leanne Cleaveley

CANDID

Have your camera handy for some candid shots. Christmas is a great opportunity to get amazing shots of joy and surprise.

If you are shooting indoors, be sure to check your camera settings. Too many of my photos were ruined by the camera compensating for low light by adjusting the shutter speed.

Slow shutter speed + fast-moving subject = undesirable blur

So be sure to have adequate light, as mentioned above, and adjust your ISO for the light you do have. Shooting in a higher ISO, such as 400 or 800, is sometimes necessary in a poorly lit room.

Once you are set, keep the camera handy but not in front of your face all the time. Adults and even children tend to change their expressions when they know a camera is nearby, ruining the effect of a great candid shot.



Photograph by Leanne Cleaveley

Another strategy to get a good “natural” look is to take a few posed shots and then go in for the candid once your subject has gotten used to the camera being out. For younger subjects, I like to get them to ‘ham it up’ by saying “make a silly face.” After a few silly shots they get back to what they are doing and I move in for the natural shot.

When shooting candid photos, a great tool to ensure that you don’t miss a great expression is burst mode. Set your camera, hold down the shutter, and away you go. Later, you can go through the photos at your leisure and pick your favorites.

Be aware that when shooting in burst mode in low-light situations using a flash, you may find your flash won’t “keep up” with the shutter. Try to find other light sources if you can. Some cameras won’t even allow burst mode to operate when the on-camera flash is engaged, as the flash needs time to charge before it can be used again.

 **Recommended Reading:** For more tips on getting great candid shots of youngsters, check out Photzy’s free [Child Candid Photography](#) quick guide.



Photograph by Leanne Cleaveley

Posed

If it weren't for posed shots, my husband and I would rarely show up in our holiday photos. We make a point of taking a family photo in front of our Christmas tree each year. I set the camera up on a tripod and use the timer to get us all in the photo.

Set-up for a photo like this involves making sure that the focus is right. When taking shots of a big group, you don't want anyone standing or sitting farther behind or in front of the group. Chances are, if they do that, they will be out of focus.

For our family tripod shots, I usually do a test shot with just my husband in it, sitting or standing where we want to be. Then the kids come in and I hit the shutter and run to get in the photo (even though I give myself plenty of time, it makes us all giggle). Alternatively, you can use a wireless shutter release to do the same thing; just ensure that the remote is out of the picture.



Photograph by Leanne Cleaveley

We usually do a silly shot for our posed photos too. Inevitably, one of the kids will do “bunny ears” on someone. Far better to give them permission to do it than have someone ruin a great photo.



Photograph by Leanne Cleaveley

DETAILS

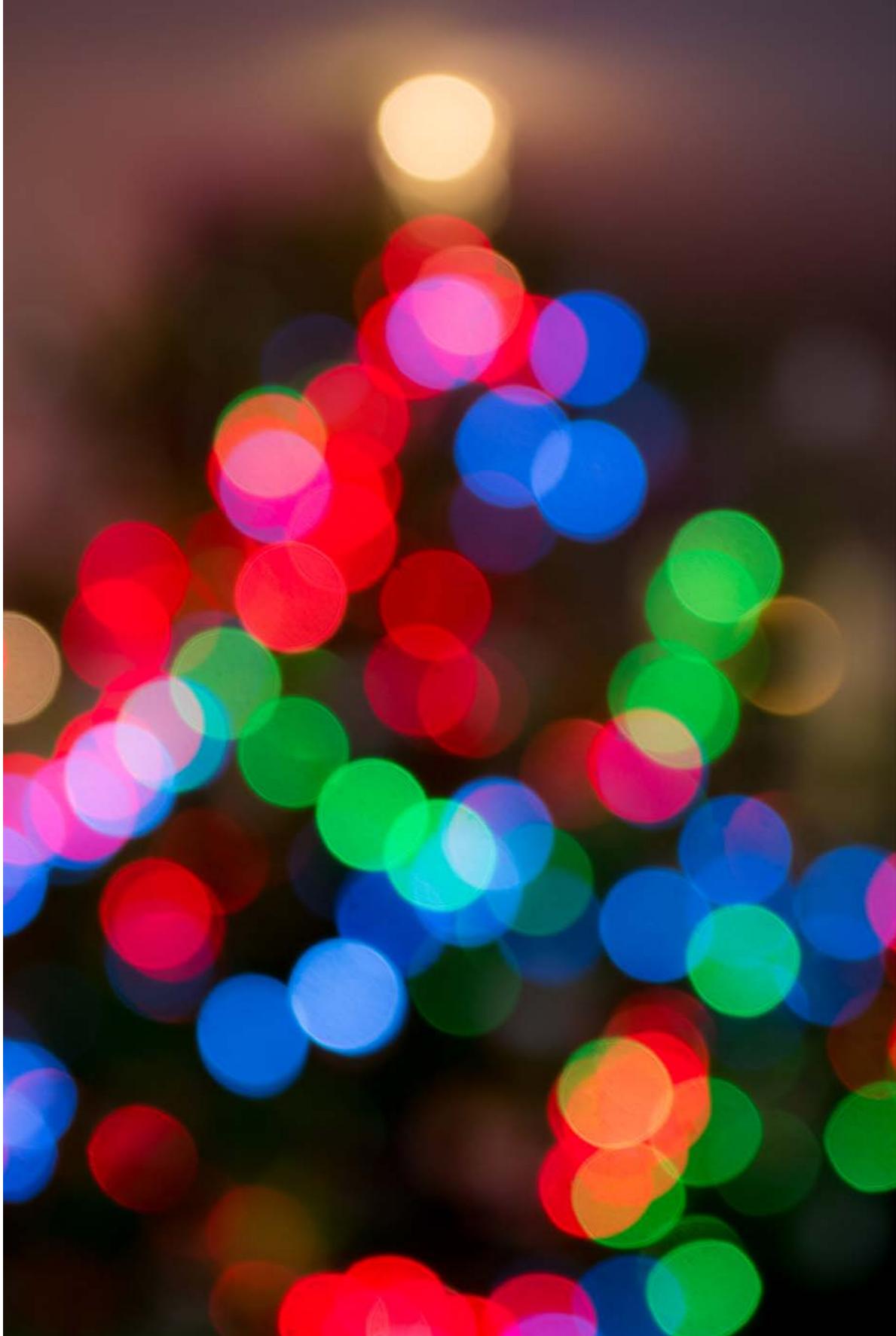
Details enrich a story, and the same is true for your holiday photos. Be sure to make some time to catch some detailed shots. Whether it be a shot of a treasured gift or a special heirloom ornament, these types of shots tell an important part of your holiday story.

Macro and Close-Ups

Whether using a macro lens or zooming in close with another lens, you need to keep a couple things in mind when shooting things like Christmas ornaments and lights.

First, stabilization is very important, so use a tripod. The slightest movement of your hand when taking a close-up shot can create a lot of blur. And you have the time to set up the tripod, because you are shooting objects that are still.

Another thing to consider is depth of field. When shooting close-up shots, your depth of field will typically be much narrower. Because of this, you should be careful to ensure that your subject is in focus.



Photograph by Leanne Cleaveley

On the plus side, the narrow depth of field is great for ensuring that your subject really stands out. Our eyes will naturally go to the things in the photo that are focused and the rest creates a pleasing blur or background, which brings us to bokeh...

Bokeh

With all those holiday lights around, you must allow yourself a chance to play a bit and get some great bokeh shots. Bokeh, or the quality of blurred or out-of-focus light in a photograph, can add great interest and create a lovely background.

To get bokeh, you need to set your aperture to achieve a shallow depth of field. You do this by increasing the size of the aperture, or decreasing the f-stop. How much you 'open up' your aperture, and how far you are from your subject and the lights, will affect the size of the bokeh in your photo.

Ultimately, you should be close to the subject you want to have in focus and have a fair distance between your subject and the lights to get good bokeh.



Key Lesson: Not all bokeh is good. A very busy, distracting background can detract from a shot. So be careful to choose your background so that the bokeh complements, rather than detracts from, your photograph.



Photograph by Leanne Cleaveley

Another fun thing to try is to take a “bokeh only” shot. I have several years’ worth of Christmas tree shots, so it was great fun for me to manually set my focus to get an all bokeh shot of the tree, as seen in the photo on the previous page.

SILHOUETTES

All those Christmas lights lend themselves to silhouette shots. Silhouette shots are a great way to tell a story, as they give a little bit of information and leave the rest up to your imagination. And everyone loves a good mystery, right?

By placing your subject between yourself and the lights and avoiding using flash, you can achieve some great silhouettes, as seen in the photo on the left.

You want to set your exposure so that it exposes for the brightest part of your shot. You can achieve this by using spot metering and aiming at a brighter area in the background of your photo (the Christmas lights, in this case).

You also need to be aware of any ambient light that could bring out details on your subject. Your subject should be dark, as details will take away from the overall effect of the silhouette.



Photograph by Leanne Cleaveley

To get a great holiday silhouette, follow these steps:

- Put your subject between you and the light source
- Make sure all other light sources are turned off
- Expose for a brighter spot in your photo

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Self-Check Quiz:

- 1) A _____ depth of field and proximity to your subject are two things needed to get a good shot with bokeh.
- 2) Very slight movements can cause blur when taking close-up and macro shots, so be sure to use a _____.
- 3) True or False: When shooting indoors, you should always adjust your white balance for the type of lights that are dominant in the room you are shooting in.
- 4) You can use photos to tell something about an event or activity in the form of a _____.
- 5) Sometimes it is necessary to shoot at _____ or _____ ISO when shooting indoors.
- 6) _____ don't last as long in the cold, so be sure to charge yours or grab an extra one before heading outside.
- 7) Choose the best answer:
To take a great silhouette photograph:
 - a) Position yourself between the light source and your subject
 - b) Position your subject between you and the light source
 - c) Position your light source between yourself and the subject
- 8) One way to ensure adequate light when shooting indoors is to use a flash. Two ways to soften the light from the flash are to use a _____ or to _____ off a nearby wall or the ceiling.
- 9) What can you do to avoid getting 'fog' on your lens?



Photograph by Leanne Cleaveley



Hey there!

Let's get real for a minute... Learning photography can be super challenging! But we're here to help you every step of the way! Here are 3 of our most useful (and **FREE!**) photography resources:

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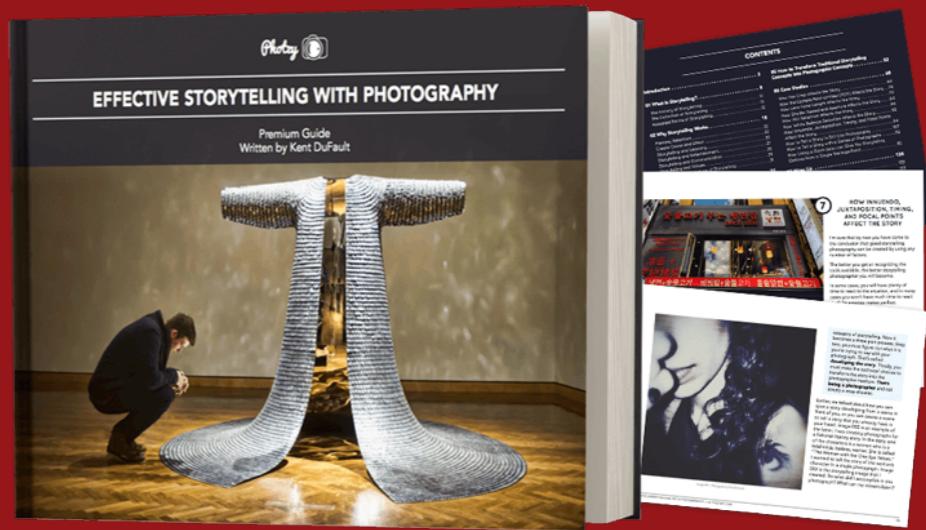
ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Leanne Cleaveley is a hobby photographer, part-time elementary school teacher, and full-time mother and wife. She loves reading, gardening, crafting, and music – and contemplates ways to find more time in the day to pursue her hobbies. Her photographs can be found on [Flickr](#).

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