

PEOPLE

By Kent DuFault

There isn't a better topic for storytelling photography than people. Every human has their own story, and they're never without drama.

Photographing people in a storytelling manner is a highly skilled photographic talent.

Many photographers simply cannot do it.

The reason? It requires connecting with someone else in an intimate manner.

Annie Leibovitz is probably currently the world's most excellent storyteller in the arena of photographing people. You would do well to buy a book on her photography and study it. She digs deep and pulls out intimate details about her subjects that are fascinating and often provocative.

Storytelling photography of people is not merely a portrait. It's not just a likeness. It's a peek at what makes someone tick.



Image 001 –Photograph by Sayla Brown

Image 001 is an example of a photograph that would get ripped to pieces in a photography forum. This is because the vast majority of us photographers are simplistic in our thinking, only looking at the obvious, and not observing the story.

I am no exception. In fact, I was ready to pan this shot as an example of what you don't want to do as a visual storyteller of people.

But then I stopped and **really** looked at this photograph. I was blown away. There is SO much story packed into this shot, both overt and subliminal that it kind of makes me jealous.

"Virginity Rocks" is an obvious storytelling clue about this individual and their thoughts on sexuality.

But study the photograph further.

You cannot tell if the subject is male or female. Part of the story said here is about being androgynous or confused about sexuality.

Take notice that the subject is standing in an empty desert and appears small against the landscape.

I think the photographer is telling us that this person feels lonely, alone, and at least partially confused.



Assignment:

I want you to consider Image 001 carefully. Think about the overt and the subtle clues to this subject. Now, plan a portrait where you will place one apparent and numerous subliminal clues that tell a story about your subject.



Image 002 – Photograph by Segun Osunyomi

I would classify Image 002 as a good portrait, but not an excellent storytelling image. The girls are posed in a visually appealing manner.

They all have lovely expressions, and there is just enough physical contact to hint that they are likely sisters.

There is a story here, but it isn't strong.

Telling a Relationship Story with People



Image 003 – Photograph by Marcos Santos

The placement of the hands in Image 003 tells a more dominant story about the relationship between these two individuals than we saw in Image 002.

**Key Point:**

When trying to show a relationship story in people photography, touching is a primary tool in your toolbox.



Image 004 – Photograph by Altin Ferreira

These two individuals (Image 004) are posed and touching intimately, but the visual story tells of a disconnect between them. Study their expressions and their eyes. One would assume that they are an intimate couple. But the picture story is one of separate worlds.



Key Point:

When telling a relationship story between multiple people, the eyes and lips are of utmost importance. Even minor changes in those two parts of the human face can drastically change your finished story.



Image 005 – Photograph by Blake Cheek

Let's return to the idea of sisters.

Image 005 is very similar in context to Image 002. It depicts three sisters of varying ages in a portrait.

However, the story is a superior example over Image 002 due to physical contact, expression variance, and body language.



Assignment:

Create a photoshoot where you depict a story about the relationship between two or more people. Pay special attention to the pose, body contact, positioning of the hands, direction of the eyes, and even micro influences like a tilt of the head and positioning of the legs.



Image 006 – Photograph by Chi lok TSANG

An enjoyable way to tell stories about people is through the use of style. Everyone has a style. Even folks who say they have no style have a style, because their style is no style!



Image 007 – Photograph by Allie Smith

You can approach the use of style in two ways. You can impose your style, or you can depict the style of the individual that you're photographing.

For this creativity prompt, I will break the use of style into two sections. First, we will talk about clothing, props, and location. Second, we will look at the hair and makeup.



Assignment:

Select someone who you would like to be your model. Have your model select some clothes and props that *they* feel represents their style. Secondly, select some clothes and props that *you* feel represents their style. Now, find two locations to shoot in: one that you will use to reflect their choices of style and one that will reflect *your* choices of style. Don't cheat and use the same location. Study Images 006 and 007. Notice how the location and props are significant to the stories being told about style.



[Image 008 - Photograph by Lana Graves](#)

Hair and makeup are critical in the story of people and their style.



Image 009 – Photograph (L) by [Hannah Skelly](#) and Photograph (M) by [David Billings](#) and Photograph (R) by [Rafael Silva](#)



Remember:

It's important to note that hair and makeup apply equally to men as well as women.



Key Point:

If you are not highly experienced in the areas of hair and makeup, I would work closely with your chosen subject and allow them to make the critical decisions in this area. As a photographer, your role will be choosing the lighting, pose, and background that highlights the hair and makeup styling chosen by your subject.



Assignment:

Set up two photoshoots. For one shoot, use a female model, and for the other, use a male model. In each case, work with your chosen model on the decisions of hair and makeup. Once that is completed, **you** select the wardrobe, props, and location to complete the story on each individual's style.

People and Their Activities

Image 010 – Photograph by [Avi Richards](#)

Another potent tool for telling photo stories about people is to capture them active in their environment.

Environmental portraiture adds to the story because it helps the viewer fill in clues about the subject's daily life.

This is known as environmental portraiture.

**Key Point:**

In environmental portraiture, you go to the subject's location. It is then up to you to find the best way to photograph them within their place. Always keep two things in mind. Firstly, the site should add to the story of the individual. Don't frame your shot so tight that the location becomes a moot point and unrecognizable. Secondly, the person is the subject of your photo, so don't frame the shot or compose the frame in a manner where the subject becomes lost in their surroundings.



Image 011 – Photograph by [Jonathan Borba](#)

Environmental portraiture tells an excellent story for subjects of any age!



Image 012 – Photograph by [Tandem X Visuals](#)

Image 012 is an excellent example of storytelling people photography. It incorporates a number of the techniques discussed in this creativity prompt.

- Style
- Hair and makeup
- Props
- Location
- Activity



Assignment:

Get out and tell some photo stories with environmental portraiture. Use numerous people, both male and female. Also, try many different ages, from toddlers to senior citizens. Incorporate as many factors from this prompt as you can: relationship, style, hair, makeup, props, location, and activity.