

Great Photos Can Make or Break a Story

We all love to see a great layout in a magazine with an interesting story and great photos or art that add to the whole reading experience. However, as writers, we know not everyone who is gifted in the journalistic sense is also gifted in the photographic sense, so we have two choices: get someone else to take the photos or send you some (say, the manufacturer) or learn to take better photos.

If you want to take photos that will make your story stand out in the stack of manuscripts waiting to be reviewed, here are a few tips that might help.

Less Dead Things - Of course, we all know the purpose of hunting is to kill your prey so you can eat or display it. That's a given. But most readers want to see the beauty of the hunt, the scenery, the details of your ammo and gun and the little tricks you use to make your hunt more successful. Keep the "blood & guts" to a minimum and go for "less is more" -- get a gun, some people or some colorful scenery into the picture with your harvest if you can. Include photos of the guns, ammo and other equipment, which are as important (or more) than the birds or bucks. Unless you are showing how to identify the species, it usually isn't necessary to show a lot of the quarry (although, one great "beauty" shot as a possible lead is always nice...)

Be Sharp - The most beautiful shot in the world won't look good in the magazine if it is blurry. If you can't hold the camera steady, use a tripod or sandbag and/or get a cable release so you can do it "remote control" or maybe get one of the digital cameras that has the "no jiggle" feature. Everything looks sharp on the tiny LCD screen on your digital camera - at that small size, just about everything looks in focus - but use the "zoom" button on your digital camera to close in on the photo and you will see if it really is as sharp as you thought. If not, try, try again. You can also try using "continuous shooting" mode, where the camera takes a burst of photos at one time; that way, one might just be perfectly in focus

Get Up Close & Personal - You may have a great shot of your friend shooting the target, but if you are standing too far away, even with a zoom lens, the photo may not blow up big enough to show the great detail. Get as close as you safely can and then use the zoom, with the camera set on a high resolution, so there is plenty of detail and flexibility for the graphic artist to work with. Use macro mode or a macro lens to show

details. In most cases, you need to get closer to the subject than you think you should.

Take a Different View - There is not just one way to look at a gun, bird, choke, shooter, whatever. Try taking shots from different angles to get a different perspective. Graphic artists need good "lead" photos to draw readers into a story, and one with a little different look to it often works well. If your camera has a "macro" lens, use it to get great shots of details. Readers get tired of seeing the "same old, same old" when it comes to photos, so give them something different (along with some traditional shots, too, of course.)

Move With the Light - If you have the opportunity, watch the area where you want to take your photos - inside or out - and see what time of day provides the best lighting situation and take your photos then. It can make a huge difference in the results. Generally, dawn and dusk provide the warmest light and softest shadows. You can "cheat" on the light a little by using something like a frosted white shower curtain to provide some nice diffused light. You can also use your cap to reduce lens flares -- just position it where the sun is positioned and look through your lens to get the light you want. If you think you can't take good photos during bad-weather months, you're wrong. Right after a storm you often get great light; right before a storm, you often get great skies and clouds.

Location, Location, Location - Realtors say this all the time, but it's true with photos, too. Often we get so caught up in getting a photo of the "thing," we forget to look at what's behind and around the thing. If you have to shoot with a bad background, take a high-resolution photo that can be blown up and cropped (before you send it in) to show only the good part. When shooting things like guns and gun parts, think about the background before you take the shot. Find a neutral background (or put one down) where there is good light. You don't want the background to compete with or distract from the

important part. Make sure the surface is clean -- when the graphic artist zooms in to use the photo, all the dust and dirt shows up big time! Use your hands to "frame" the shot ahead of time so you can see what might be cluttering up your photo.

Relate to the Subject - To get great animal shots, aim at their eyes. If the eyes aren't in focus, the rest of the photo won't be too great, either. To get great shooting shots, anticipate -- when you know what's coming up (a great shot, a hard shot, whatever), get in position before it happens and set your camera, focus, lighting, etc. up, then wait for just the right moment and take your shot (or a burst of shots). If you want to show the size of something, include a person or something that everyone can relate to.

Be Your Own Worst Critic - Take a good, honest look at the photos you have taken and say to yourself "Is that really a good photo?" Compare it to photos in magazines that you like. You don't have to take photos like a pro, but you should be able to say honestly to yourself "That's a nice shot, and it shows exactly what I was trying to show." If not, go back to the drawing board, or the photography location. You'll be glad when you see your story in print accompanied by the great photos you took.

Invest in Good Stuff - Just like you invested in a good computer and printer to produce your manuscripts, invest in a good camera you find comfortable to use and spend some time learning to use it. The results will be as satisfying as using spell check and cut-and-paste to produce those blazingly hot, right-on-the-money bits of prose you are so proud of. Get a book on photography, take a class, invest in some "tricks of the trade" (like shades and boxes to help provide the right light, some background cloths, etc.) and talk to others about how they figured out to get good photos with their not-so-expensive digital camera. If your photos are at least as good as your writing, they will help sell the story to the editor and the readers.

Good shooting!

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