VISUAL STORYTELLING

What you will learn

This Visual Storytelling resource provides a comprehensive understanding of how to create and share a compelling visual piece for both digital and traditional platforms. Exploring photography, video and graphic design for different audiences, the principles of crafting a message are presented, along with the technical aspects and creative software to consider. Going through real-life strategies and examples, this resource aims to equip individuals and organisations with knowledge, tools and ethical storytelling practices to achieve professional and effective visual communication.

Contents

- Why tell a story through visuals?

- Creating: shaping the message

- Creating: technical aspects

- Creating: software tools

- Sharing the story

- Ethics, consent and safeguarding

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Why tell a story through visuals?

A good story resonates with the public by evoking genuine emotions and providing a clear message. Even if this can be accomplished by the power of words, it is not a secret that today's society is dominated by visuals. Whether it is on television, smartphones, newspapers or billboards, the main pieces of information will always contain a visual element, which is **relatable** and **illustrates** a point.

Stories remind us of the connections which exist

between us despite our differences.

Stories remind us that we are all human.

Visual storytelling is the use of visual media (photography, graphics and/or video) to tell a story. Infographics, photos, animated videos, illustration, maps and even memes are other examples of the types of pieces that can encourage an audience to take action.

Humans rely heavily on visual cues for most behaviours, and we are naturally attracted to images. Seeing something familiar, whether it is a face, an object or a place, makes people stop and look. Viewing stories happening in front of their eyes helps people to understand them better and even put themselves in the character's shoes.

This is the principle of most advertisements and visual stories, especially on social media, which is one of the biggest platforms used by people to obtained information these days. With fast, contrasting visuals and a strong message, content using images and videos gets far more **engagement** than posts that don't include them. These stories usually generate curiosity, amazement and admiration, with a bold perspective that stands out from other content and take the audience on a journey that touches them emotionally. Keep in mind that people expect to get mainly three aspects from social media: entertainment, education and inspiration.

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Creating: shaping the message

When stories are visually strong, timely and simple, they conjure up a feeling. The variety of content that can be communicated through a story is ample, from life experiences, to the success of a campaign or the promotion of an upcoming event. Regardless of the type of visual media, there are usually **three stages** of creating visual content and studying its impact. These are: **planning**, **execution** and **assessment**.

Make sure you spend a significant amount of time in the planning stage. This can be the backbone of the project and a point of reference whenever there are questions during the execution and assessment stages. When planning a piece of visual media, consider the **three 'W' questions**: Why? Who? What?

WHY	WHO	WHAT
The purpose: why is this piece being created? It could be to provide information, to generate change, to inspire etc. Set a Call to Action (CTA): something that the viewer will do after seeing the piece, like signing a petition, reading a blog or joining a campaign.	**The audience: who is this piece for?** Think about demographics: age, gender and location. What platforms do they use the most? Do they already have knowledge about the topic? Would they rather watch a short video or examine multiple infographics? Where is the piece going to be shared, so it reaches the audience?	**The story: what story will reach the audience to achieve the purpose?** A story has characters, it could include dialogues or just a voiceover. What is your message? Have a clear idea of the key message(s) and, if it is a video, what the structure of the final film will be.

EXAMPLE

You work for a charity that supports people going through domestic abuse, and you have been assigned to do a video promoting the services that the organisation offers.

Deciding that the audience will be people of ages 40 to 60 of all genders and Scotland-based, the piece can be shared on local Facebook groups. The main character of the story could be a young woman with a clear Scottish accent (reminiscent of a daughter), talking directly to the camera. She tells a story of how her neighbour would seem happy and engage in conversation, but how she has not seen them lately, except when they take the rubbish out, with clothes that cover most of their body and avoiding everyone. She explains that the charity can support people like her neighbour and tells the audience to get in touch with their helpline if they are worried about someone.

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Creating: shaping the message (continued)

TYPES OF VISUAL MEDIA

Depending on the type of media, the workflow can look a bit different.

In **photography**, for example, it is common to have a plan for the subjects or objects to be photographed, considering the three W questions. But, in documentary photography, someone can capture an unexpected and powerful scene. That one picture will be the centre of the project, so the three W questions will be built around it.

There are many elements that can help telling a story in just one image, like someone's expression, their clothes, objects, their environment, among others. These can help tell where someone is from, their journey and what is important to them. Here are some examples:

Many people are delving into **videography** using their camera phones, since the platform TikTok became widely popular. Usually, a video can be either high production value or low budget, the latter being the most common on social media today.

There are also three stages in videography: pre-production (planning), production (recording) and post-production (editing). However, when the content is strong, just recording immediately suffices. Some points to consider:

- Grab the audience with a good hook in the first **3 seconds**, so they stay to watch the full video (intro text, impactful image, a relatable element, etc.)
- Always add **captions**
- Have some bullet points to follow if talking straight to camera

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Creating: shaping the message (continued)

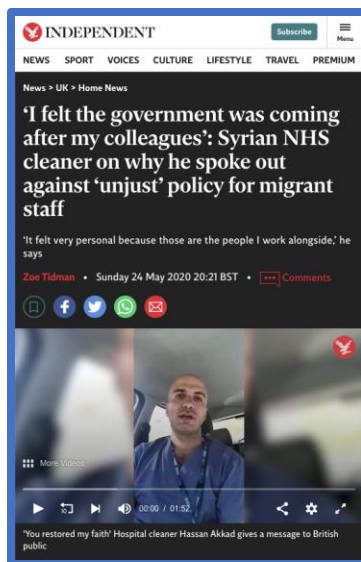**Storytelling structures** can be defined during the pre-production stage.

This classic narrative structure is clear, popular and effective:
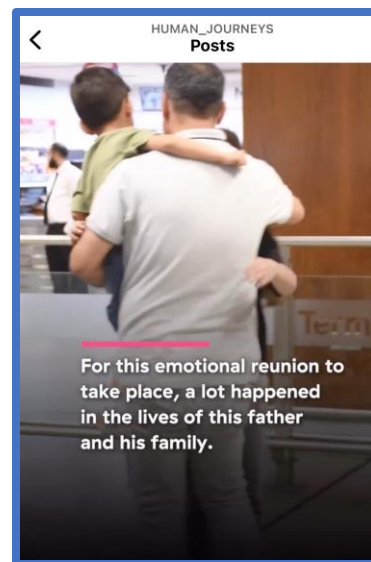*Intro > Rising Action > Climax > Falling Action > Resolution*

These are some powerful video examples:

Go to video

Go to video

Go to video

Graphic design is commonly linked to layouts, logos and even illustration. It can also combine photography with other visual elements, being optimal for explanatory pieces. This type of content is typically highly planned, following a specific structure that will convey a message in the best way. When a story is shared, using quotes or picking the strongest line of the narrative are effective ways to generate engagement.

Illustrations are also a useful way to present information particularly when there are ideas that cannot be done through photography or other media. This is when illustration can display almost anything imaginable, to transmit a specific concept. Graphic design can be used like this:

Creating: technical aspects

Once the story or content has been chosen, as well as the type of media, there are some technical aspects to follow when producing a visual piece. When it comes to **photography** and **videography**, there are multiple elements related to cinematography, art direction, post-production and more. Nonetheless, creating a low budget piece using a camera phone can also bring impressive results. And, even if shutter speed, aperture and ISO are factors to be mastered in a hi-pro setting, a phone can do most of the work with a good outcome.

Overall, the quality of a photo or video is important when capturing the viewer's attention; people would not understand what is happening in an image if it is too pixelated, out of focus or too dark. It is recommended that the Camera app on the phone is set to film in **HD** and at **30fps** (frames per second). This can be selected on the top of the app and more elements are available in Settings:
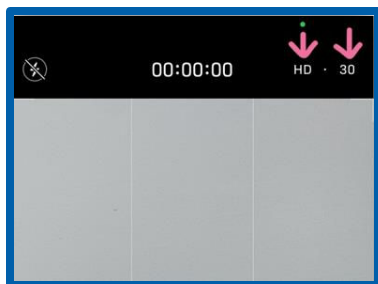
iPhone/iOS

Android

Make sure that the subject is **properly lit** and the camera is **exposing** them correctly. Light needs to fall on their face rather than come from behind.

DO NOT FORGET THE AUDIO

When producing a video, the audio can be as important as the images. A video can have dialogue, background music or both. If there is going to be spoken words, consider:

• Filming in a quiet place, without much noise coming from the street, a fan, animals etc.

• Using an external microphone near the subject's face is a good solution when filming outdoors or in a noisy setting.

• If the internal microphone of the smartphone is the only option, be careful not to cover it when holding the phone.
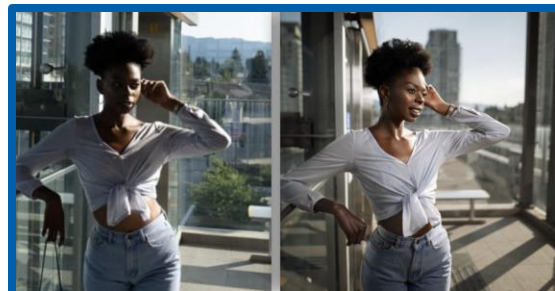
TIP: tap on the phone screen the subject that must be in **focus**.

Source: Pexels

Underexposed   Properly exposed   Overexposed

Source: ManyCam

Too dark   Properly lit

Source: PetaPixel

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Creating: technical aspects

There are multiple **composition and framing** rules, but the most common one is the rule of thirds, where an imaginary grid is used as a guide to place the subject(s) in frame:
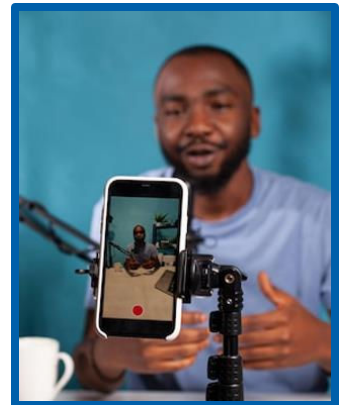

Source: BidunArt

A specific **colour palette** can also direct the viewer's eye. Using complementary colours, or creating some kind of colour contrast, is more attention-grabbing than scenes using different tones of similar neutral colours.

Neutral colours and low contrast | High colour contrast between subject and scene

Colours are especially important also in **graphic design**, particularly if there are branding guidelines in place. Colours must be chosen considering the best legibility for the viewer; trying to read a vibrant text on a vibrant background, or understanding a shape on a similar colour background, is not easy on the eyes.

Poor contrast | Optimal contrast | Poor contrast | Optimal contrast


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Creating: software tools

In planning, it is good practice to think about the software tools needed. Even if the piece will be presented on traditional media, like a newspaper or a flyer, an illustration would have to be digitalised and a photo would need to be enhanced. Similarly, there are useful platforms when it comes to share the content online.

For video editing, the common programmes for computers are **Adobe Premiere Pro**, **DaVinci Resolve** and **Final Cut Pro**. For simple cuts and addition of captions for phone videos, there are apps that are more accessible, such as:
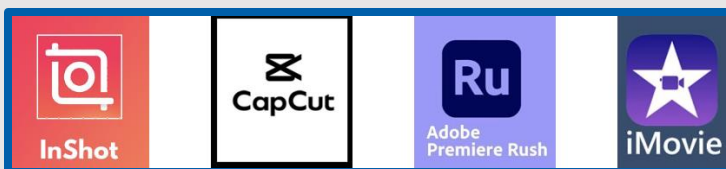
And if the videos are to be shared on **Instagram** and/or **TikTok**, these social media platforms have their own editing features.
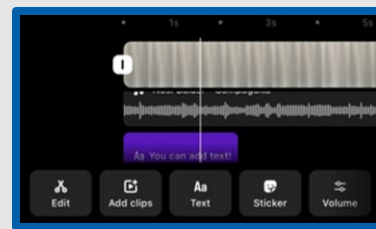
When developing or enhancing a photograph digitally, **Adobe Lightroom**, **Adobe Photoshop** and **Capture One Pro** are the typical programmes to go for. Still, phone apps like **Google Photos**, **iOS Photos**, **Snapseed** and **Lightroom Mobile** achieve great results.

Canva is today one of the most popular software for content creation, since its features help with photography, video and design. Because its use is very intuitive, people without much creative experience can produce graphic design pieces and even videos with motion graphics.
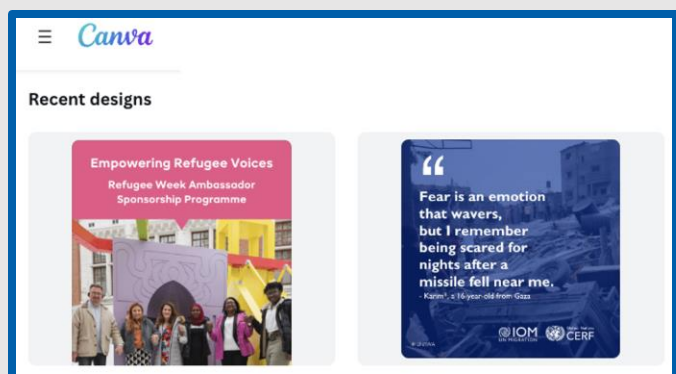
Still, **Adobe Illustrator** and **Adobe Photoshop** are professional tools that provide more precision when working with illustrations and other graphics.

When sharing one piece in multiple platforms, or scheduling, tools like **Meta Business Suite**, **Buffer**, **Sprout Social** and **Hootsuite** offer useful features.

TIP: Always keep in mind which platform(s) the content will be shared on, since this could define the aspect ratio of the piece. The different social media platforms and other digital spaces have specific restrictions when it comes to aspect ratios. It is essential to make sure the content is displayed correctly.
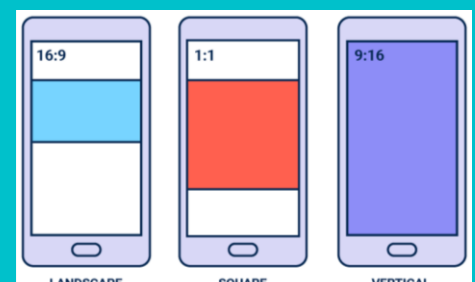
Source: Sproutsocial

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Sharing the story

When sharing the visual piece, consider again the **three W questions** emphasising the key audiences to be reached. Depending on the type of audience, the story/message can be amplified through specific platforms, the ones that target a particular audience.

Harnessing social media channels

Consider your audience: tailor your approach based on your target audience's preferences and demographics to ensure maximum impact. Identify which platform(s) your target audience is using to effectively engage them.
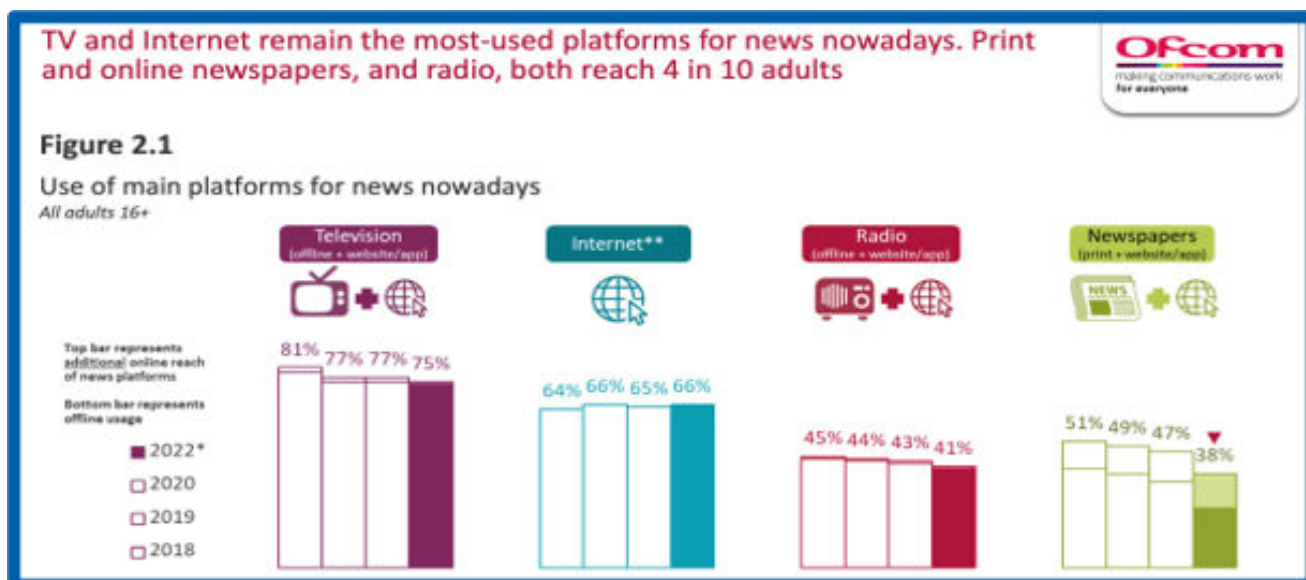
Incorporate into regular communications

- **Include in newsletters:** integrate your story into your organisation's regular newsletter to keep supporters engaged and informed.

- **Spotlight in annual reports:** Showcase your story, providing transparency and accountability to donors and stakeholders.

- Share as a **blogs or op-ed**, incorporating key storytelling elements.

Engaging with the Media

If appropriate and timely, share the story with the media to reach a broader audience and raise awareness about your cause.

Choosing the right platform:

- **Evaluate Impact:** Consider which platform will deliver the highest impact for the story, whether it is through television, internet, radio, or print media.

- **Leverage Local News:** Don't underestimate the power of local news outlets in amplifying the message within your community.

TV and Internet remain the most-used platforms for news nowadays. Print and online newspapers, and radio, both reach 4 in 10 adults

Ofcom
making communications work
for everyone

Figure 2.1
Use of main platforms for news nowadays
All adults 16+

Television (offline + website/app)
Internet**
Radio (offline + website/app)
Newspapers (print + website/app)

Top bar represents additional online reach of news platforms

Bottom bar represents offline usage

■ 2022*
□ 2020
□ 2019
□ 2018

81% 77% 77% 75%
64% 66% 65% 66%
45% 44% 43% 41%
51% 49% 47% 38%
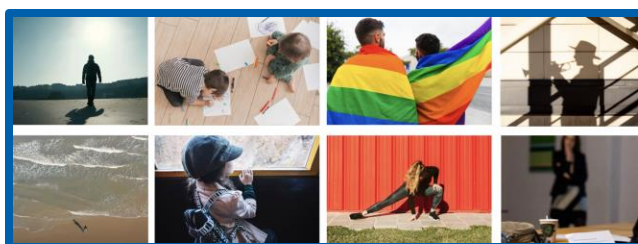
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Ethics, consent and safeguarding

When using real-life events and people with lived experience in storytelling, there are elements to keep in mind to protect the individuals involved and people close to them.

Before interviewing people, check the following:

• Are interviewees with lived experience happy to be identified?
• Do they fully understand where their story will be shown?
• Does appearing on TV/Internet put themselves or their families in any danger?
• Are there any questions they would rather NOT be asked?
• Will the interviewee need an interpreter or perhaps a case worker who they trust and feel comfortable with?
• Share the questions you will be asking them in advance to give them time to prepare.

Find a full safeguarding checklist on the IMIX website

If people do not want to be identified, there are still ways of taking anonymous portraits that showcase their story. These are some examples:

More details on how to take anonymous photos can be found on the IMIX website.

Social Media Safeguarding

• Make sure the interviewee knows there may be negative comments.

• If the story is being published on an organisation's platform, this can offer the interviewee the opportunity to review the text before it goes live.

• Journalists can turn off comments under articles, as these are often the nastiest.

• Comments can be monitored on behalf of the interviewee, rather than encouraging them to read them directly.

• Some social media platforms have the option of automatically deleting comments with specific keywords, assigned by the account owner.

• Comments can be flagged on social media platforms and if necessary, reported to the police if they incite hatred.

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