

Tips for Documentary Photography

Documentary Photography is a style of photojournalism that captures important events and social issues, but also looks at everyday life. Documentary photography strives to give an honest portrayal to the audience while being artistic in nature.



Figure 1 – Amtrak passengers at NYC's Grand Central Station.

I. The Story – Building the Narrative

When working on a photo essay (a collection of documentary photographs centered around a theme or process) you will first need to build your narrative. This can be done with some simple research about the process, the area you plan to shoot, etc. It's good to loosely plan a narrative. This includes, establishing place and time (capturing setting, clothes, and people) and capture key steps of a process. Take notes and keep in mind the story you want to capture as you take photos.

2. Get Permission

Let people know about your project and get them comfortable with idea of having their picture taken. This may include calling in advance and finding out the policy on photography or getting people to sign contracts for permission to be photographed. Getting permission will help with a crucial aspect of getting candid shots.



Figure 2 – Amtrak promotional pin worn by employees.



Figure 3 – Readied Shot of Donald Dannheim



Figure 4 – Candid Shot of Dannheim family member.

3. The Candid Shot

Candid shots are when your subject seems unaware that they are being captured on film. It can be a difficult shot to capture when people prefer to be camera ready. Candid shots are great for capturing a process like knitting or just capturing how people live out their lives. Some tips for capturing candid shots include:

- Taking your camera everywhere. Also be ready to shoot quickly.
- Shoot continuously. Not all your photos will be usable, but you can go through them later to choose the best ones.
- Be unassuming. This can be difficult when you're shooting with a larger camera. Some things to consider: give your subject space and avoid using flash when you can.
- Photograph when your subject is occupied. People often will forget they're having their picture taken if they're in the middle of some kind of task. For more talkative people asking them questions about the task may keep them more occupied.
- Time. The longer you are with subjects the more used to you they become and thus more comfortable. This will give you more opportunities to capture that impactful candid image.

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- Figure 1:** Passengers line up in New York City's Grand central Station to buy tickets for Amtrak passenger trains – 1974. Jim Pickerall. U.S. National Archives. [Flickr.com/photos/usnationalarchives](https://www.flickr.com/photos/usnationalarchives/).
- Figure 2:** "Tracks are back!" is one of the themes publicized by Amtrak which has the responsibility for most U.S. intercity rail passenger services – 1974. Charles O'Rear. U.S. National Archives. [Flickr.com/photos/usnationalarchives](https://www.flickr.com/photos/usnationalarchives/).
- Figure 3:** Donald Dannheim and his family operate the New Ulm Dairy. Bottling milk is the major part of the business, but the firm also sells ice cream. Flip Schulke. U.S. National Archives. [Flickr.com/photos/usnationalarchives](https://www.flickr.com/photos/usnationalarchives/).
- Figure 4:** Member of Donald Dannheim family who operate a dairy and ice cream store. Flip Schulke. U.S. National Archives. [Flickr.com/photos/usnationalarchives](https://www.flickr.com/photos/usnationalarchives/).