

## CHAPTER 3

# PHOTOGRAPHING MEMORIES

This section is contributed by Zakaria Zainal, a documentary photographer. He published *Our Gurkhas: Singapore Through Their Eyes*, a photo essay on retired Singapore Gurkhas. Read *Our Gurkhas* at [www.singaporememory.sg/showcases/30/contents](http://www.singaporememory.sg/showcases/30/contents)

## INTRODUCTION

Photography is the art and practice of taking and processing photographs. It is a great tool for documenting memories because it can capture precise moments in time.

A single photo features a memorable moment, place or event. However, if you want to tell a complete story, you may wish to develop a photo essay instead. A photo essay is a series of photos arranged in a specific order, allowing you to explore a theme or show the progression of an event. A great photo essay evokes emotions in its audience.

## WHAT YOU NEED

To tell a story through photography, you don't really need fancy equipment. Often, a basic point-and-shoot camera or even your smartphone camera will suffice. At the end of the day, your camera is only a tool. More important are your interactions with your subjects, your research and the content and messages that are conveyed through your photos.

Do ensure that you have sufficient battery and memory space to last through your fieldwork.

### Equipment and tools checklist

- ✓ Camera (Digital SLR, point-and-shoot camera or smartphone)
- ✓ Spare batteries
- ✓ Storage cards
- ✓ Pen and notebook
- ✓ Tape recorder
- ✓ Photo-editing software such as Adobe Lightroom or Picasa (available free at [picasa.google.com](http://picasa.google.com))





## HOW-TO GUIDE

### 1 Choose a topic

Look around you for story ideas or **think about the experiences you have had**. In my case, I had a six-month internship with a Nepalese newspaper; the experience exposed me to the country's culture, and this in turn helped me decide on my topic and in my interactions with the retired Singapore Gurkhas.

### 2 Research

Spend time reading and collecting information on your topic, at the library or on the Internet. **Learn from or emulate similar photography projects**. Talk to and interview people related to

From *Gila Bola: Surviving Singapore Soccer*, by Dan Koh and Zakaria Zainal, a photo essay on Singapore football fans.



Photo courtesy of Zakaria Zainal

your topic; they may be your photography subjects, their friends and relatives as well as academics and experts. Besides equipping you with knowledge, your detailed research will also give you the confidence to tackle the challenges you may encounter over the course of your project.

### 3 Determine the angle, message and emotions of your story

**Keep the story simple.** There may be several ways to approach your story, but stick to one that you feel will help guide your readers better. For example, the topic of Singapore Gurkhas offered many possible angles. In the end, I decided to keep the focus on the stories and memories they have of Singapore during the time of their service.

Football fans captured in *Gila Bola*.



Photos courtesy of Zakaria Zainal

### 6 Put photographs together to tell a story

In most cases, you will not be able to use all the photographs you have taken. Be discerning and **select only the best ones** that narrate the story well. The editing process also helps you know if you need additional photographs to help tell the story better.

### 7 Caption your photos

You may have interesting photos, but ultimately **what will guide your readers are detailed captions**. Your captions should include names of the people in the photos, date, information on what they are doing and where they are at, where relevant.

### 8 Upload your photo essay

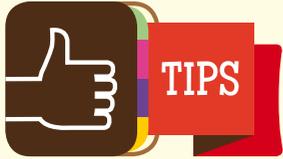
Save your photos in JPEG or PDF format and **email to [singaporememory@nlb.gov.sg](mailto:singaporememory@nlb.gov.sg)**. Include your personal details such as name and contact number and a synopsis of your submission.

### 4 Plan your photos

**Plan the shots** you want to take. It is useful to study photos taken by other photographers — you can get tips and inspiration on shot sizes (e.g. wide, zoomed-in, portrait, close-up), lighting, composition and more.

### 5 Take photos and conduct interviews

When you arrive at the scene to take photos, don't be too rigid about sticking to your plan. **Go with the flow and let your eyes and heart decide** what photographs to take. When you interview your subjects for the captions or story, be sure to get answers to the questions of who, what, when, which, how and why (5W1H).



- Familiarise yourself with the functions of your camera and the basic principles of good photography. These will enable you to be creative and take good pictures under different conditions.
- Write a project statement that will give you a clear direction. It also prevents you from going off-topic and helps you focus when you feel overwhelmed by too much information.
- It is important to identify your target audience and know who will be interested in or affected by your project. If you always keep them in mind as you work on your project, you will take more meaningful photos.
- Write your story and captions while the details are still fresh in your mind so you will not lose key information. Take it as an assignment you have to send to an editor or teacher in less than 48 hours.
- Don't be too pre-occupied with collecting information and photographs all the time. It is good to pause, analyse and reflect on the material you already have.
- Don't be afraid to ask your interviewees for more names of people or suggestions of things and places you can photograph. They may likely lead you to the right individuals and ideas for your project.
- Take down key personal information, especially names and ages, accurately. Other important information includes occupation, contact numbers and email addresses.



## SAMPLE PHOTOGRAPHY WORKS

*Our Gurkhas: Singapore Through Their Eyes*  
by Zakaria Zainal

*Mosaic Memories*  
by Justin Zhuang, Zakaria Zainal and Wee Ho Gai

*Gila Bola: Surviving Singapore Soccer*  
by Dan Koh and Zakaria Zainal

## MORE ON PHOTOGRAPHY

### Books

*BetterPhoto Basics: The Absolute Beginner's Guide to Taking Photos Like the Pros*  
by Jim Miotke

*How to Photograph Absolutely Everything: Successful Pictures from Your Digital Camera*  
by Tom Ang

*Image Makers, Image Takers*  
by Anne-Celine Jaeger

### Online

*What Makes a Great Photo Essay?*

*5 Types of Photos That Make for Strong Photo Essays*

*5ive Foot Way*

*Shooting Strangers, Photographs by Danny Santos II*

*Sebastian Song's blog*



## SHARING OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

### JEROME LIM

Jerome Lim photographs for and writes the blog *The Long and Winding Road* to capture Singapore's changing landscape. He hopes to preserve his memories of a Singapore that we may not see tomorrow by documenting his experiences through photography. Check out [www.thelongwindingroad.wordpress.com/tag/jerome-lim/](http://www.thelongwindingroad.wordpress.com/tag/jerome-lim/)

### How is capturing photographs to tell a story different from normal photography?

I don't see any difference, as every photograph has a story to tell. It is important to visualise what you want to capture from the perspective of the story you want to tell.

### How do you prepare for your photography sessions?

The amount of preparation depends on the subject matter. If you're documenting a place, you'll need prior research to identify, for example, the key features of an architectural work or subjects of interest.

### What are three things you would bring to any photography session?

Spare batteries, storage cards and cleaning gear. It can sometimes be hard to predict how heavy your usage may be, and it is always important to keep your lenses clean.

### Which photography assignment was the most meaningful to you?

My attempt to capture the last days of the Malaysian Railway in Singapore (below) put me in touch with like-minded people, many of whom have become friends, and also with the spaces and people that made the railway what it was.

The now defunct Bukit Timah Railway.



Photo courtesy of Jerome Lim

## Can you share some photography tips?

- To tell a story, it's important to identify our subject, isolate it within the image and visualise how the rest of the image will relate to it. Keeping your photographs simple and uncluttered often works well.

- You can give great visual impact to your photographs by following simple rules of composition, such as the rule of thirds or diagonals. The use of light to highlight subjects can add dramatic effect.
- It's also important to understand the relationships between aperture size, shutter speed, depth of field and motion.

A larger aperture has a shallower depth of field, which can be used to isolate subjects. Faster shutter speeds freeze objects in motion while slow shutter speeds result in blurriness, which can be used to suggest motion.

## What equipment do you recommend?

I use a digital SLR camera primarily as it offers a greater degree of control. But compact and phone cameras are excellent and easy to use. I recommend equipment that you feel most at ease using. Understanding your equipment (and its limitations) and knowing how to use it is more important than how sophisticated it is.



Clockwise from top left:  
Rule of thirds  
Off-centre subjects  
Use of leading lines  
Use of light  
Use of blurriness to suggest movement