

Digital Photo Essays

Sarah Harsh

Hi! I'm Dr. Sarah Harsh, a postdoctoral fellow in Emory's Writing Program. In this presentation, I'll tell you about my digital photo essay assignment. This assignment gives students the opportunity to practice multimodal composition while exploring ideas in a creative and engaging way. I'll explain how and why I use this assignment in my classes, then offer some guidance should you be interested in assigning a digital photo essay in your own class.

[SLIDE] In a digital photo essay, digital images and text work together to tell a story, make an argument, or explore an idea. Students will shoot a series of photographs and accompany these images with written captions or titles. I suggest also assigning an Artist's Statement, or a few paragraphs of text where the student explains their ideas and reflects on their process. I like to conclude this assignment with a Gallery Tour where each student showcases one of their photos and offers brief remarks. Students really enjoy seeing one another's work, and the presentation is an opportunity to practice oral communication skills. The gallery tour can easily be adapted to online teaching by enabling screen sharing in your Zoom classroom.

[SLIDE] As an instructor, you have some options for how you want students to submit this digital photo essay. These submission options are tied to different possible audiences for your students' work. I've done both options in my classes and they both work well, so it really just depends on your course, your subject matter, and your technological aptitude. You can choose to make your students' photo essays public using social media. If you choose this option, your students can post their images and captions to the photo-sharing platform Instagram. This Instagram option gives students a chance to practice public writing and an opportunity to participate in conversations beyond the classroom. Chances are many of your students will already be familiar with Instagram. Since it's likely that students already have an Instagram account that they use in their personal lives, I encourage them to make a secondary account (using their Emory email) for academic purposes. One of the skills we practice in my writing classes is appealing to an appropriate audience, so this is a good opportunity to reinforce that audience awareness. Students can submit a link to their Instagram account, just remind them to set their account to "public" so the images can be viewed.

Your other option is to limit the audience for your students' photo essays to members of your classroom. This approach works best if the subject matter of these photo essays might be more sensitive. I've had students do self-portraits on topics that relate to mental health, and this isn't necessarily material they feel comfortable sharing beyond our class. If you don't want to deal with Instagram or other social media sites, this is the option for you. Students can easily submit their work as a Word Document or even as Powerpoint, which students can submit via email or

upload to Canvas. Photo essays are well-suited to this kind of digital submission because it can be logistically challenging and expensive for students to print good-quality photos themselves.

[SLIDE] Whether public or private, digital photo essays offer several benefits. They take advantage of students' innate digital literacy. Even if your students aren't active social media users, I'd bet they still take photos on their phones. This assignment activates that skill set and primes students to think critically about the relationships between image and text. Multimodal compositions like this one help prepare students for life after college and get them to engage with a broader audience. Because the photos themselves are a key component of the essay, this assignment accommodates a wide-range of language abilities. I've had great success assigning digital photo essays to English Language Learners. This assignment is also great for visual learners and gives all students the opportunity to be creative. Last but certainly not least, students have reported that they really enjoyed this assignment and that it also facilitated their learning on our course topics.

[SLIDE] Some course topics are a natural fit for a digital photo essay. Any course with some kind of place- or space- based inquiry would do really well with this assignment. However, I think photo essays are also a great option in literature and language courses. Students can compose a photo essay in response to a text. You might even have them use quotes from the text as captions and pair them with interpretive images. You can also assign a photo essay to express some kind of abstract idea relevant to your course theme. Or, if you're doing a community-engaged course, a photo essay could be a great way for your students to document the semester. In that case, I'd make sure you get the permission of your community partners and participants before your students start taking photos.

[SLIDE] I'll share with you an assignment sheet I used for my course "Writing About Travel." As you can see, I chose the public option here and had my students post their photo essays first to Instagram, and then to the websites they were designing as part of our course. I went with a quite general topic here: their photo essay just had to be about a place. I assigned this over a break when I knew that many students would be traveling, but those who stayed on campus did just as well (I'll show some examples of each at the end of this presentation). In this assignment sheet, I emphasize that the students' images and text need to work together to achieve their purpose. I let the students choose whether their photo essays were going to be narrative (and tell a story) or persuasive (and make an argument). I encourage them to up a separate Instagram account and walk them through the steps they need to complete this assignment. I offer some suggestions to get them thinking in a visual mode, prompting them to consider lighting, framing, angles, and so on when shooting and editing their photos. For this assignment, students needed captions for each photo. I didn't put a word count on these captions, but that is something you can consider. I had them use a hashtag for our class and also create a unique hashtag that expresses the message of their photo essay. Our class hashtag made it easy for me to view all the

students' submissions with one click and created a kind of digital community for our classroom. The students' custom hashtag prompted them to condense their ideas into a short, clever phrase.

On this assignment sheet, I explain to students what is required in their Artist Statement. This is where I want them to clarify their ideas and articulate their process. I also assigned a written reflection with this photo essay. This reflection gives students the opportunity to self-assess their work. If you do a gallery tour with presentations, students can draw from their Artist Statement and Reflection in an "Artist's Talk."

[SLIDE] I've developed several resources to guide and support students through this assignment. Students often complete this assignment using just a smartphone, but if they feel limited by their own technology, they can rent high-quality cameras from the Woodruff Library. Once they have their equipment sorted out, it's time for them to begin drafting. I'll share a brainstorming handout that I use to get students "warmed up" to the idea of a photo essay. An important part of the students' drafting process is coming up with a "shot list" of must-have images that are central to their message. I encourage you to assign model photo essays relevant to your course theme. This will help students learn about the genre and conventions of photo essays, and there are some really great examples out there in sources like the *New York Times* and the *Atlantic*. You can also devote class time or asynchronous work time to students editing their images in a "Photo Lab." You might have students workshop one another's photo essays at any stage of the composition process. I'll include some workshop materials with this presentation, along with a questionnaire you can use to help students reflect on their projects if you do a Gallery Tour.

[SLIDE] I'll conclude by sharing with you some of the great work my students have done on this assignment. Stirling took captivating photos of an abandoned mental hospital in Washington, D.C. In the captions, he quoted from legal documents and medical records, creating a multimedia argument that the decrepit building mirrors the neglect the patients experienced during their time at the institution. His project has comments from Instagram users around the world.

But students don't have to travel far to make a great photo essay. Brooke took photos of Emory's campus and the surrounding areas. She made an argument that Emory is much more isolated from the city of Atlanta than it sometimes claims. Pairing her hashtag #FarRemoved with black and white images, her photo essay depicts a sense of isolation. Interestingly, I had a student in this same class who made similar observations about Emory's campus but had a completely different perspective; she considered this isolation as a good thing. Her photo essay was all about serenity; she saw campus as an urban oasis. This contrast made for some really rich discussion during our GalleryTour, and it also really encapsulates one of my favorite things about this assignment: your students get to see the world through one another's eyes.

[SLIDE] I hope this presentation has encouraged you to consider assigning a digital photo essay in your own courses. Feel free to reach out with any questions. If you do assign something similar, I'd love to see the results. Thanks for listening!