

VISUALIZING THE INVESTIGATIVE STORY

CREATIVE SOLUTIONS FOR COMMON PROBLEMS

Evan Stulberger · Investigative Producer · WNBC-TV – New York, NY



Welcome to the 2014 IRE Panel on Visual Storytelling.
This presentation was prepared by Evan Stulberger,
investigative producer with the WNBC I-Team in New York
City.

Along with being an IRE member, Evan is also a member of
the National Press Photographers Association.

In these slides we'll discuss solutions for problems that
often come up when trying to create visuals for the
video/broadcast investigation.

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@evan4ny

#IRE14

#getvisual

#86712091

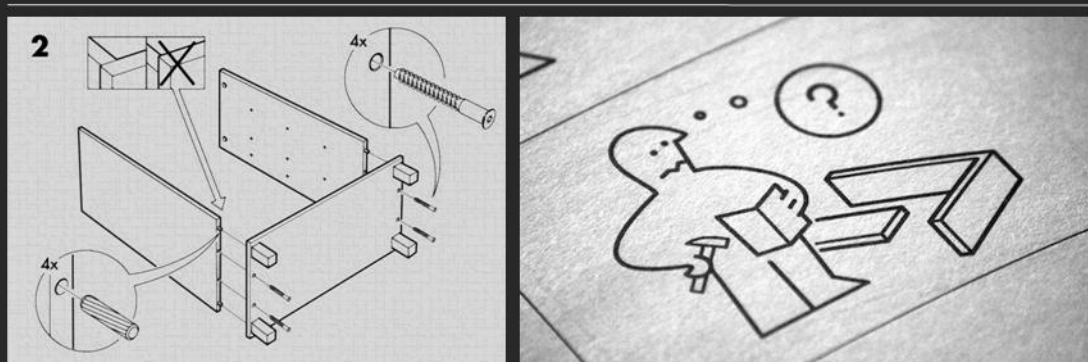
TIP SHEET: bit.ly/1rFQCOy

Evan's twitter handle is @evan4ny.

This presentation can be found with the hastags #IRE14 and #getvisual.

TIP SHEET: bit.ly/1rFQCOy

PROBLEM



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For those of us who come from a general assignment news mindset, the investigative story can often be frustrating. In general assignment news, we're often faced with an event, an action, and a subject. Put those together before your deadline, and the job is done. Investigative teams often have to tell stories about complex or abstract issues. What video do you show when you need to talk about a "conflict of interest?" What about "taxpayer dollars," or "the middle class?" On a regular basis, we feature subjects who shy away from our cameras. Sometimes they want to speak to us, while staying anonymous.

The first thing we need to do is figure out our approach.



We're doing video stories, and that means we can't leave the screen blank. We need to use pictures to help tell our stories. Without a plan or vision, this can put a lot of pressure on the production staff. Visualizing isn't just the responsibility of the photographer or editor. The entire team should be tuned in to the look and feel of a story.

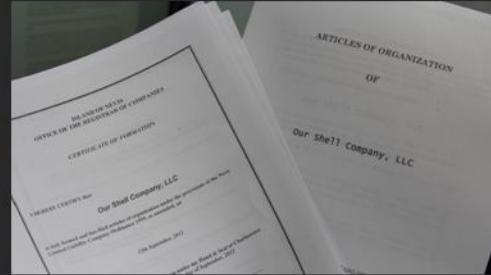


When investigative reporter Chris Glorioso first pitched the idea of creating an off-shore tax haven for television, we all immediately thought that it would make an excellent visual story. The challenge here was transforming a introductory class on tax law into something that would evoke a response from our viewers. We decided to create an experiential piece that showed how quickly, and inexpensively, one could create a shell company. The contrast between the ultra rich and the everyday Joe was going to be a main device in telling the story.



Before writing the script, we shot and gathered our elements. This is the usual procedure. When we were done with the initial shoots we took an inventory of our elements. We had: video of Chris on the phone; shots of the incorporation papers; and two opposing experts to weigh in on the matter.

ELEMENTS



AWESOME TELEVISION

(like, if Game of Thrones had a baby with Breaking Bad)
(and that baby was a dragon)

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We quickly realized that our elements combined would not be enough to carry a viewer's attention through the entire piece. We would need to find a way to bring the viewer in...

INSPIRATION

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We were racking our brains trying to figure out a creative way to visualize this story. We needed some inspiration.



http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L1Zxktsb_xA
@evan4ny #IRE14 #getvisual

At some point in the process, I turned to Chris, and producer Tom Burke, and asked if they've ever seen a Guy Ritchie movie. I told them that the sequences in his movies had a look and feel that I wanted to use in our shell company story. I sent them this reference clip to give them a better idea of what I was thinking (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L1Zxktsb_xA). My pitch was that the film's stylized visuals and sound would work as a great device to transition us between ideas in the story.

With those images in mind, we started adapting the script and gathering more elements. We would create our own sequences, inspired by the Guy Ritchie films.



<https://vimeo.com/album/2928286/video/98989649>
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FULL STORY - OUR SHELL COMPANY:

<http://www.nbcnewyork.com/video/#!/on-air/as-seen-on/I-Team--How-We-Started-An-Offshore-Shell-Company/170415126>

The piece went on to win an Emmy in 2013 in the “Business Story” category. It also received honors from the National Press Photographer’s Association in their annual Best of Video Editing national competition. You can see here how the sequences feel like the previous clip from the movie Snatch. We thought very hard about what images would be iconic enough to represent the “uber-rich” and then what we can show to contrast that with the average person. Champagne versus beer. Cash versus coin. Wall street versus punch cards. Limo versus subway. Since the images moved so quickly, we needed to make sure that they would be clear enough to resonate and stick with the viewer.

The video was shot on a Panasonic HPX-170 and a Canon 7D. Editing was done in Final Cut Pro 7, graphics in Apple Motion and Adobe Photoshop.

INSPIRATION

Film

Documentaries
Hollywood Films
RogerDeakins.com
Cinematography.com
LIGHTING
Editing

TV

Cosmos (Fox)
60 Minutes
News Magazines
Dramas
Commercials
Game Shows
NOVA (PBS)
Editing
Graphics

Internet

YouTube
Vimeo
Casey Niestat
Philip Bloom
lookatevan.com
TV.NPPA.ORG
B-roll.net

Radio

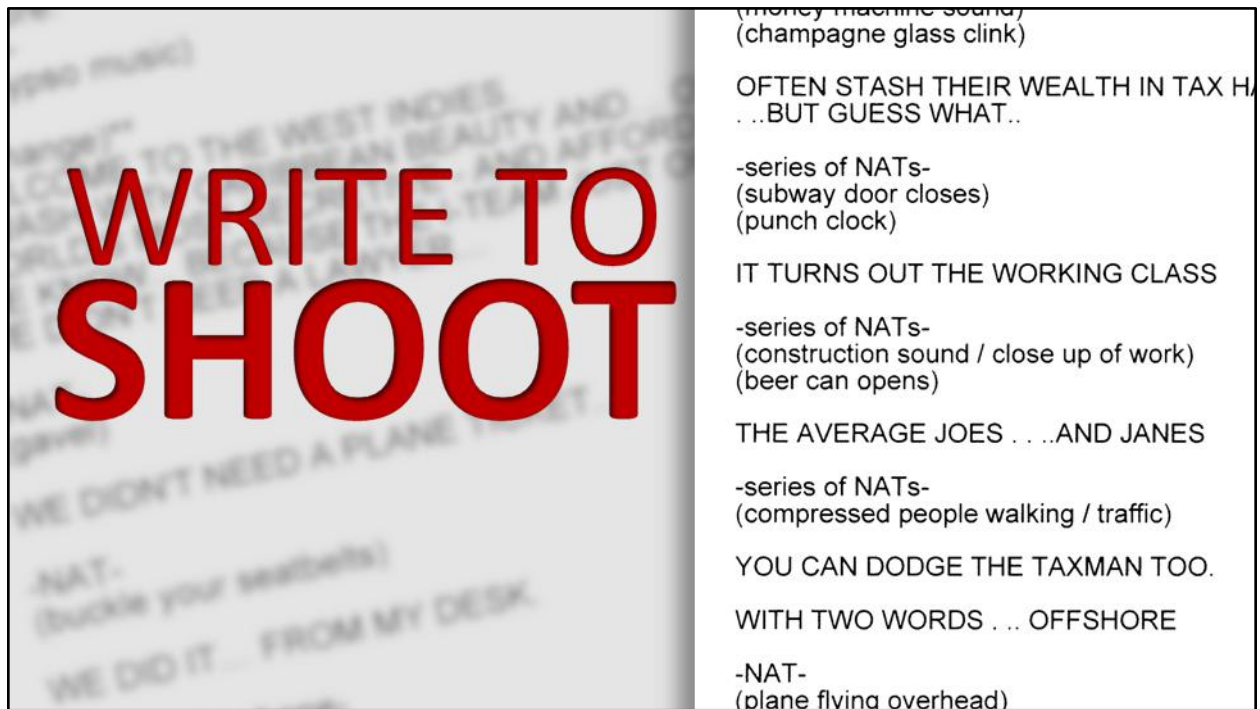
Radio Lab
This American Life
The Moth

Print

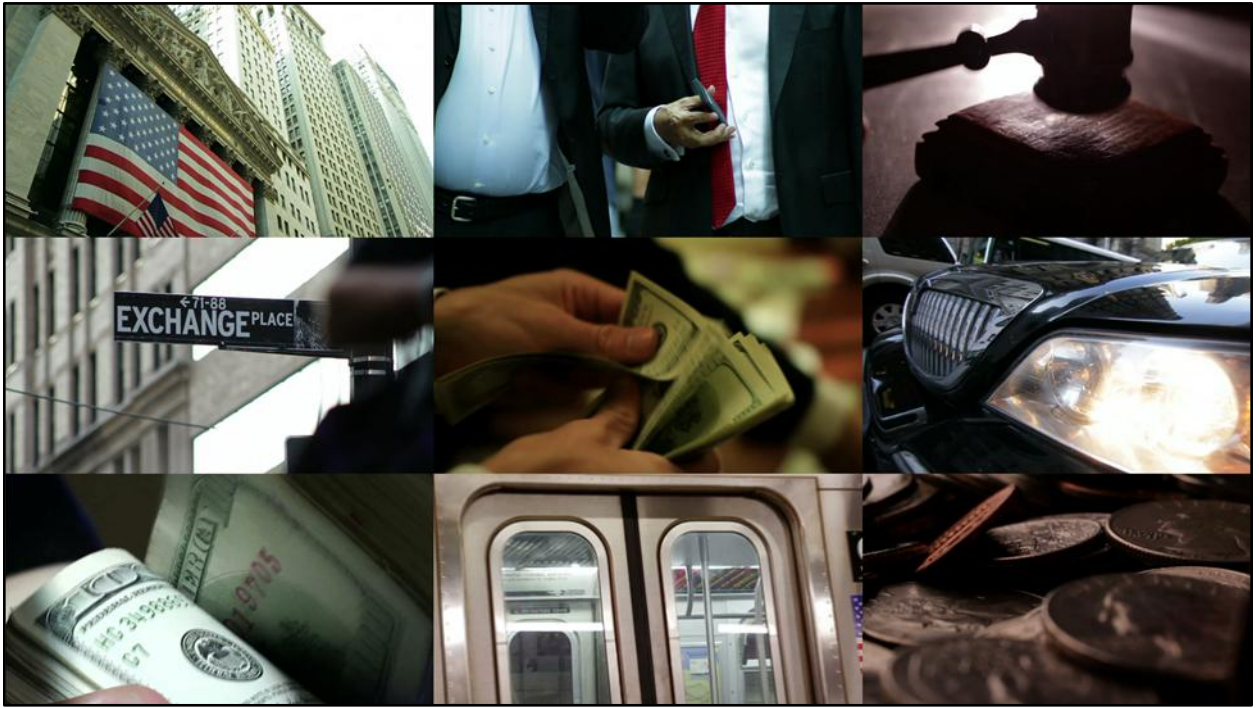
Bloomberg Businesswk
Infographics
Brochures
Magazines
Corporate Materials

Keep your eyes open. We're practically drowning in fresh content every day. Use that to your advantage and draw from other sources to help inform your visual decisions.

Each medium has something to offer the visual storyteller. This slide includes a number of sources that help me create a visual strategy for our stories.



We had a plan and a script for the shell company story before I went out and started gathering b-roll elements used in those introductory sequences. You can see the diversity in video there. If we didn't have a plan, I could have spent weeks running around New York City collecting those elements. We built the script first, and then used that as a shot list, to keep us quick and efficient. Before we rolled one frame on the camera we knew exactly what kind of shots we needed.



Quick tip



Keep track of what you're shooting and archive the raw in a "useful B-roll" library. These stories constantly call for generic, non-specific video. When you get the footage loaded, start to keep your own quick-access library of frequently used shots. I keep a folder with video of the city skyline, healthcare workers, money, etc...

It's also good to keep this library in mind when you're out on a shoot. Look around and think if any of the video from that location would be useful in the future. It's worth spending the extra ten minutes collecting those shots. It'll save you hours down the road.

Quick tip



Almost all of the raw video from the shell company story was archived. The shots of money, transit, and wall street I use on a monthly basis. We shot solid coverage on those days, getting enough footage to keep us from reusing the same shots over and over again.

Quick tip



FULL STORY:
[Juvenile Offenders Get City Jobs](http://www.nbcnewyork.com/video/#!/on-air/as-seen-on/Juvenile-Offenders-Gets-City-Jobs/165795696)
@evan4ny #IRE14 #getvisual



FULL STORY: <http://www.nbcnewyork.com/video/#!/on-air/as-seen-on/Juvenile-Offenders-Gets-City-Jobs/165795696>

QUICK TIP-

There are times when we have to guard the identity of the people who we photograph. The examples in the slide are from a story that focuses on teens in juvenile detention. We were given access to the facility under the condition that we keep the kids anonymous. The slide shows a few creative methods to keep a subject's identity safe.

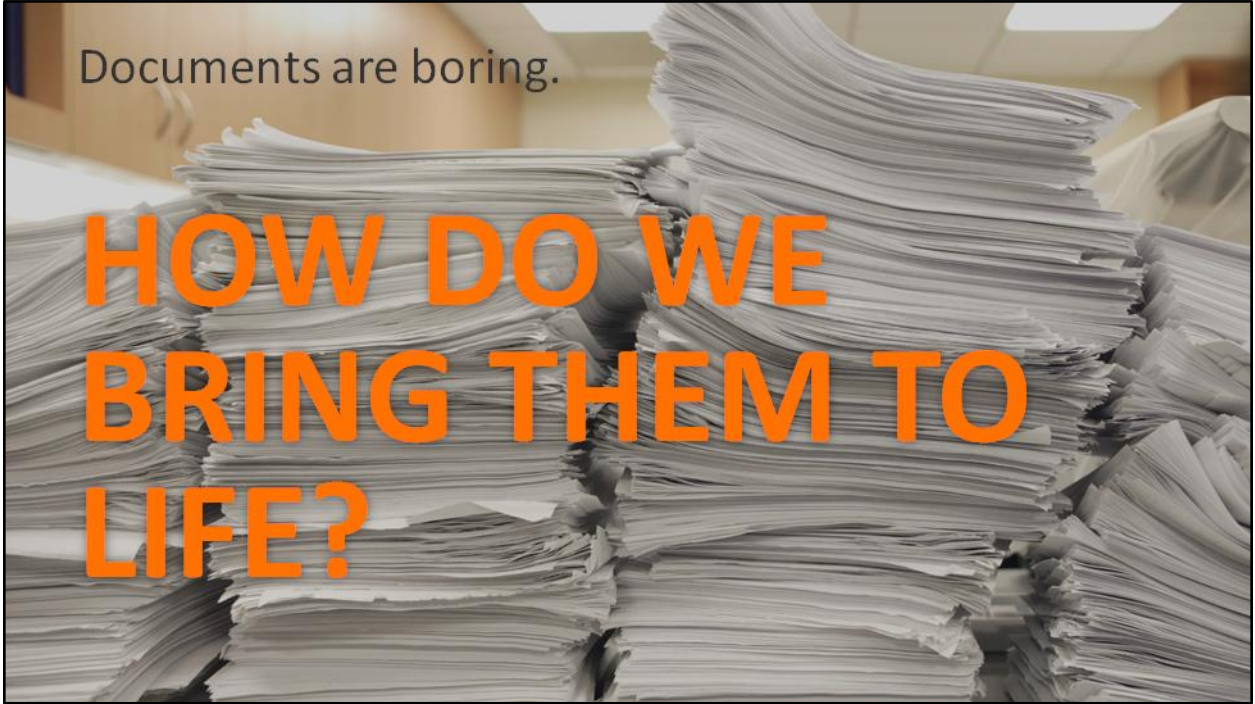
1. Close ups and extreme close ups are some of the best shots to use in these situations. They're a great solution because offer anonymity, while giving the viewer an interesting view of the action. Close ups also help the editor fix problems when the eventual continuity issue creeps up. Be careful not to come back with only close ups. Staying close with the camera can get dizzying, and will rob the viewer from seeing the big picture. Without a wide shot to establish the scene, close ups can be confusing.
2. Since we want some variety in our shots, we can shoot wide and use objects in the scene to block our subject's face. The photo with the ladder is a good example. The angle keeps the painter's face hidden, but we still have a good view of the action.
3. Another way to stay wide, while keeping a subject anonymous is using selective focus to blur out the subject. Look at the shot with the paint cans. I had the camera very close to the paint and put those cans in focus. With painter framed between the cans we can see what he's doing, but since the focus is on the foreground the subject in the distance is blurry – keeping his identity safe. I did this a another time, where I had the guard's keys and radio in focus while shooting the blurry painters in the background.
4. One other method I used in this piece is the silhouette (not pictured). In one room of the

detention center I saw a teen working in front of a window. I exposed the camera for the window, keeping focus on the teen. When he moved in front of the window I had a perfect, sharp, silhouette. You couldn't make out any of his facial features, just his outline. The scratches and graffiti on the window gave some texture to the shot and helped give the viewer a feel for the location.

PROBLEM



PROBLEM: Documents are necessary to tell the investigative story. We want to show the viewers the proof that we obtained. So how do we make these stacks of white wood pulp visually interesting?

A large, messy stack of papers in an office setting. The papers are piled high, with some edges frayed and others slightly curled. The background shows a blurred office environment with wooden paneling and a ceiling light fixture.

Documents are boring.

HOW DO WE BRING THEM TO LIFE?

Viewers might not share the zeal that IRE members have for documents. It's up to us to present them in a way that provides visual interest while serving the story.

WIDE – MEDIUM – TIGHT



<https://vimeo.com/album/2928286/video/99098305>

@evan4ny #IRE14 #getvisual

Example: <https://vimeo.com/album/2928286/video/99098305>

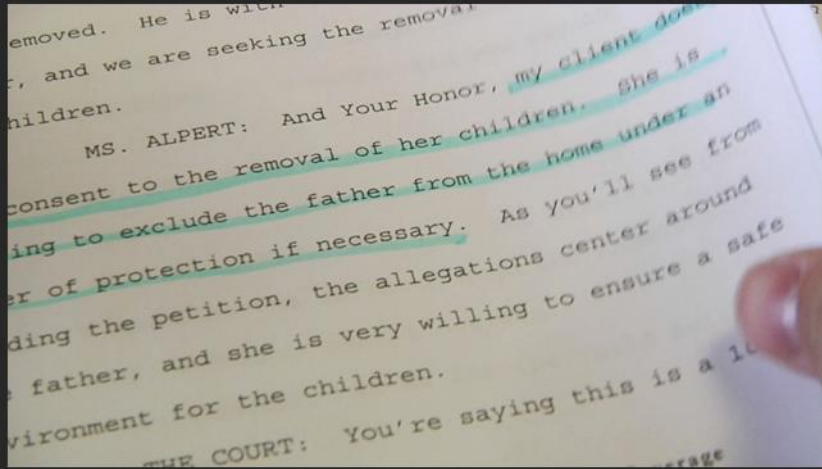
FULL STORY: <http://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/Essure-Birth-Control-FDA-Pain-Studies-I-Team.html>

Treat documents like any other subject that you photograph. Get your coverage. The mantra WIDE – MEDIUM – TIGHT applies here. Use wide shots to show the viewer the document as a whole. This will help orient them once you move in to the pertinent words and phrases. Tight shots are vital here. Showing a wide shot alone isn't good enough. Let the audience see the words that match the ideas in your script. Documents are static objects; they're not going to get up and order a pizza or play shortstop for the Mets. The action needs to come from camera movement or our physical handling of the papers.

The video linked in the slide shows a complicated graphic we had to build for a story about contraceptive complaints (full story here: [nbcnewyork.com](http://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/Essure-Birth-Control-FDA-Pain-Studies-I-Team.html) link). We wanted to show the litany of papers involved in this case, while, at the same time, picking out key parts of the document. The camera is constantly moving, go through paper after paper, showing a detail and a detail there. I highlighted certain phrases that we needed to call attention to. This section of the story moves pretty quickly, so we need to make sure we carefully direct the viewer's eye to the pertinent details.

The files were prepared in Adobe Photoshop CS5. The graphic was then created in Adobe After Effects CS6. I used the 3D camera in the program to navigate around the stack of papers.

TELL A STORY



<https://vimeo.com/album/2928286/video/99098306>

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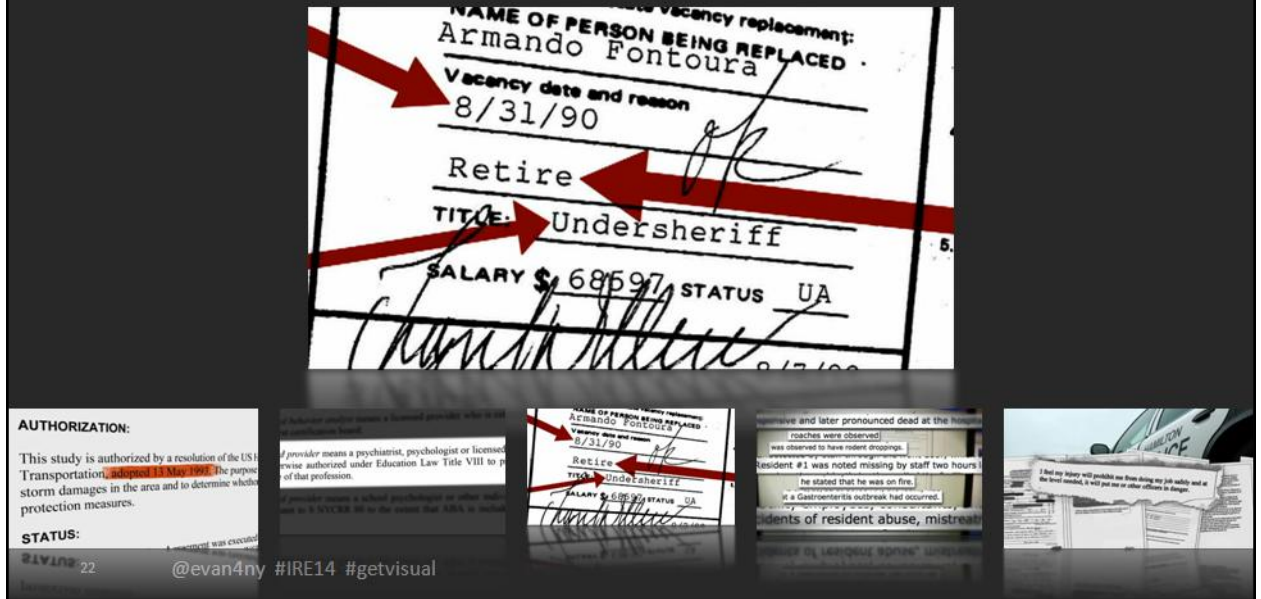
Example:

<https://vimeo.com/album/2928286/video/99098306>

FULL STORY: http://www.nbcnewyork.com/investigations/I-TEAM_-Budget-Cuts-Delay-Family-Court-Hearings_-Unnecessarily-Traumatizing-Some-Children_New-York-228256391.html

Documents can also act as a character in the story. In this piece I had the lines in the court transcript appear as reporter, Melissa Russo, read the phrases that were important for our story. We used the typewriter sound to give the effect a sense of urgency. We weren't in the courtroom when this happened, and neither was the viewer, so we used these documents to help place them in the situation.

EXAMPLES OF PULLING OUT TEXT



Some methods I use to call attention to text in our document shots:

1. The highlighter
2. Darken and blur the parts of the document that aren't important
3. Rip outs using a ripped paper graphic element, or straight rectangles cropped from the original document
4. Arrows and underlines to point to specific words and numbers

WAL-MART TRANSPORTATION LLC

DOT# 63585

Print

State Reported Crashes - Detailed Crash Report (As of May 30, 2014)

Crash Date & Time: 05/30/12 07:25
Report State: NJ
Report #: NJ0012163479

Carrier Information

Carrier Name: Wal-Mart Transportation LLC

DOT #

63585

Carrier Address: 311 North Water Blvd

MC #

011339

Jerseyville, NJ 07746

State Census #

Crash Information

of Fatalities: 0

of Injuries: 0

of Vehicles in Crash: 0

Location

Crash Date & Time: 05/30/12 07:25

Report State: NJ

Location: NJ

Reporting Agency: NEW JERSEY STATE POLICE

City: MOORE TWP

Officer Badge #: 7802

County: HUNTERDON

Report #: NJ0012163479

Crash State: NJ

Crash Reportable: No

State Reportable: No

Crash Environment

Roadway Trafficway: Two-Way Trafficway, Divided, Unprotected Median

Weather Condition: No Adverse Conditions

Road Access Control: Full Control

Light Condition: Night

Road Surface Condition: Dry

Friction: Good

Driver Information

Age: 30

Crash Issued: No

License State: NJ

Valid License: No

Vehicle Information

Identification

Veh. Identification #: 1F150LDR164R023

Make/Model: 2011 FORD F-150

Vehicle Plate #: 1A4027

Vehicle License State: NJ

Hazardous Materials

Release of Cargo: No

Release of Cargo: No

Vehicle Type

Vehicle Configuration: Super-Duty Truck

Cargo Body Type: Box

Gross Vehicle Weight: 6,000

Gross Vehicle Weight Range: 6,000 - 14,000 Pounds

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QUICK TIP:

If you want to add a little texture to your digital documents, simply print them and scan them into the computer. When you scan the physical copy the grain and imperfection of the paper become part of the document. This quick process helps bring those flat PDFs to life.

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QUICK TIP:

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NUMBERS

@evan4ny #IRE14 #getvisual

We love numbers, but it's easy to start throwing them down onto a poor unsuspecting viewer. Before you know it, they're drowning in statistics, focusing on calculus and not your story.



@evan4ny #IRE14 #getvisual

Charts are one option, but it's hard to connect an isolated chart to the subject that you're discussing.

USE YOUR ENVIRONMENT



<https://vimeo.com/99103178>

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EXAMPLE: <https://vimeo.com/99103178>

FULL STORY: <http://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/Bus-Driver-Video-Stop-Sign-Camera-Drivers-Bronx-207576691.html>

USE YOUR ENVIRONMENT



<https://vimeo.com/album/2928286/video/99103180>

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EXAMPLE:

<https://vimeo.com/album/2928286/video/99103180>

FULL STORY:

<http://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/Long-Island-Firefighter-Drill-Team-Racing-Elmont-Taxpayer-Dollars-133130328.html>

STANDUPS TO TELL A NUMBERS STORY

New York	Conduct NYS 5 construction study
New York	Improve bicycle and pedestrian safety on Main Street, Holbrook
New York	Transportation parking facility serving the Harlem Hospital Compl



<https://vimeo.com/album/2928286/video/99099393>

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EXAMPLE:

<https://vimeo.com/album/2928286/video/99099393>

FULL STORY: <http://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/NBC-4-Investigation--NY-Sitting-On-Mountain-of-Unspent-Earmarks-116516768.html>

STANDUPS TO TELL A NUMBERS STORY



<https://vimeo.com/album/2928286/video/99099392>

30

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EXAMPLE:

<https://vimeo.com/album/2928286/video/99099392>

FULL STORY:

<http://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/Kidney-Transplant-Disparity-Dialysis-ProPublica-I-Team-149269465.html>

NO GRAPHICS? NO PROBLEM.



<https://vimeo.com/album/2928286/video/99099389>

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EXAMPLE:

<https://vimeo.com/album/2928286/video/99099389>

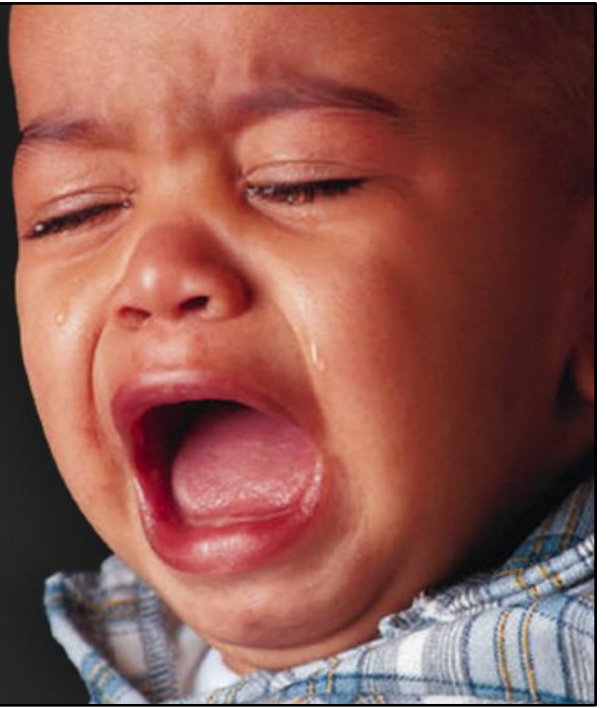
FULL STORY:

<http://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/School-Superintendents-Double-Dipping-NJ-194214491.html>

[illegible]

but,
it's NOT
MY
VIDEO!

@evan4ny #IRE14 #getvisual





Turn lemons into lemonade. Turn piles of bad video into an opportunity to be creative.

Your TV sits this way



Not this way

(vertical video)
(AKA my pet peeve)



I LOVE
VERTICAL
VIDEO!

@evan4ny #IRE14 #getvisual

So hold your phone
this way when filming



Not this way

Vertical Video Public Service Announcement (with puppets)
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bt9zSfinwFA>

VERTICAL VIDEO



<https://vimeo.com/album/2928286/video/99103179>

@evan4ny #IRE14 #getvisual

EXAMPLE:

<https://vimeo.com/album/2928286/video/99103179>

FULL STORY: <http://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/Bus-Driver-Video-Stop-Sign-Camera-Drivers-Bronx-207576691.html>

FRAME WITHIN A FRAME



<https://vimeo.com/album/2928286/video/99103179>
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EXAMPLE:

<https://vimeo.com/album/2928286/video/99103179>

FULL STORY:

<http://www.nbcnewyork.com/video/#!/news/health/Simple-Fitness-Test-Indicates-Heart-Health/123448794>

FRAME WITHIN A FRAME



<https://vimeo.com/album/2928286/video/99103179>
@evan4ny #IRE14 #getvisual

EXAMPLE:

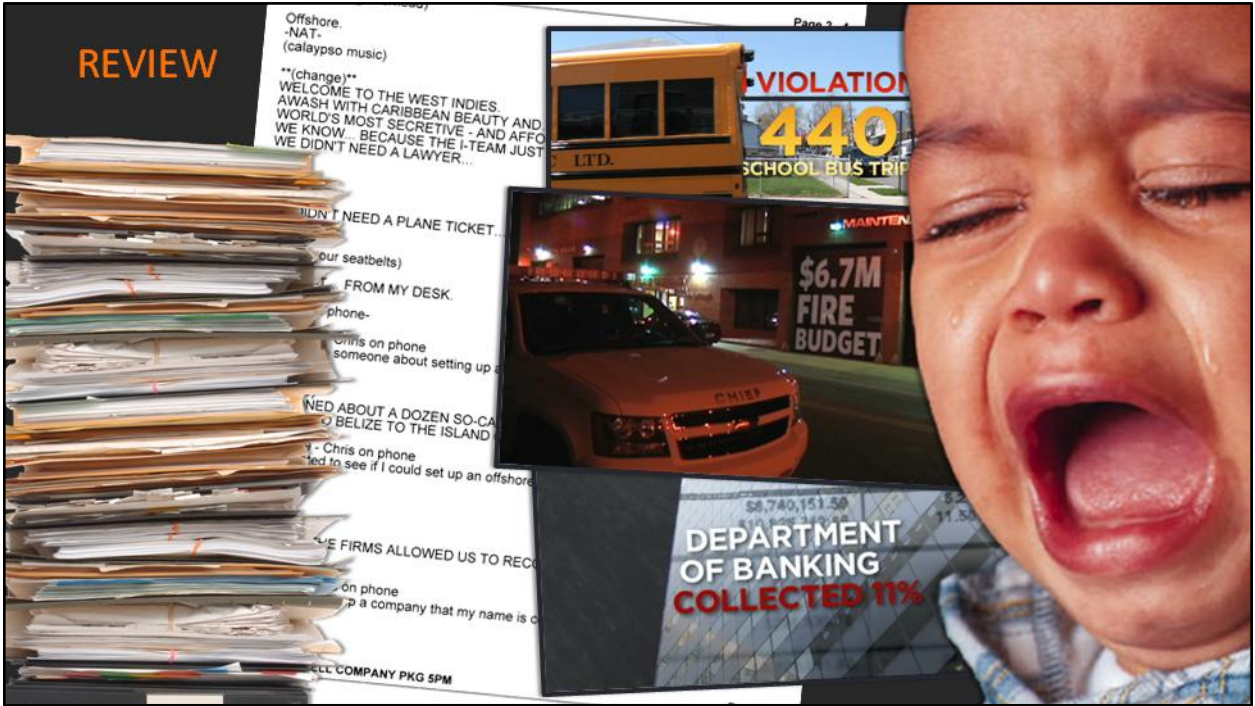
<https://vimeo.com/album/2928286/video/99103179>

FULL STORY:

<http://www.nbcnewyork.com/investigations/New-York-Downtown-Hospital-C-Section-Lawsuit--138783374.html>

REVIEW

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DRAW FROM YOUR EXPERIENCE



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If nothing else, remember this-
We're bombarded by media every second of every day. Use that to your advantage. Look out of news and into other experiences to help inform your visual decisions. It will make your work stand out.

 @evan4ny
evan.stulberger@nbcuni.com

 nbcnewyork.com/investigations

lookatevan.com

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