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How to Write Good Captions in Photojournalism

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Captioning photos is an important part of journalism. Captions must be accurate and informative. In fact, most readers tend to look at the photos, and then the captions, in a story before they decide whether they want to read the story itself.[1] Use the following points to help write a caption that will intrigue the reader enough to read the story.

Method 1   Learning Caption Basics

1   **Check your facts.** One of the most important aspects of any type of journalism is accuracy. If you use incorrect information, the story or photo loses credibility. Before uploading or printing any photo captions, make sure you've checked that anything stated in the caption is accurate.

- Don't print an incorrect caption if you have trouble checking your facts, either because you can't find an appropriate source, or because you're on a deadline. It's better to leave the information out if you aren't sure it's accurate.

2   **Describe something that isn't obvious.** If a photo caption simply describes the visuals in the photo, it's fairly useless. If you have a photo of a sunset and simply caption is as "a sunset" you're not adding any additional information for the reader. Instead, describe details of the photo that are not obvious, like the location, the time of day or year, or a specific event that is taking place.

- For example, if you have a photo of a sunset you might want to caption it as: "Pacific coast sunset, March2016, from Long Beach, Vancouver Island."
- Also avoid using terms like: "is shown," "is pictured," "and looks on," or "above."

3   **Do not start a caption with certain words.** A caption should not begin with the words 'a,' 'an,' or 'the.' These words are too basic and take up valuable captioning room when they aren't necessary. For example, instead of saying: "A blue jay in the boreal forest;" simply say: "Blue jay flying through boreal forest."[2]

- Also, do not start a caption with the name of someone, start the caption with a description first and then include the name. For example, don't say: "Stan Theman near Sunshine Meadow Park." Instead say: "Jogger Stan Theman near Sunshine Meadow Park."
- When identifying where someone is in a photo, you can say "from left." You do not have to say "from left to right."

4   **Identify the main people in the photo.** If your photo includes important people, identify who they are. If you know their names, include them (unless they've asked to remain anonymous). If you don't know their names, you might want to put a description of who they are instead (e.g. "protesters on the streets of Washington, DC").

- While it shouldn't need to be said, make sure any and all names you use are spelled correctly and have the proper title.
- If the photo includes a group of people, or some people who are not relevant to the story (i.e. their names are not required to tell the story), you do not have to name each of them in the caption.[3]

5   **Be as specific as possible.** This advice goes hand-and-hand with being accurate. If you are unsure of where the photo was taken, or who is in the photo, find out. Showing a photo without any specific information may not be useful to the reader, especially if you cannot inform them of the context in which the photo was taken.

- If you were working with another journalist for the story, contact them for more information if needed.
- If you are trying to identify a specific person in the photo, describing where in the photo they are is very useful. For example, if Bob Smith is the only one in a hat, you can say: "Bob Smith, back row in hat."
- While specific is good, you can also phrase your caption so that is starts general and becomes more specific, or starts specific and ends more generally. Either method ensures specificity, but creates easy-to-ready statements.[4]

6   **Label historical photos properly.** If you're using an historical photo in your story, make sure it's labelled properly and includes the date (at least the year) it was taken. Depending on who owns the photo, you may also need to credit another photography and/or organization (e.g. museum, archive, etc.).

7   **Use the present tense in captions.** Because most photos being shown as part of a news story are of things happening "right now," use the present tense in the caption. An obvious exception would be any historical photos, where using the past tense makes sense.[5]

- The nice thing about using the present tense is that it portrays a sense of immediacy and increases the impact of the photo on the reader.

8   **Avoid humour when the photo isn't intended to be humorous.** If the photo you're captioning is of a serious or sombre event, don't try to be funny in the caption. Funny captions should only be used when the photo itself is a joke or of a funny event that is intended to make the reader laugh.

9   **Remember to always include credits and citations.** Every photo should include the name of the photographer and/or the organization that owns the photograph. In actual photographic magazines and publications, photos also include the technical details of how the photo was taken (e.g. aperture, film speed, f-stop, lens, etc.)[6]

- When writing the credits, you don't have to use the term "credited to" or "photo by" if the information is presented in a consistent and understandable format. For example, maybe the credits are always italicized or are a smaller font size.

Method 2   Enhancing the Story with Captions

1   **Use the caption to tell the reader something new.** When a reader looks at the photo they're usually confronted with some form of emotion and some information (based on what they see in the photo). The caption, in turn, should provide the reader with a piece of information they were unaware of from simply looking at the photo. In short, the caption should teach the reader something about the photo.[7]

- Captions should intrigue a reader to investigate the story further and look for more information.
- Captions should also refrain from repeating aspects of the story itself. The caption and the story should complement each other and not be repetitive.

2   **Avoid making judgemental statements.** Captions should be informative, not judgemental or critical. Unless you were actually able to speak to the people in the photo, and asked them what they were feeling or thinking, don't make assumptions based only on their appearance in the photo. For example, avoid "unhappy shoppers waiting in line" unless you actually know they were unhappy.

- Journalism is intended to be objective and informative for the reader. Journalists are suppose to present the facts in an unbiased way and allow the reader to form an opinion.

3   **Do not worry about length of the caption.** A photo may say a thousand words, but sometimes a few words are required to put the photo in context. If a lengthy description is required in order to allow the photo to make sense, that's okay. While you want to try to be as clear and succinct as possible, don't limit the information in your caption if it will be helpful.[8]

4   **Write in a conversational language.** Journalism, in general, doesn't use overly complicated language. But it also doesn't use cliches or slang. Captions should follow the same basic language requirements. Write your captions in a conversational tone, similar to the way you'd address a family member if you were showing them the photo. Avoid cliches and slang (and acronyms). Don't use complicated words if they aren't

needed.

- If the photo is accompanied by a story, try to use the same tone in the caption that was used in the story.[9]

5 **Include unessential story items in the captions.** Stories that accompany photos tend to be about something specific and, obviously, tell a story. If there is a piece of information that is useful to understanding the photo, but isn't necessary in telling the story, put it in a caption instead of in the body of the story.[10]

- This doesn't mean that captions are only used for unimportant items of the story, but rather items that are not essentially to the telling of the story. A caption can be a free-standing mini-story that can include items not used within the story itself.
- Again, remember that the caption and story should complement each other. Not repeat each other.

6 **Determine what punctuation should be used.** If the photo is simply of a person (e.g. headshot) or a photo of a very specific item (e.g. umbrella), it's okay to caption the photo with the name of the person or item without any punctuation. In other cases, it is also okay to use incomplete sentences in a caption, but this may depend upon the publication and their requirements.[11]

- An example of a caption without punctuation might be: "Toyota 345X Transmission"
- An example of the difference between a complete and incomplete caption: Complete — "Actress Ann Levy takes the Acura 325 for a spin on the British test drive course in London." Incomplete — "Taking the Acura 325 for a spin."

7 **Simplify descriptions in subsequent captions.** If multiple, consecutive photos in a story show either the same place or person or event, it is not necessary to keep repeating the details of these items in each caption. For example, if you introduce the person in the first caption using their full name, you can simply refer to them with they last name in subsequent captions.[12]

- It is okay to assume that someone viewing and reading one photo have viewed and read the captions of the previous photos since they likely are in a specific order that tells a story.
- You can also skip being too detailed in the caption if the story itself provides a lot of details. For example, if the story tells the details of the event, you do not have to repeat those details in the captions.

8 **Identify when photos have been digitally altered.** Photos are sometimes enlarged, shrunk, or cropped in order to fit the situation, story, page, space, etc. This type of altering doesn't need to be explained because it doesn't change what is in the image. However, if you've changed the photo in any other way (i.e. changed the colour, removed something, added something, enhanced something unnaturally, etc.) you must identify this in the caption.[13]

- The caption doesn't have to explicitly say what you've changed, but should at least state "photo illustration."
- This rule also goes for unique photography methods like time-lapse, etc.

9 **Considering using a caption-writing formula.** Until you get use to writing captions, you might want to start by using a specific formula. Eventually your captions will likely follow this formula, or something similar, without you needing to think about it. But until then, rely on the formula to ensure you've included all the needed items.[14]

- One such formula is: [noun] [verb] [direct object] during [proper event name] at [proper noun location] in [city] on [day of the week], [month] [date], [year]. [Why or how.]
- An example written using this formula: "Dallas firefighters (noun) battle (present-tense verb) a fire (direct object) at the Fitzhugh Apartments (proper noun location) near the intersection of Fitzhugh Avenue and Monarch Street in Dallas (city) on Thursday (day of the week), July (month) 1 (date), 2004 (year)."[15]

Method 3 **Avoiding Caption Mistakes**

1 **Do not be arrogant.** Arrogance in captions comes when the person writing the caption doesn't care about the reader, and simply writes a caption that is easy at the moment of writing. This can also be consider being selfish because the writer cares more about themselves than the reader who is trying to decipher what the

photo and story are about.

- This can also happen when a writer is trying to be 'fancy' and try something new or clever. There is no need to get complicated. Keep things simple, clear, and accurate.

2 **Avoid making assumptions.** You know what they say about people who assume … ! The same goes for writing captions. These assumptions could be on the part of the journalist, photographer, or even someone else at the publication where everything is being put together. Don't make assumptions about what was going on in the photo, or who the people are. Find out the truth and only include what's accurate.

- This also goes for style and format. If you aren't sure if the publication has a specific format for captions, ask. Don't use a format you like that may need to be completely revised later because you didn't ask.

3 **Make sure you aren't sloppy.** Sloppiness happens when someone just doesn't care, or doesn't consider the situation important enough to double-check. The result of sloppiness can be incorrect spelling, the wrong names for people in the photo, captions that don't match the photos, referring to a photo in the story incorrectly, etc. If you're proud of your work, do a good job from start to finish.

- This can also happen when someone tries to use another language in the caption, but doesn't check if it has been written properly. Google Translate is not the same as double-checking if the language is correct!

4 **Remember that what you print is considered fact.** As a journalist, whatever you print either in your story or caption is usually considered fact by your readers. They rightfully assume you've done your fact-checking and that what you're telling them is accurate. If you were too lazy or sloppy to do the job, you risk passing along incorrect information to a large number of people.

- Also remember that once information gets "out there," it can be hard to correct. Especially if that information is related to an event that was tragic, stressful or still ongoing.