

Reading photographs

Using questions to decode, evaluate, and understand photographic images.

BY MELISSA THIBAUT AND DAVID WALBERT



Figure 1. A picture is worth a thousand words — but which words?
Interpreting photographs thoughtfully is a core skill of visual literacy.

The saying "a picture is worth a thousand words" is never more true than with a photograph. Photographs have tremendous power to communicate information. But they also have tremendous power to communicate *misinformation*, especially if we're not careful how we read them. Reading photographs presents a unique set of challenges. Students can learn to use questions to decode, evaluate, and respond to photographic images.

What's in a picture?

When photographic images are used to convey information, as in mass media and on the Web, consider the content of the photograph and the intent of the photographer. It is important to think consciously and critically and to pay attention to all aspects of the image. Chances are, you already ask your students to answer the four "W" questions when viewing a photograph: who, what, where, and when?

- *Who* or *what* do you see?
- *When* was this photograph taken — what is happening in the photograph?
- *Where* was this photograph taken?

What we usually don't ask of a photograph is the fifth "W" — *why*. This is where critical thinking and visual literacy come in. Here are some questions that ask why:

- Why did the photographer select these particular elements to include in the photograph? What *don't* you see?
- Why did the photographer emphasize certain elements and not others? What's in focus? Is only one person or element in focus, or are many elements in focus?
- Why did the photographer take the picture at this moment? What happened before or after this picture was taken?
- Why did the photographer take the picture from this angle? What might the scene have looked like from another vantage point — from left, right, behind, above, or below?

A photographer's decisions

When we ask these *why* questions, we put ourselves in the scene — and in the mind of the photographer. The photographer made a series of decisions about where, when, and how to take the photograph. To read a photograph thoughtfully, we have to consider those decisions. In more technical language, these decisions include the following:

- What is the photograph's *composition*?
- What *moment in time* does the photograph capture?
- What is the *setting* of this photograph?
- What is the *focal point* of the photograph?

COMPOSITION

As the photographer decides where to stand, moves the camera, or zooms in on a scene, she selects what to include in the image. What did the photographer choose to include or exclude in the image? If she had zoomed out or stood further away, what additional information could we see? The composition of the photograph can also be altered later by cropping. How does the decision to frame only certain elements in the photograph affect the message conveyed by the photograph?

Example. The photograph¹ of a crowd of jubilant Iraqis toppling the statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad on April 9, 2003, is one of the most common images of the recent

war in Iraq. A closeup shot shows a crowd of primarily Iraqis toppling the statue. A wide shot of the same scene would have revealed that the crowd in the square was made up of primarily US forces and journalists. How does this change the story told by the photograph? And how does it change the story to show an American soldier draping an American flag across the statue before it was toppled, which was the image beamed across the Arab world from Baghdad that day? Whether or not the photo was staged or edited, this is an excellent example of a situation where it is important to ask not just "What *do* you see?" but also "What *don't* you see?"

A MOMENT IN TIME

Depress the shutter and a moment is captured on film. But why depress the shutter at that moment? And if a series of pictures is taken in quick succession, why was the image of one moment chosen for display or publication over that of another? What happened just before this moment, or just after it?

Example. The ability to select the "decisive moment" is the defining greatness of photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson. In the National Portrait Gallery exhibition *Tête à Tête: portraits by Henri Cartier-Bresson*², the photographs³ featured famous individuals captured in a defining moment. "My passion has never been for photography 'in itself,'" Cartier-Bresson wrote in 1994, "but for the possibility — through forgetting yourself — of recording in a fraction of a second the emotion of a subject, and the beauty of the form." (Quoted in the Washington Post Magazine Photogallery and Exhibition⁴.)

The website⁵ about the *Tête à Tête* is a great place to start an exploration of time and photography. Be sure to check out the excellent teachers' resources⁶ for use with the exhibit. The activities provided may be used with students' own photos and include excellent visual literacy topics such as "What's in a Photograph?" and "Composition and the Decisive Moment."

SETTING

The setting of a photograph may be a matter of circumstance or a conscious decision. For the most part, photojournalists take pictures wherever the people or events they are covering happen to be at a given moment. Some photographs, however, are more planned and may be scheduled for a specific location. In either case, decisions about how the subject is placed in the setting may indicate more or less of a "sense of place."

Example. One type of photography in which setting is very important is travel photography. Nothing says London like a photo of Big Ben or the London Bridge. Using landmarks, monuments, or famous natural elements in a photograph is a core technique for evoking a sense of place. Of course, the photographer assumes a certain contextual understanding on the part of the viewer: the Statue of Liberty in the background will represent New York to nearly all Americans, but the Sydney Opera House, though equally distinctive, may be less widely recognized in this country. The Fodor's Focus on Photography⁷'s travel photography pages discuss the preparations and techniques a traveling photographer may consider as he captures his journey on film.

FOCAL POINT

The focal point of a photograph — the point to which the viewer's attention is drawn — is usually the image's main subject. In other cases, however, the viewer's eye may be drawn, through the use of light or the depth of field, to a different place in the photograph. The photographer selects the focal point not only by focusing the camera but also through other techniques. For example, adjusting the shutter speed to bring only one element into focus immediately elevates that to the most important part of the image. If one element in the photograph is strongly backlit, it may seem to glow and thus draw the viewer's attention. By combining these techniques, the photographer can determine the viewer's point of view.

Example. What is the photographer's thought process as she composes, frames, shoots and selects an image? Listen as photographer Lisa Maizlish narrates the decisions she made in photographing the students featured on the PBS reality show *American High*⁸. How did she capture the essence of each student? How can the same students be portrayed as both childlike and mature? What images does the photographer like best and why?

The viewer's decisions

Just as a photographer makes decisions in creating a photograph, viewers make decisions about how to read it. In particular, viewers have to decide how to interpret a photograph's *context* — what might be happening outside the time and space captured in the image — but even the simple "W" questions can be open to debate.

In many photographs, information about the people, events, setting, and so on are made *explicit* by the photographer — there are distinct visual clues that tell us who the people are, what they are doing, and where and when the photograph was taken. In other cases, though, that information is *implicit* — implied but not clearly communicated by the photographer, or left to be inferred by the viewer. The identities of the people in the photograph may be unclear; their purpose may be unknown; the time and place may be difficult or impossible to discern.

When the context is implicit, viewers are left to fill it in on their own, making assumptions based on their own experience or values. Viewers may not even realize that they are making those assumptions — we may fill in a photograph's context without really thinking about it. And, of course, the line between explicit and implicit context is not always clear. Just as successful written communication requires that the writer and reader speak the same language, successful visual communication requires that the photographer and viewer share a common "visual language" of signs, clues, and assumptions. So if we want to read a photograph thoughtfully, we have to "unpack" the assumptions we make about its context.

EXAMPLE 1: EXPLICIT CONTEXT

In this photograph, the context appears to be explicit (click the photo for a larger version):



Figure 2.

We could probably all agree fairly quickly that this photograph shows a birthday party for the man in the white sweater, that the other people in the photo are his family, that it is taken in his home (or in the home of someone else in the photo), and that he is about to blow out the candles. Easy enough.

Then again, someone from a different culture might ask why this round brown object is on fire. (Is he a god? Are they making an offering to him of some kind?) So when we view a photograph, we have to be careful that we have enough cultural background in common with the photographer to correctly interpret what we see. In this case, we know that the round flaming thing is a cake and that the candles signify that it is someone's birthday. But a quick flip through the pages of *National Geographic* will offer photographs whose context may be far less clear to us.

EXAMPLE 2: IMPLICIT CONTEXT

In this photograph, the context is less clear. (Again, click the photo for a larger image.)



Figure 3.

What do we know about this photograph? We see a group of girls playing, or at least enjoying themselves. Clearly they are African American. But are they rich, poor, or middle class? Do they live in city or in a small town? Where are they — at school? on a playground? on a street? When was the photo taken? In summer, apparently, but that's all we can tell; we don't know where the girls have been or where they're going. Why are they wet, and what's the water in the background?

To fill in these gaps, we make assumptions. You may have made many assumptions about the photograph unconsciously and almost instantly on seeing it. You may even imagine stories of these girls' lives based on your own experience. What do you suppose is actually going on here? To find out if you're right, read the caption:

Black youngsters cool off with fire hydrant water on Chicago's South Side in the Woodlawn community.

If we know Chicago, we now know that these children live in a poor urban neighborhood. The online exhibit⁹ from which we borrowed this photograph also says that it was taken in 1973. Did you recognize that the water in the background was from a fire hydrant? If you grew up in a city, you probably did; if not, you may have thought there had been a storm — again, cultural background comes into play. Were your assumptions correct? Can you always trust your first instinct? (And even having read the caption, how much do we really know about these girls and their lives?)

EXAMPLE 3: NO CONTEXT

Finally, look at this photo (click for a larger version). What do you think is going on here?



Figure 4.

This photograph provides almost no context at all. We can't see the people's faces clearly. The bus or van appears to be pretty old, which might help us date the image. Our first guess as to location is probably no better than "the middle of nowhere." It's early in the morning, to judge from the light — or maybe it's evening, or maybe it's just a badly taken photograph! More importantly, are these people getting on or off the bus? Where are they going, or where have they been, and why?

Here's the caption from the Library of Congress:

Loading bus, leaving Manzanar for relocation, Manzanar Relocation Center, California.

That's probably no help, but a little research tells us that the Manzanar Relocation Center was a facility where Japanese Americans were processed for relocation in internment camps during World War II. One of the authors admits that his first guess was that these people were leaving some small town to look for work during the Depression — the right mood, maybe, but certainly the wrong time, place, and meaning. The photograph by itself tells us very little about what's going on; we probably could have invented any number of captions, and you'd have believed us!

PHOTOGRAPHY AND WRITING

The terms and concepts used in "Reading Photographs" may sound familiar. We use many of the same terms in writing. See our series about the Five Features of Effective Writing to see how you can use the concepts of Focus, Organization, Style and more as you teach.

IMAGE CREDITS

- "5-year-old Harold Walker picking cotton," photograph by Lewis Hines (1916). From the Library of Congress National Child Labor Committee Collection. Reproduction number LC-USZ6-1202. Use this search (see <http://www.learnnc.orghttp://lcweb2.loc.gov/pp/nclquery.html>) to locate.

- "Loading bus, leaving Manzanar for relocation, Manzanar Relocation Center, California," photograph by Ansel Adams (1943). From the American Memory Project collection *"Suffering Under a Great Injustice": Ansel Adams's Photographs of Japanese-Americans at Manzanar* (see <http://www.learnnc.orghttp://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aamhtml/aamhome.html>).
Reproduction number: LC-DIG-ppprs-00293.
- "Black youngsters cool off with fire hydrant water on Chicago's South Side in the Woodlawn community (see http://www.learnnc.orghttp://www.archives.gov/exhibits/portrait_of_black_chicago/part_2/part_2_image_2.html)," photograph by John White (June, 1973). From the National Archives and Records Administration collection *Portrait of Black Chicago* (see http://www.learnnc.orghttp://www.archives.gov/exhibits/portrait_of_black_chicago/introduction.html), taken as part of the Environmental Protection Agency project DOCUMERICA. Reproduction number: NWDNS-412-DA-13684.
- The photograph of the birthday party is from a royalty-free image collection. Photographer unknown.

On the web

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Notes

1. See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/gall/o,8542,933922,00.html>.
2. See <http://www.npg.si.edu/exh/cb/index.htm>.
3. See <http://www.npg.si.edu/exh/cb/flah1.htm>.
4. See <http://www.washingtonpost.com/>.
5. See <http://www.npg.si.edu/exh/cb/index.htm>.
6. See <http://www.npg.si.edu/exh/cb/index-prog.htm>.
7. See <http://www.fodors.com/focus/>.
8. See <http://www.pbs.org/americanhigh/weekly/lisasphotos.html>.
9. See http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/portrait_of_black_chicago/introduction.html.

Contributors

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Melissa joined LEARN NC as Education Resource Coordinator in August 2000, working to identify and catalog great web resources and develop innovative instructional materials. Since becoming Executive Director in 2008, Melissa oversees all areas of the LEARN NC program, including publications, professional development, online learning, and instructional technology.

Before joining LEARN, Melissa was a Media Coordinator at W. G. Enloe Gifted and Talented International Baccalaureate High School in Raleigh, N.C. Her experience as a librarian has included

university, public, literacy, and school programs. Her master's degree in Library and Information Science is from the University of South Florida, Tampa, and her undergraduate degree in Economics is from Colby College, Waterville, Maine. She is currently a PhD-seeking student in Public Administration at North Carolina State University, focusing her study on educational policy and public management.

When not working at LEARN NC, you may find Melissa reading, creating scrapbooks, or writing letters (yes, snail-mail!).

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David Walbert is Editorial and Web Director for LEARN NC in the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Education. He is responsible for all of LEARN NC's educational publications, oversees development of various web applications including LEARN NC's website and content management systems, and is the organization's primary web, information, and visual designer. He has worked with LEARN NC since August 1997.

David holds a Ph.D. in History from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is the author of *Garden Spot: Lancaster County, the Old Order Amish, and the Selling of Rural America*, published in 2002 by Oxford University Press. With LEARN NC, he has written numerous articles for K–12 teachers on topics such as historical education, visual literacy, writing instruction, and technology integration.

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