

Understanding How Photographs Communicate

Here are a few of the techniques and strategies by which a photo conveys meaning:

Angle: The vantage point or direction from which the artist photographs the subject.

Framing: By deciding where the edges of the image will be, the photograph determines what you will (and will not) see—whether the subject will fill the frame and appear “close up” or will be seen at a distance as part of a larger context.

Light: Light is one of the most powerful tools of the photographer. The manipulation of light and dark and the sharpness of contrast between light and dark contribute to the mood a photograph conveys.

Focus: The clarity or blurriness of the image. The range between the nearest and farthest things that appear in clear focus defines the photograph’s depth of field.

Composition: What is in the foreground? Are the elements arranged in any particular pattern? Do you see any geometric shapes? Are the lines of the photograph straight or curving, thick or thin? Do any visual elements repeat? Is the visual weight of the photograph balanced: on each side? top to bottom? diagonally? (Adapted from Susan Schekel, personal communication, Stony Brook University)

Using Photographs in the Classroom

For many years, I have been a fan of the news photo awards given annually by *Editor & Publisher* magazine. Each year, newspapers and magazines are recognized for excellence in photography. Categories include hard news, soft news (feature), sports, and more. You can search previous years’ winners at www.editorandpublisher.com.

When working with groups of students, I recommend printing out and distributing a different photo to each group. Because they will not likely have had any prior experience analyzing photos, they will need some guidance. I have found the simple Photo Analysis Worksheet (Worksheet 3.1) developed by the National Archives to be particularly useful.

Photo Analysis Worksheet

Step 1. Observation

- A. Study the photograph for two minutes. Form an overall impression of the photograph and then examine individual items. Next, divide the photo into quadrants and study each section to see what new details become visible.
- B. Use the chart below to list people, objects, and activities in the photograph.

People	Objects	Activities

Step 2. Inference

Based on what you have observed above, list three things you might infer from this photograph.

Step 3. Questions

- A. What questions does this photograph raise in your mind?
- B. Where could you find answers to them?

WORKSHEET 3.1 Analysis Worksheet: Photograph.

Source: www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/photo.html also in PDF format: www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/

Getting Started

Before using the photo analysis handout, it might be helpful to ask the question: What do you see? Students, working in groups, should create a list. I suggest images be used without accompanying captions. (One idea is to cover the photo caption with a piece of construction paper, so that the caption can be read at a later time.) Captions draw students' attention away from the photo, even though they do provide the context. But that is not the goal here. We want students simply to gather information solely from the image itself. When they don't have any context, they are required to look deeply at the photo—and through this process, they will see details they would not have seen otherwise.

After the teacher gives them time to study their photos, representatives of each group should be called on to explain what they observed. (It may be helpful for students to stand in front of the class and hold up their group's photo or for a teacher to project it in the front of the room so that the entire class can see it). After each group has shared its findings, a student should lift the cover from the caption below its photo, and read it aloud. This completes the activity, allowing students to understand the context of the photo.

A host of websites now provide teachers with many options for locating and using photos with students. Here are a few:

Resources for Photos

Daily News Photos

<http://news.yahoo.com>

In the “News Search” toolbar on the left, click first on the magnifying glass icon and select the “news photos” option from the drop-down menu. Then enter words that describe what you're searching for to produce a host of images.

The National Archives

www.archives.gov/research/start/by-format.html#photos

LIFE Magazine Archives

<http://images.google.com/hosted/life>

EduPic Graphical Resource

www.edupic.net

Smithsonian Photography Initiative

<http://photography.si.edu>

Picturing Modern America 1880–1920

<http://cct2.edc.org/PMA/>

Read Write Web

www.readwriteweb.com/archives/digital_image_resources_on_the_deep_web.php

Pictures of the Year International

www.poyi.org/65/winners.html

Pulitzer Prize Winning Photographs

www.pulitzer.org/bycat

Framing

Imagine holding a camera and looking through its viewfinder. You might move the camera, or yourself, in order to improve the composition of the picture inside your viewfinder, and thus your final picture. You are deciding what to include and what to leave out. This is called *framing*. When many of us look at a photograph, we usually don't ask the critical-thinking question: What is outside the frame? But we should. Consider the baby photo examples Debbie Abilock presents on pages 109 and 110 of her NoodleTools “Visual Literacy” handout (see Figures 3.3a and 3.3b; www.noodletools.com/debbie/literacies/visual/digitnews.pdf).

Check out the news photography framing exercise “How Framing Affects Our Understanding” at www.frankwbaker.com/framing.htm.



FIGURE 3.3a It looks like the baby is reading the newspaper. Its hand is holding the corner of the page, perhaps ready to turn the page, but let's consider what we don't see.



FIGURE 3.3b Now we see the baby is actually sitting on someone's lap. Seeing what's "outside the frame" changes the viewer's understanding.

Visual Literacy Inquiry

Graphic designer Erin Riesland (2005) suggests that students who are learning to incorporate visual literacy into their thinking consider the following questions:

- What am I looking at?
- What does this image mean to me?
- What is the relationship between the image and the displayed text message?
- How is this message effective? (Riesland, 2005, para. 10)

Manipulation of Images

Pick up a magazine aimed at women and, even though it's hard to tell, most likely the cover has been retouched or digitally altered. The use of software programs to change photographic images has become so commonplace that many of us don't realize or recognize it. *Newsweek* magazine has an online gallery worthy of student attention. "Unattainable Beauty," which can be found at www.newsweek.com/feature/2010/unattainable-beauty.html, takes a look at a decade's worth of what it

says are bad digital photo alterations and provides background on how the original images were changed.

Another take on this topic that is appropriate for young women is from Sweden. It invites students to discover how magazine covers are manipulated (<http://demo.fb.se/e/girlpower/retouch>).

Activity

Students can be encouraged to take sides on this issue. Should photographs of models or actors be digitally altered? Have your students conduct their own research. What rights do famous people give up when their photos are used on magazine covers? Do you think retouched images should be labeled with a symbol?

We think of the manipulation of images as a contemporary issue, especially with the advent of Photoshop and other photo-altering software. But the truth is that images have been manipulated since photography was first invented. Examples of this can be seen by going to the website gajitz.com and searching for the article “Before Photoshop: 7 Photo Edits That Literally Made History” (<http://gajitz.com/before-photoshop-7-photo-edits-that-literally-made-history>).

I’ve created a lesson plan, “Critically Viewing Photographs,” designed to get students thinking about a famous photograph taken after the Battle of Gettysburg. The lesson plan can be found at www.frankwbaker.com/civilwarlessonplan.htm.

Kate Doesn’t Like Photoshop

In 2003, actress Kate Winslet made news not for a movie she made but for her comments about how she was portrayed on a magazine cover. The British edition of *Gentleman’s Quarterly* magazine featured Winslet, whose legs had been significantly trimmed and tummy flattened. She protested, “The retouching is excessive. I do not look like that and more importantly I don’t desire to look like that.” In 2005, she objected to photo retouching in a movie poster (Schewe, 2005).