

# Captions

Behind every great picture there should be a well-written, informative and compelling caption. A picture is not complete without one; and reading a good caption may be THE reason a reader ends up getting interested in a story. A photojournalist is not a complete journalist unless he or she is responsible for gathering the information for a caption and writing it. A publication runs into problems of accuracy and ineffective reporting when the photographer is left out of the loop in the caption process. In short, the caption is critical!

Here are some how-to tips to help you report and write informative and interesting captions that contribute to the picture:

- Great captions are “written” in the field. Good reporting – getting the story and asking the right questions, as well as gathering quotes – has to happen when you are “gathering” your pictures. If you wait until you get back to the office to do this it will be too late and you’ll end up making desperate phone calls on deadline, or worse, guessing your way through the caption, which leads to inaccurate and badly written copy, as well as disappointed (and even angry) readers.
- Prepare for gathering caption information on assignment by including several pens and a note pad in your camera bag. You may also want to bring along a voice recorder to insure that the quotes and additional information you gather are complete and accurate.
- Prepare a list of questions you might want to ask your subject BEFORE you go on your assignment. This could be as simple jotting down general forms of the Who, What, Where, When, Why, How questions (see below for further description of these questions). But also consider who you are photographing and what you as a reader of your publication might want to know about the subject if you were reading the story.
- When should you gather the information for the caption? Begin as soon as you get there, jotting down observations and writing descriptions of the places and people you are photographing. You should also immediately begin to determine who you need to talk to get the information you need.
- When do you start asking questions, before, during or after the shoot? It depends on the situation. My rule of thumb is that if something is going on that I don’t want to miss, I shoot first and ask questions later. I don’t want to break up the moment. But if the moment is broken up anyway because my subjects are aware of my presence, I put my cameras down and sit down and have a conversation with them. This is a great way to break the ice, find out more about other aspects of the story I could photograph other than the obvious ones and to also gather facts and quotes for captions. Overall, unless the moment is happening right when I begin, or it is obvious what it is I need to shoot, I like to try to talk with someone in charge of an event, or the subject, BEFORE I start taking pictures, better yet, even before I get there, via a phone conversation. The more informed I am going into a project, the more I can anticipate great pictures.
- When asking questions, be EXTREMELY curious. Your subjects will love you for it, because it will indicate that you are interested in them beyond just taking the picture; this is critical to gaining their trust. Ask them the basic questions, WHO they are, WHAT the event or story is about, WHERE it is happening, WHEN it is happening (or you’ll need to note when the event took place later when you actually write the caption); WHY the event/story is important and HOW the event/story made a difference in the lives of your subjects.
- The WHO and HOW are great questions to ask to evoke a response that will produce an effective quote, something every caption should have. A quote should not be merely a fact, it should reflect how the subject feels, it should reveal character, it should move the reader. A quote in a caption is equivalent to a moment in a picture. And with a good quote, in conjunction with the basic facts, the caption tends to write itself.
- If you’ve gathered well, most of your work is done by the time you get back to the office, but not quite! You need to make sure your spelling and grammar is flawless. Don’t rely on spell check (keep a dictionary handy at all times). Use the Associated Press Stylebook to check words, abbreviations, etc., that are unique to the journalism world (and often different than what you’ve learned in English class!). Always have your caption checked by an editor; this is not a sign of weakness, it is actually quite the opposite. Behind all the great writers of the world are great editors. But don’t let the editor write the caption. You were there! You know best what happened. Just have him/her check it.
- Some caption NO-NOs: don’t repeat what is obvious in the picture; don’t use descriptive, flowery language; write in third person and do not include yourself in the caption; don’t insert your own opinion – you are a merely a “bridge” between your subject and your viewers, so stay in the background; don’t assume anything is happening in a picture – if you are not sure, ask. If you are sure, still ask.
- Above all, believe in yourself as a writer and reporter. Don’t avoid it; embrace it. Don’t buy the line that photographers take pictures because they cannot write. That is simply untrue. Great writing IS visual. So it makes sense that great photographers who already think visually should be able to write effectively. Don’t confuse difficulty with mechanics (spelling, grammar) with the ability to report well and write creatively!