

Photo Captions & Keywords  
By John Smock, Knight Fellow  
International Center for Journalists

After the headline, photo captions are often the first elements of a publication to be read. For search engines like Google and photo archives descriptive text in the form of captions and keywords associated with an image are how images are identified. Writing photo captions and keywords is an essential part of the news photographer's job. A photo caption should provide the reader basic information needed to understand a photograph and its relevance to the news. It should be written in a consistent, concise format that allows news organizations to move the photo to publication without delay. Keywords should work to associate the issue with broad searchable themes.

Professional standards of clarity, accuracy and completeness in caption writing should be as high or higher than any other writing that appears in a publication. A poorly written caption that is uninformative or worse: misleading can diminish the impact of a good photo and undermine its credibility as journalism. If readers can't trust the accuracy of the simple information included in a caption, why should they trust what they read in the rest of the publication?

In the interactive world and for online slideshows the caption may play an expanded role relative to print depending on how the information will be worked into presentation. In this context captions may be written quite differently. The captions for a slideshow should not repeat the same information over and over but work as short, progressive explanations of the individual image in the context of the entire slideshow. In some cases they are presented as title cards that present short "factoids," additional information or stats that help provide context.

## WRITING CAPTIONS

In most photo captions the first sentence identifies the people and place in the photograph and supply the date and location where it was taken. The second (and perhaps third) sentence should provide contextual information to help readers understand what they are looking at.

The exact format for captions vary from publication to publication, but a basic photo captions should:

- Clearly identify the people and location that appear in the photo. Professional titles should be included as well as the formal name of the location. SPELL NAMES CORRECTLY (check against the spellings in the article if necessary) For photographs of more than one person, identifications typically go from left to right. In the case of large groups, identifications of only notable people may be required and sometimes no I.D.s are required at all. Your publication should establish a standard for its photographers.
- Include the date and day the photograph was taken. This is essential information for a news publication. The more current a photo is the better. If an archive photograph or photograph taken prior to the event being illustrated is used, the caption should make it clear that it is a "file photo."
- Provide some context or background to the reader so he or she can understand the news value of the photograph. A sentence or two is usually sufficient.
- Photo captions should be written in complete sentences and in the present tense. The present tense gives the image a sense of immediacy. It does not always logical to write the entire caption in the present tense. Often the first sentence is written in the present tense and following sentences are not.

- Be brief. Most captions are one or two short, declarative sentences. Some may extend to a third sentence if complex contextual information is needed to explain the image completely.

Here are two examples:

*New York City Police Officers check subway cars at Columbus Circle on Friday, Oct. 7, 2005. Security in the city's mass transit system has been increased following yesterday's announcement of a specific terrorist threat to the subway system. (AP Photo/John Smock)*

*A school bus is towed following a collision with a car on the Major Deagan Expressway (I-87) in the Bronx on Friday, Sept. 30, 2005. There were no major injuries reported among the 42 students and eight adults on board from St. Joseph School in the Bronx. (AP Photo/John Smock)*

*General Pervez Musharraf, President of Pakistan, addresses the audience at the Columbia University World Leadership Forum in New York on Friday, Sept. 16, 2005. In town for the United Nations World Summit this week, several heads of state are speaking at the university. (AP Photo/John Smock)*

*(L-R) New York City Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein and Deputy Mayor for Education Denis Wolcott at PS 40 in Brooklyn on Thursday, Sept. 22, 2005, announce the highest scores for New York City public school 4th graders on state math exams since standards-based testing began four years ago.*

*9 Nov. 2005 - Cairo, Egypt - A woman displays her ink-stained finger after voting. Egyptians took to the polls today for the first round of parliamentary election. President Hosni Mubarak and his ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) have allowed several opposition groups, most notably the formerly banned Muslim Brotherhood party, to be among the 5,000 candidates campaigning for more than 400 seats. Photo credit: John Smock/SIPA*

*9 June, 2005 – Kabul, Afghanistan -- A child severely burned by a car bomb yesterday receives care at the Indira Gandhi Institute of Child Medicine. Doctors are struggling with limited medicines to treat the growing number of child victims whose injuries are often compounded by other medical problems, such as poor nutrition, that diminish a child's ability to heal. John Smock/SIPA.*

*Musician Phil Stewart uses software by Ejamming Inc. to play online with musicians (pictured on the screen) in other parts of New York City at the DigitalLife Expo on Friday, Oct. 14, 2005. The three-day DigitalLife Expo features cutting-edge technology for work, home and play. (AP Photo/John Smock)*

*Esquire magazine Editor-in-Chief David Granger, left, and Publisher Kevin O'Malley, right, pose with actress Jessica Biel at her unveiling as the magazine's 2005 'Sexiest Woman Alive' on Thursday, Oct. 6, 2005, in New York City. (AP Photo/John Smock)*

Here are some things to watch out for:

- Don't be vague in your caption and make sure names of people and places are correctly identified and spelled. Be accurate. A photojournalist is a journalist.

- If a photo is manipulated digitally beyond simple sizing and color control, it should be labeled as a “photo illustration” in the caption or in the photo credit. If unusual photo techniques are used, such as time-lapse photography, it should be noted in the caption. Explanations may also be needed for special effects, such as the use of an inset or a picture sequence.
- Do not use verbs or verb phrases such as “looks on” or “poses” “or “is pictured above” in writing captions. They are obvious and boring.
- Do not editorialize or make assumptions about what someone in a picture is thinking: “an unhappy voter...” or “A fortunate survivor...” The reader should be given the facts and allowed to decide for herself or himself what the feelings or emotions are.
- Do not characterize the content of a picture as beautiful, dramatic, horrifying or in any other such descriptive terms that should be evident in the photograph. If it's not evident in the photograph, your telling the reader won't make it happen.
- “Wild Art,” standalones, and day shots are all terms used to describe photographs that are published independently of a written story. They often require a more comprehensive caption. Some publications even provide small headlines.

## COLLECTING CAPTION INFORMATION

This is the news business and time counts. Photographers often do research and collect the names and spelling of expected participants prior to the event (the Internet can be very helpful with this). Some will often begin writing their captions in spare moments before or during an event. This expedites filing when the event is over. At well organized events press releases are provided that will include the names of participants.

But often the information required for a caption isn't available before a picture is taken. Gathering caption information during an event is difficult. Photographers do it in a variety of ways. Most photographers carry small notebooks (sometimes hung around their necks) in which to write the required info. Increasingly professional cameras have small audio recorders built in that allow you to record required information. Other journalists at an event can also be a source for information. But, be careful: other journalists are often wrong.

Over time photographers develop techniques and timing to make collection caption information easier. For example, at events where several photos are filed, photographers will often use the same general description in all of their captions, merely changing the significant names in the individual photos.

## WRITING KEYWORDS

Keywords should relate the image to broader topical themes of interest to viewers. Ideally keywords should not repeat words that appear in the caption, but because search engines view and rank text identified as a keyword different than caption text, there are some exceptions. These might include: geographic information, names of significant public figures or other proper nouns.

Here are some guidelines for keyword writing:

- Use between five and 15 keywords
- Spell words out completely
- Order the keywords in terms of importance or likely search choice
- Select clear, common descriptors: ‘environmental’ rather than ‘green’

- Include broad descriptors for specific names used in the caption. For example, if 'the Indira Ghandi Institute of Child Medicine' appears in the caption use 'children' and 'hospital' as keywords
- Include alternative descriptors to those that appear in the caption.
- Include geographic location
- Include important proper names

Here are a couple examples:

*Caption: New York City Police Officers check subway cars at Columbus Circle on Friday, Oct. 7, 2005. Security in the city's mass transit system has been increased following yesterday's announcement of a specific terrorist threat to the subway system. (AP Photo/John Smock)*

Keywords: New York City, Terrorism, New York City Police Department, Public Transportation, Mass Transit, National Security.

*Caption: 9 June, 2005 – Kabul, Afghanistan -- A child severely burned by a car bomb yesterday receives care at the Indira Gandhi Institute of Child Medicine. Doctors are struggling with limited medicines to treat the growing number of child victims whose injuries are often compounded by other medical problems, such as poor nutrition, that diminish a child's ability to heal. John Smock/SIPA.*

Keywords: Afghanistan, children, war, terrorism, car bomb, hospital, malnutrition,

## FILING PHOTO CAPTIONS AND KEYWORDS

Captions SHOULD BE FILED BY THE PHOTOGRAPHER with the photograph. In some rare cases captions are phoned in, or at large events where a team of photographers and editors are on site, editors may write the captions to free the photographers to take more photos. News organizations may add to or change keyword based on how their database is organized.

PhotoShop and photo editing programs such as Adobe Lightroom, Adobe Bridge, Apple's Aperture and Photo Mechanic (by Camerabits) -- just to name a few -- all allow the photographer to attach caption/keyword information to a photograph as embedded text. Caption information is attached to a photograph in a very simple programming language developed for the International Press Telecommunications Council and is called "IPTC" information.

The IPTC info is part of what collectively is called metadata. Metadata includes not just the IPTC information the photographer provides but may also include the camera's shooting data – file size, aperture, date, etc. (this info is saved in the EXIF format). In the not-so-distant future metadata may also include global positioning system (GPS) information.

Different news organizations have different systems for inputting the caption info into IPTC data fields depending on the software program you use. Some fields are not used at all. You will need to talk to a photo editor to find out exactly how they'd like the caption information presented. Remember: the caption information the photographer provides not only accompanies the photo for immediate use but is also helps catalog photos in the archive for future use. Information such as keywords, dates, and the photographer's name are important search references.

