

Lesson Plan Learning Materials Best Practical

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:

1. What is the photograph's composition?
2. What moment in time does the photograph capture?
3. What is the setting of this photograph?
4. What is the focal point of the photograph?

1: 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 photograph 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 close-up 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?"

2: 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 á Tête: portraits by Henri Cartier-Bresson*, the photographs 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 Photo gallery and Exhibition.)

The website about the *Tête á Tête* is a great place to start an exploration of time and photography. Be sure to check out the excellent teachers' resources 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."

3: 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 Photography's travel photography pages discuss the preparations and techniques a traveling photographer may consider as he captures his journey on film.

4: 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*. 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):

“birthday party with cake and candles”

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.)

“African American girls playing”

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 exhibit 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?)