

We commonly use “titles” for our photographs. By design, “titles” may simply describe the obvious – “Shore at Sunset” – and leave any additional narrative for the viewer. On the other hand, photojournalists and their employers, customers, or agencies require “captions.” Photojournalists must provide clear, but brief information about the event and the contents of their photographs.

Submissions to the photojournalism competition should give due consideration for effective and efficient captioning. It is an integral part of the photojournalist’s art and craft.

**Basic tips for writing photojournalism captions.** (Purloined from WikiHow and other resources.)

**Check your facts.** One of the most important aspects of any type of journalism is accuracy. If you use incorrect information, the story or photo loses credibility. Before uploading or printing any photo captions, make sure you’ve checked that anything stated in the caption is accurate.

- Don’t print an incorrect caption if you have trouble checking your facts, either because you can’t find an appropriate source, or because you’re on a deadline. It’s better to leave the information out if you aren’t sure it’s accurate.

**Describe something that isn’t obvious.** If a photo caption simply describes the visuals in the photo, it’s fairly useless. If you have a photo of a sunset and simply caption is as “a sunset” you’re not adding any additional information for the reader. Instead, describe details of the photo that are not obvious, like the location, the time of day or year, or a specific event that is taking place.

- For example, if you have a photo of a sunset you might want to caption it as: “Pacific coast sunset, March 2016, from Long Beach, Vancouver Island.”
- Also avoid using terms like: “is shown,” “is pictured,” “and looks on,” or “above.”

**Do not start a caption with certain words.** A caption should not begin with the words ‘a,’ ‘an,’ or ‘the.’ These words are too basic and take up valuable captioning room when they aren’t necessary. For example, instead of saying: “A blue jay in the boreal forest;” simply say: “Blue jay flying through boreal forest.”

- Also, do not start a caption with the name of someone, start the caption with a description first and then include the name. For example, don’t say: “Stan Jones near Sunshine Meadow Park.” Instead say: “Jogger Stan Jones near Sunshine Meadow Park.”
- When identifying where someone is in a photo, you can say “from left.” You do not have to say “from left to right.”

**Identify the main people in the photo.** If your photo includes important people, identify who they are. If you know their names, include them (unless they've asked to remain anonymous). If you don't know their names, you might want to put a description of who they are instead (e.g. "protesters on the streets of Washington, DC").

- While it shouldn't need to be said, make sure any and all names you use are spelled correctly and have the proper title.
- If the photo includes a group of people, or some people who are not relevant to the story (i.e. their names are not required to tell the story), you do not have to name each of them in the caption.

**Be as specific as possible.** This advice goes hand-and-hand with being accurate. If you are unsure of where the photo was taken, or who is in the photo, find out. Showing a photo without any specific information may not be useful to the reader, especially if you cannot inform them of the context in which the photo was taken.

- If you were working with another journalist for the story, contact them for more information if needed.
- If you are trying to identify a specific person in the photo, describing where in the photo they are is very useful. For example, if Bob Smith is the only one in a hat, you can say: "Bob Smith, back row in hat."
- While specific is good, you can also phrase your caption so that it starts general and becomes more specific, or starts specific and ends more generally. Either method ensures specificity, but creates easy-to-read statements.

**Use the present tense in captions.** Because most photos being shown as part of a news story are of things happening "right now," use the present tense in the caption. An obvious exception would be any historical photos, where using the past tense makes sense.

- The nice thing about using the present tense is that it portrays a sense of immediacy and increases the impact of the photo on the reader.

**Avoid humor when the photo isn't intended to be humorous.** If the photo you are captioning is of a serious or somber event, don't try to be funny in the caption. Funny captions should only be used when the photo itself is a joke or of a funny event that is intended to make the reader laugh.

**Remember to always include credits and citations.** Every photo should include the name of the photographer and/or the organization that owns the photograph.

- When writing the credits, you need not use the term "credited to" or "photo by" if the information is presented in a consistent and understandable format. For example, maybe the credits are always italicized or are a smaller font size.

**For examples of professional captioning see this NWT link and the many other credible news outlets.**

[The New York Times- The Week in Pictures: March 3, 2017](#)