

Enhancing the Story with Captions

Co-authored by Heather Gallagher Last Updated: January 10, 2022



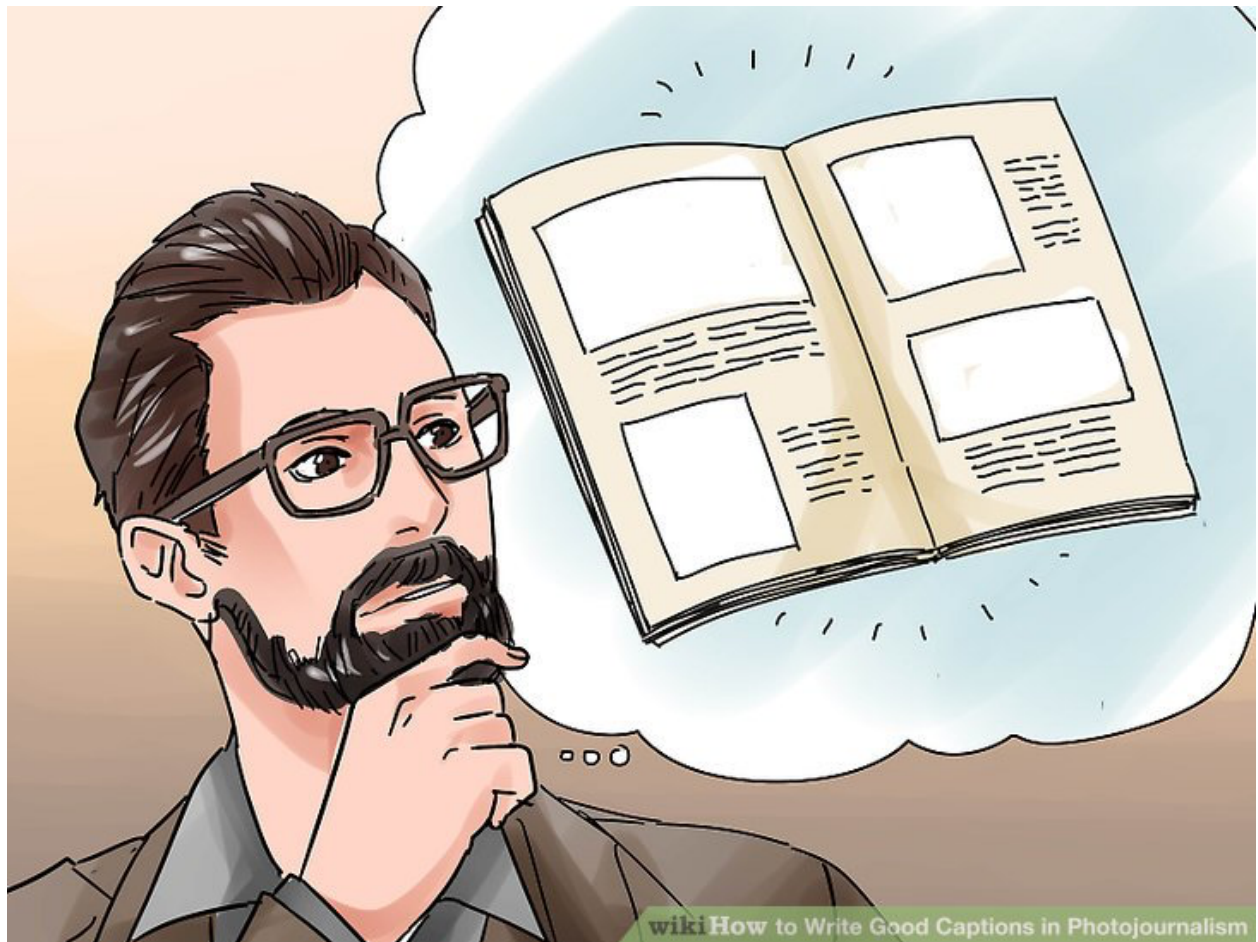
1 Use the caption to tell the reader something new. When a reader looks at the photo they're usually confronted with some form of emotion and some information (based on what they see in the photo). The caption, in turn, should provide the reader with a piece of information they were unaware of from simply looking at the photo. In short, the caption should teach the reader something about the photo.

- Captions should intrigue a reader to investigate the story further and look for more information.
- Captions should also refrain from repeating aspects of the story itself. The caption and the story should complement each other and not be repetitive.



2 Avoid making judgmental statements. Captions should be informative, not judgmental or critical. Unless you were actually able to speak to the people in the photo, and asked them what they were feeling or thinking, don't make assumptions based only on their appearance in the photo. For example, avoid "unhappy shoppers waiting in line" unless you actually know they were unhappy.

- Journalism is intended to be objective and informative for the reader. Journalists are supposed to present the facts in an unbiased way and allow the reader to form an opinion.



3 Do not worry about length of the caption. A photo may say a thousand words, but sometimes a few words are required to put the photo in context. If a lengthy description is required in order to allow the photo to make sense, that's okay. While you want to try to be as clear and succinct as possible, don't limit the information in your caption if it will be helpful.

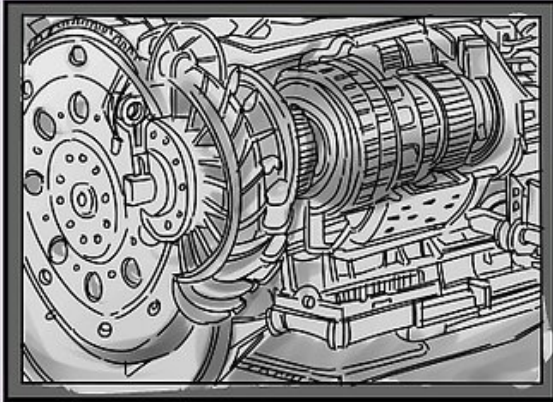


- 4 Write in a conversational language.** Journalism, in general, doesn't use overly complicated language. But it also doesn't use cliches or slang. Captions should follow the same basic language requirements. Write your captions in a conversational tone, similar to the way you'd address a family member if you were showing them the photo. Avoid cliches and slang (and acronyms). Don't use complicated words if they aren't needed.
- If the photo is accompanied by a story, try to use the same tone in the caption that was used in the story.

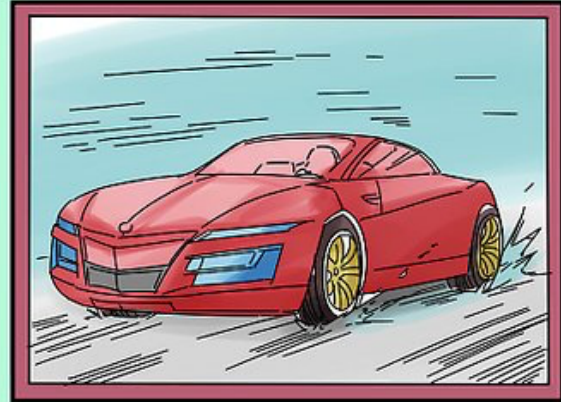


5 Include unessential story items in the captions. Stories that accompany photos tend to be about something specific and, obviously, tell a story. If there is a piece of information that is useful to understanding the photo, but isn't necessary in telling the story, put it in a caption instead of in the body of the story.

- This doesn't mean that captions are only used for unimportant items of the story, but rather items that are not essential to the telling of the story. A caption can be a free-standing mini-story that can include items not used within the story itself.
- Again, remember that the caption and story should complement each other. Not repeat each other.



Toyota 345X Transmission



Actress Ann Levy takes the Acura 325 for a spin on the British test drive course in London

wikiHow to Write Good Captions in Photojournalism

6 Determine what punctuation should be used. If the photo is simply of a person (e.g. headshot) or a photo of a very specific item (e.g. umbrella), it's okay to caption the photo with the name of the person or item without any punctuation. In other cases, it is also okay to use incomplete sentences in a caption, but this may depend upon the publication and their requirements.

- An example of a caption without punctuation might be: "Toyota 345X Transmission"
- An example of the difference between a complete and incomplete caption: Complete — "Actress Ann Levy takes the Acura 325 for a spin on the British test drive course in London." Incomplete — "Taking the Acura 325 for a spin."



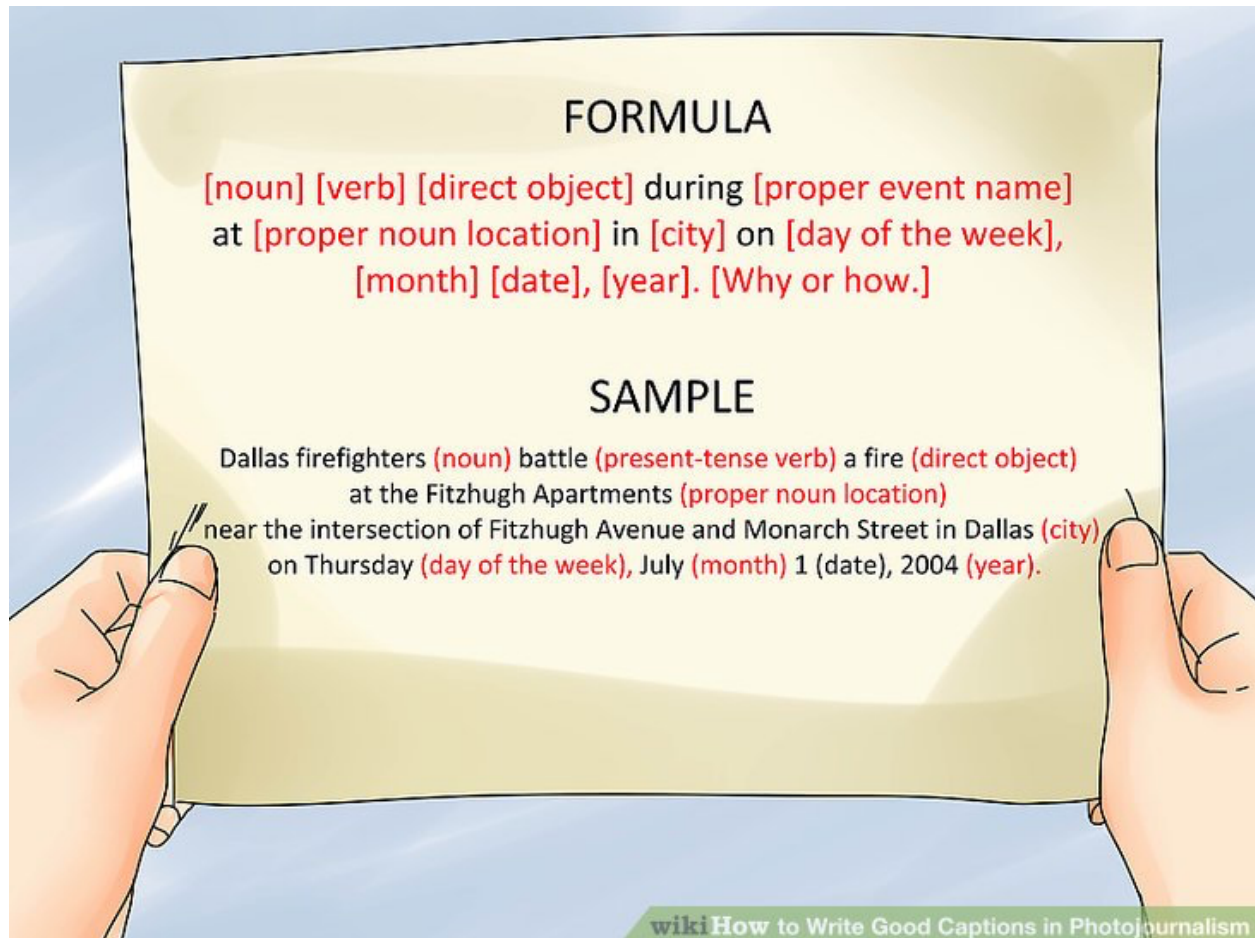
7 Simplify descriptions in subsequent captions. If multiple, consecutive photos in a story show either the same place or person or event, it is not necessary to keep repeating the details of these items in each caption. For example, if you introduce the person in the first caption using their full name, you can simply refer to them with their last name in subsequent captions.

- It is okay to assume that someone viewing and reading one photo have viewed and read the captions of the previous photos since they likely are in a specific order that tells a story.
- You can also skip being too detailed in the caption if the story itself provides a lot of details. For example, if the story tells the details of the event, you do not have to repeat those details in the captions.



8 Identify when photos have been digitally altered. Photos are sometimes enlarged, shrunk, or cropped in order to fit the situation, story, page, space, etc. This type of altering doesn't need to be explained because it doesn't change what is in the image. However, if you've changed the photo in any other way (i.e. changed the color, removed something, added something, enhanced something unnaturally, etc.) you must identify this in the caption.

- The caption doesn't have to explicitly say what you've changed, but should at least state "photo illustration."
- This rule also goes for unique photography methods like time-lapse, etc.



9 Considering using a caption-writing formula. Until you get use to writing captions, you might want to start by using a specific formula. Eventually your captions will likely follow this formula, or something similar, without you needing to think about it. But until then, rely on the formula to ensure you've included all the needed items.

- One such formula is: [noun] [verb] [direct object] during [proper event name] at [proper noun location] in [city] on [day of the week], [month] [date], [year]. [Why or how.]
- An example written using this formula: "Dallas firefighters (noun) battle (present-tense verb) a fire (direct object) at the Fitzhugh Apartments (proper noun location) near the intersection of Fitzhugh Avenue and Monarch Street in Dallas (city) on Thursday (day of the week), July (month) 1 (date), 2004 (year)."

Avoiding Caption Mistakes



1 Avoid making assumptions. Don't make assumptions about what was going on in the photo, or who the people are. Find out the truth and only include what's accurate.

- This also goes for style and format. If you aren't sure if the publication has a specific format for captions, ask. Don't use a format you like that may need to be completely revised later because you didn't ask.



2 Make sure you aren't sloppy. Sloppiness happens when someone just doesn't care, or doesn't consider the situation important enough to double-check. *The result of sloppiness can be incorrect spelling, the wrong names for people in the photo, captions that don't match the photos, referring to a photo in the story incorrectly*, etc. If you're proud of your work, do a good job from start to finish.

- This can also happen when someone tries to use another language in the caption, but doesn't check if it has been written properly. Google Translate is not the same as double-checking if the language is correct!



3 Remember that what you print is considered fact. As a journalist, whatever you print either in your story or caption is usually considered fact by your readers. They rightfully assume you've done your fact-checking and that what you're telling them is accurate. If you were too lazy or sloppy to do the job, you risk passing along incorrect information to a large number of people.

- Also remember that once information gets “out there,” it can be hard to correct. Especially if that information is related to an event that was tragic, stressful or still ongoing.