Photo Captioning Guide

MNICS

Photo captions are the most read body type in a publication. Of all the news content, only the titles of stories or headlines have higher readership than captions. It follows that standards of accuracy, clarity, completeness and good writing are as high for captions as for other type. As with headlines, captions must be crisp. As with stories, they must be readable and informative.[1]

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.[2]

READER BEHAVIOR

When writing a caption, it is useful to have clearly in mind the typical reader behavior when "using" a photograph and accompanying text:

- First, the reader looks at the photo, mentally capturing all or most of the most obvious visual information available. Often this reader look is merely a glance, so subtle aspects of the picture may not register with many readers.
- When that look at the photo sparks any interest, the reader typically looks just below the photo for information that helps explain the photo. That's when captions must perform.
- Then, typically, the reader, after digesting the information, goes back to the photo (so be sure you enhance the experience and explain anything that needs explaining).[3]

REQUIRED INFORMATION

WHO: The subject: Always use full names and titles the first time you refer to someone. (*Use "unidentified" and NOT "anonymous" to describe someone you haven't identified)*

WHAT: The action taking place (the verb and it's objects)

WHEN: The date the picture was made. Do not use the day of the week. *Example:* October 18, 2003. Multiple syllable months may be abbreviated.

WHERE: The place, City and State. (or city and country if outside the U.S.)

WHY: Explains why the picture is important

[1,3]Malcom Gibson "A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words." Ku.edu. 20 February 2013.
[2]John Smock "Writing Photo Captions." ijnet International Journalists' Network. 8 August 2008. 20 February 2013.

FORMAT

Most photo captions consist of two sentences. The first sentence identifies the people and place in the photograph and supplies the date and location where it was taken. The second sentence should provide contextual information to help readers understand what they are looking at. Captions should be written in complete sentences and in the present tense.

First Sentence:

1. DATELINE (IN ALL CAPS): **CITY, STATE - DATE:** *(Example:* ELY, MN - OCTOBER 18:)

2. Describe the picture in the present tense using an "action" verb which best describes what the person is doing.

   Examples: Gestures, Speaks to, Waves to, Walks, Walks with, Accompanies, Arrives, Arrives with, Smiles for the camera, Poses for photographers, Brandishes, etc… *Avoid using non-action verbs such as "is seen."*

3. Structure the first sentence in the following order: *Who, What, When and Where*.

Second Sentence:

1. This is the "WHY" sentence.

2. This sentence gives context to the picture and may explain why it is important.

3. Sometimes it's just the latest news about the subject with no relation to the actual image itself. It can be written in the past tense.

SAMPLE CAPTIONS

KARLSTAD, MN - OCTOBER 3: A fire crew from Wisconsin works to secure a fireline on October 3, 2012 just outside of Karlstad, MN. The day before, the city was partially evacuated when the fire reached the edge of town, destroying many homes and other property. (Photo by Mark Erickson/MNICS)

ST. PAUL, MN - NOVEMBER 3: President George W. Bush receives a standing ovation while campaigning in Minnesota for U.S. Senate Republican candidate Norm Coleman November 3, 2002 at the Xcel Energy Center in St. Paul, Minnesota. Coleman faces a close race against former Vice President Walter Mondale, who became the Democratic candidate after the death of Senator Paul Wellstone. (Photo by Mark Erickson/Getty Images)

* This photo captioning guide is not intended as a writing style guide. It is intended merely as a guide to a standard format for photo captions where one might not otherwise exist. Agency representatives should follow their agency style guidelines as appropriate. Additional questions can be directed to Mark Erickson merickson@southmetrofire.com.