Working Assumptions

HOW-TO

Writing for Photographs

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workingassumptions.org

Working Assumptions is a cultural non-profit that explores the everyday give-and-take of family and care through visual storytelling, encouraging reflection and dialogue.

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Writing for Your Photograph

This **how-to** is designed **for learners** of all skill levels, from **beginners to experts**.

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Overview

You've taken or found a photograph that inspires you, and now it's time to write. Instead of using descriptive or journalistic styles, you want to experiment and write with a fresh, unique voice. What tone or style will best suit your vision? This guide will help you draw inspiration from your photograph, develop a distinct voice, and tell a compelling story.

Materials

Pen or pencil
A printed photograph

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Exploring Your Chosen Photograph

Choose a photograph that inspires you. Before you write, look deeply at the photograph. Make note of the following:

- **List things that were happening before, during, or after you took the photograph.** Consider including things happening outside the frame.
- **Describe any surprising or fascinating information that the viewer can't know and that helps give the photograph context.**
  Is someone making a surprising expression? Do shadows resemble ghosts? Do background subjects tell a bigger story?
- **Describe things that the photograph cannot capture.**
  Think about smells, tastes, sounds, temperature, or bits of conversation.
- **List any emotions or feelings that you associate with this photograph.**
  Is there a sense of calmness, chaos, melancholy, or mystery?

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Now, do some freewriting:

When freewriting — writing continuously for a set amount of time — allow your thoughts to flow freely onto the page. Take 10 or 15 minutes to freewrite about the thoughts inspired by your photograph. Consider the obvious details, such as who is in focus and who isn't, what is happening in the photo, and the colors and shapes present. Also, think about less obvious aspects like metaphors, emotions, and imagined backstories. Let your imagination run wild!



Example:

I wake up my little sister and make her pancakes. After breakfast, I lay out supplies for her to make a collage and transfer her fresh dreams onto paper. She beautifully blends words and images. Encouraging her creativity fills me with hope for a more interesting world.

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Discovering Your Style of Writing

Now that you've spent some time freewriting, read your words to discover their suggestions. Here are some questions to help you discover and explore your natural writing style:

- **Do you use a lot of sensory details?**
  You may be leaning toward **descriptive writing**?
- **Do your words feel dreamlike or imaginative — blurring the lines between reality and fantasy?**
  Your work may have a hint of **magical realism**.
- **Do you create a storyline and describe characters or events?**
  You should consider **narrative writing**.
- **Do your words have rhythm, rhyme, or structure**?
  You may want to explore a **Shakespearean sonnet**.
- **Does your writing have a lot of powerful or concise imagery?**
  Try writing a **haiku**.
- **Does your writing have a light sense of humor?**
  You may want to create a **limerick**.

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Shaping the Story

It's time to explore different creative writing styles to further shape your story. Below, you will see how our freewriting example changes with each style — the same photograph can be interpreted in many ways!

Descriptive Writing: Describe the details in your photograph using vivid language, making the reader feel as if they are inside the photograph. Use sensory details (sight, smell, touch, etc.) to further draw readers into your story.

Example:

> The gray morning had just awakened. Although the day looked gloomy and cold, the warm summer day warmed us. My little sister had just woken up, and her body and mind were still not fully ready for the day. I made her pancakes that were too sweet, even for a teenager. I laid out supplies for her to explore colors, textures, and words related to the dreams she had just awakened from. I encouraged her to find photographs and words to express the magic of her sleep and create art. Watching her create moved me deeply, filling me with hope for a more interesting world.

Narrative Writing: This style of writing is centered on telling a story. It can include a timeline, characters, and real or imagined settings to bring your events to life.

Example:

> I woke my little sister and made her pancakes. After breakfast, I set out supplies for her to create a collage — *National Geographic* magazines bought at a garage sale, old museum catalogs, stickers, markers, Mod Podge, and scissors. I prompted her to create a collage that creatively shows what she dreamt of. She beautifully blended words and images, showing me the content of her dreams. In the end, I realized that encouraging her creativity filled me with hope, reminding me that she makes the world more interesting with her art.

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Magical Realism: This style blends the real world with fantasy or magic, often conveying information through symbolic elements. Use this style to add layers of imagination to your story, making it more creative and shifting the context through words.

Example:

> She dreams of flying, and I watch as she floats above the living room. I motion my little sister to come to the table for pancakes. She gently floats down, awakened by the sweet aromas on the table. After breakfast, I bring our supplies so she can make a collage inspired by her dreams. Soon, she's floating again, lost in the space between her art and dream memories. There is no difference between waking or sleeping anymore. The world feels more interesting within these states.

Shakespearean Sonnet: Developed to elevate the English language, this structured style transforms your story into an emotional poem that is vivid, lyrical, and timeless. It invites readers to see beyond the photograph, revealing deeper layers of meaning or emotion.

- **Structure:**
  14 lines, each line written in iambic pentameter (10 syllables per line, with alternating unstressed and stressed syllables).
- **Rhyme Scheme:**
  ABAB CDCD EFEF GG

Example:

> I wake my sister fair, with morning's light,
> And make her pancakes, sweet with tender care.
> Then lay the tools for dreams, both pure and bright,
> For her to craft with hands both soft and rare.

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She blends with grace, her words and images,
A collage born of fresh and glowing thought.
Each stroke made, her spirit's art engages,
A world she builds, by wondrous dreams begot.

Inspiring her, my heart with hope does swell,
For in her work, I see a brighter day.
Her creativity, a tale to tell,
Of dreams that grow, and light the darkest way.

So let her hands, with beauty ever weave,
A world more rich than what we can believe.

Haiku: This three-line, unrhymed poem originated in Japan. You can use it to describe what is happening in your photograph in a very poetic, focused, and emotional way. The brevity invites readers to pause and think about your descriptions relating to the photograph.

- **Structure:**
  Three lines, totaling 17 syllables: 5 syllables, 7 syllables, and 5 syllables.

Example:

She wakes from dreaming,
Turning dreams into paper.
Her art wields magic.

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Limerick: A five-line rhyming poem created in the 18th century. Limericks are intended to be humorous and are often sung.

- **Structure:**
  Five lines: Although the number of syllables can vary, the 3rd and 4th lines always have fewer syllables than lines 1, 2, and 5.
- **Rhyme Scheme:**
  AA BB A

Example:

Each morning I make her some food,
Something tasty to suit her mood.
We break out the paints,
With prayer to the saints
That farts won't make the day crude!

Helpful writing tips:

- Focus on the story you want to tell and decide what details to include that support it.
- Add context to enhance the visual narrative.
- Play with different styles to find one that resonates with you and the story you want to tell.
- Think about the emotions in your photograph and consider how you want to emphasize them in your text.
- Be imaginative and color your photograph with words!

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Writing for Your Photograph

Now that you've read through the examples, pick a style that speaks to you, and use your freewriting as a starting point to craft your caption. Let the style help shape your voice and story. When you're done, place your writing next to your photograph. How do the photograph and caption speak to each other?

Want to experiment even more?
Try a different style and place it next to your photo. You may be surprised at the story a different writing style tells!

There is no *right* story, just what you write. 🙂 Consider creating a flip-book to showcase them all!

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