

It's Like Pulling Teeth



Information gathering
and writing story captions

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riting captions may seem like a simple task -- you just tell what's going on the the picture, right?

Wrong!

Telling a mini story in the caption is an important responsibility of a staff member; more so in yearbook than newspaper, even though newspapers can use a photo and a story caption in place of a story. And now, with online newspapers, story captions are used more often.

Here's the scenario:

Photo in hand (or on your phone) you go interview a student so you can write a meaningful, story caption.

Publication Staffer: Hi, I'm John from the yearbook/newspaper staff and I need to talk to you about this picture.

Person we'll call Joe: OK

John: This picture looks like you are trying to break out of a tackle; is that right?

Joe: Yeah.

John: What does it feel like?

Joe: I don't know.

John: Well, tell me what goes through your mind.

Joe: Stuff

John: What kind of stuff? What were you thinking?

Joe: I don't know.

John: Are you thinking about the plays the coaches taught you?

Joe: Yeah man, that's it.

John: OK, what play was this? Did you get out of the tackle and score or get a first down?

Joe: I don't know man, it was just a play...

and so the story goes. You return to the staff room and try to write some type of caption that will at least have the basic information. It may end up like this:





Trying to break out of a tackle from a lion defender, Joe Jones, #20, junior, struggles to get loose. The bears won the game 14-7.

What's wrong with this caption? It gives the basic information, but it doesn't tell the reader the story behind the photo.





That's what good story captions do - they tell or show the reader what's **not** obvious in the photo. They give a mini profile of the person in the photo and/or the details involved in the action before and/or after the photo was taken.

Let's look at a standard two sentence caption:

Sentence #1

-  Tells who, what, when where
-  Identifies people fully by name, class and title or position
-  Does not state the obvious
-  Written in present tense

Sentence #2

-  Tells why or how and can add the "so what" factor. Ask yourself "so what?" is this important? will it matter to anyone? will it make the caption more interesting?
-  Adds to the story by giving details and additional information
-  Don't pad the space
-  Write in past tense

Example: *Lindsey Adair, senior drama student, applies make-up backstage before a performance of "The Wizard of OZ." Adair played the part of Glenda the Good Witch and spent 30 minutes getting into her costume and applying the glittery foundation to her face.*

A variation of the two sentence caption is the multi-sentence caption. Steps one and two are the same. The next sentences are details and quotes. This takes us back to the beginning scenario -- how do you get good information you can use?

INTERVIEW

- Be a reporter
- Attend the function/event/concert/game if applicable
- Get the 5Ws and H
- Get specific details
- Be prepared - get background information
- Keep asking questions until you get something you can use

Some questions the reporter must ask:

- Who are the people in the photo other than the center of interest?
- What do I already know?
- What, exactly, is going on in the photo?
- What are the reasons for the action?
- When did it happen?
- Why is it happening?
- Where is it taking place?
- How is the action being performed? skills? equipment? etc?
- How do you (the center of interest) feel?
- What were you thinking?



Basically, it's the bottom line of reporting - the 5Ws and H. Once you have the background then your common sense and creativity take over during the interview. Think on your feet. If your source is not cooperating, you, the reporter, must keep asking questions and **listening** to the answers. Even if you go off on a tangent that seemingly doesn't have anything to do with the photo, you're still getting information. With a transition you can usually use the information you pull from the person.

Let's look at the opening scenario again:

Publication Staffer: Hi, I'm John from the yearbook/newspaper staff and I need to talk to you about this picture.

Person we'll call Joe: OK

John: This picture looks like you are trying to break out of a tackle; is that right?

Joe: Yeah.

John: What does it feel like?

Joe: I don't know.

John: Well, tell me what goes through your mind.

Joe: Stuff

John: What kind of stuff? What were you thinking?

Joe: I don't know.

John: Are you thinking about the plays the coaches taught you?

Joe: Yeah man, that's it.

John: OK, what play was this? Did you get out of the tackle and score or get a first down?

Joe: I don't know man, it was just a play....

John: Well, Joe, how long have you been playing football?

Joe: Since I was little.

John: What age did you start playing?

Joe: 10

John: Did you play for a community league?

Joe: Yeah

John: Are there any players on the team now you played with back then?

Joe: Yeah

John: Who are they?

Joe: Kelly Smith, Bill Jones, Bobby Marcus, Kyle Ford and Eric Luu

John: What it like playing with former team mates?

Joe: It's fun.

John: Why is it fun?

Joe: It just is, man.

John: What do you think they think about y'all playing together again?

Joe: I don't know.

As a reporter you see this part of the conversation is going nowhere, so your creativity and interviewing skills kick in.

John: What's your favorite thing to do?

Joe: Rap

John: You're a rapper?

Joe: Yes

John: Where have you performed?

Joe: I've done a few private parties for friends and all of my family reunions.

John: That sounds like fun. What's the hardest part about rapping?

Joe: Keeping the rhythm and making sure people understand what you're saying; also getting a message out so people can understand

John: What do you usually rap about?

Joe: Usually about girls, music, hanging with my friends.

John: Do you perform solo or do you have a group?

Joe: I have a group and we just made an album and uploaded it to YouTube.

John: What's the name of the group?

Joe: Me & the Fellas; we hope people will download it and pay for it. We made a digital recording to send to radio stations and music producers.

John: What's your ultimate goal as a rapper?

Joe: To become rich and famous!

John: Thanks

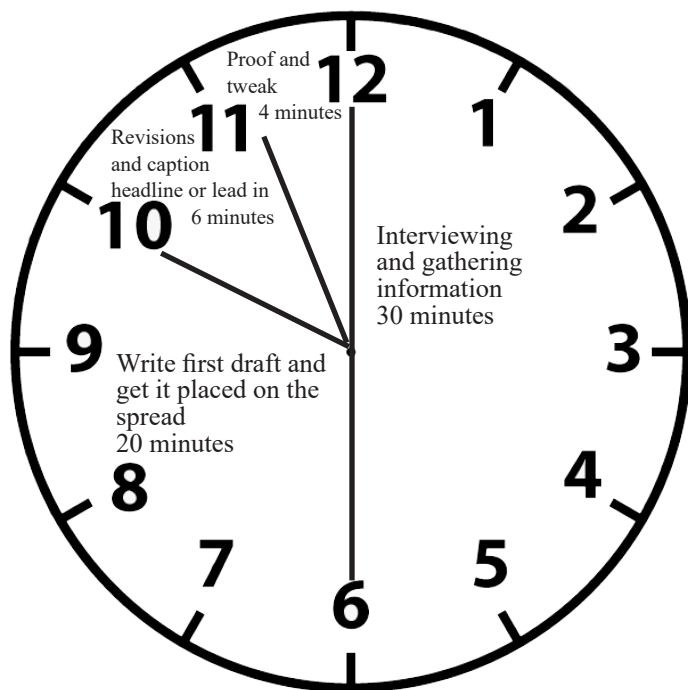


When Joe started talking about something he was really interested in, even though it didn't have anything to do with football, he opened up to John. Now, John has enough information about Joe to write a story caption. It might go something like this:

Trying to break out of a tackle from a lion defender, Joe Jones, #20, junior, struggles to get loose. The bears won the game 14-7. Even though Jones has been playing football since he was 10, his favorite past time is rapping. His group, Me & the Fellas, recorded a demo CD, uploaded it to YouTube and sent it to radio stations and producers. "My ultimate goal as a rapper," he said, "is to become rich and famous."






So, the heart of getting information you can use is be persistent, determined and take the interview in a direction where you can get useful information. Then use that information to explain what's going on in the photo and write a mini feature story to enhance your coverage.

Allow yourself enough time for interviewing, writing, revisions and proofreading



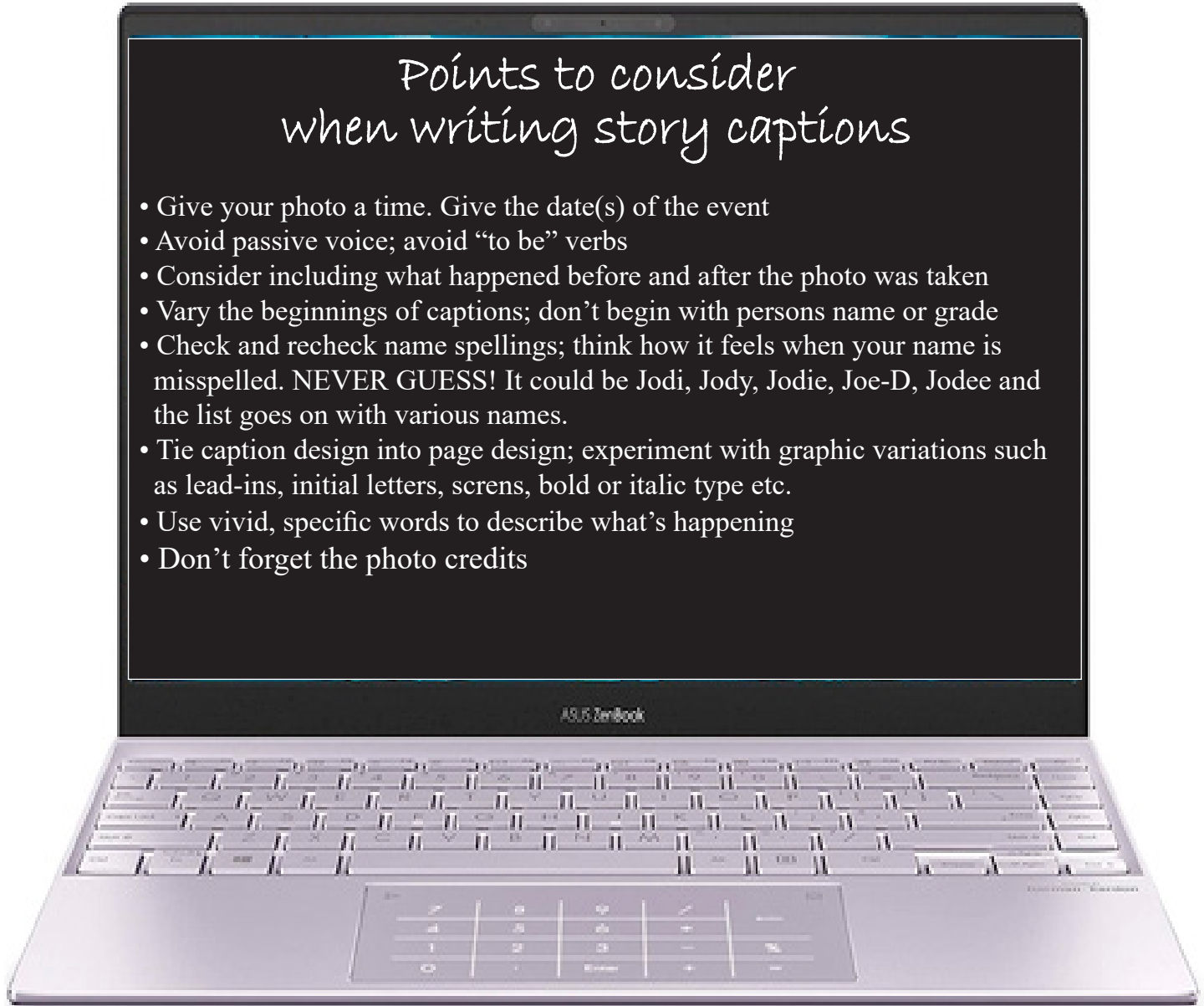
It's the basis for a journalist: INTERVIEWING

Tips for Interviewing

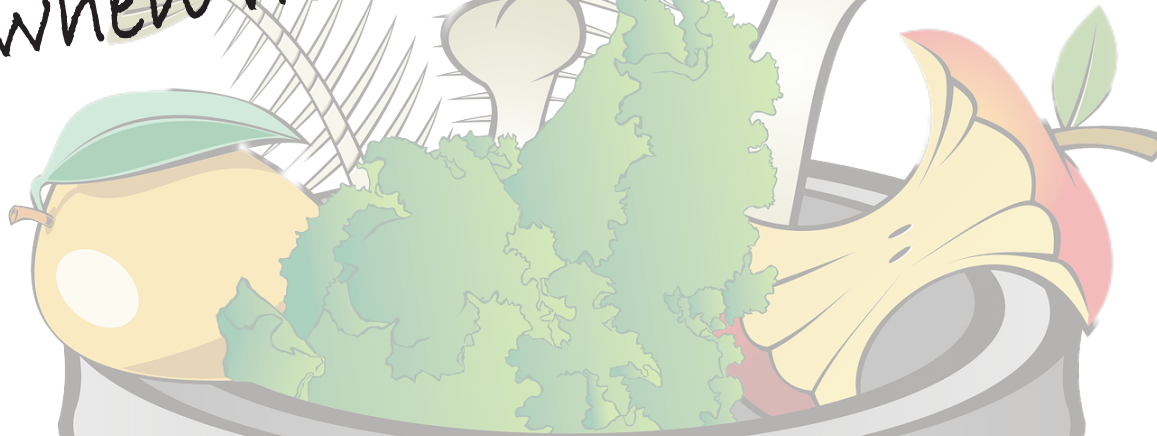
-  Don't just hand the person a piece of paper or text them with questions and ask them to write down their answers. Sit down with them and talk -- have a conversation.
-  Make sure you have a list of prepared questions, but don't be limited to just those. Listen to the person and see what they might be telling you.
-  If you ask "yes" or "no" questions, always follow with "why." You must get the person to explain. That's usually where you find the unusual or interesting stories and anecdotes you can use to make your story captions come alive.
-  Always take notes, even if you are using a recorder and keep those notes on file. You never know when someone will question a quote or comment or your design file will become corrupted and you have to re-create it.
-  Get as many details as you can. Be specific. Not short, but 4'8"; not tall, but 6'10". Get details that evoke emotions - make the reader relive the event and the story around it when they read the story caption.

Points to consider when writing story captions

- Give your photo a time. Give the date(s) of the event
- Avoid passive voice; avoid “to be” verbs
- Consider including what happened before and after the photo was taken
- Vary the beginnings of captions; don’t begin with persons name or grade
- Check and recheck name spellings; think how it feels when your name is misspelled. NEVER GUESS! It could be Jodi, Jody, Jodie, Joe-D, Jodee and the list goes on with various names.
- Tie caption design into page design; experiment with graphic variations such as lead-ins, initial letters, screens, bold or italic type etc.
- Use vivid, specific words to describe what’s happening
- Don’t forget the photo credits



What you should avoid when writing story captions



- **Stating the obvious**
- **Beginning with labels or names using the same pattern for all captions on the same spread**
- **Too many “to be” verbs**
- **Editorializing**
- **Verbs that do not tell the result (tries, attempts)**
- **Using left to right**
- **Making up information and fabricating quotes**
- **Lying to the reader**
- **Gag captions**
- **Never imply or suggest something libelous, false or embarrassing**
- **Inside jokes**

One Interview: Ten different ways to write the story caption

Focus on “Who”

Debbie Thomas, senior band member, sells her tenth bag of vanilla popcorn to Doug Whitaker, junior, during Jordan Dipple's algebra class. In-school sales of popcorn and candy were one of the most popular ways of raising money. Over 100 groups sold 15 varieties of treats between the first and last week of school.

Focus on “What”

Popcorn sales financed the band's trip to San Antonio, where they marched in the Fiestas Patrias Parade May 4. Debbie Thomas', senior, sale to Doug Whitaker, junior, was one of the 500 bags band members sold.

Describe the “What”

The sweet smell of popcorn trails after Debbie Thomas, senior, as she sends a thank you smile to Doug Whitaker, junior, as she sells another bag in Jordan Dipple's algebra class. San Antonio and the Fiestas Patrias Parade were the fundraising goals for all 225 band members.

Describe the “How” or “Why”

Rarely seen without bags of popcorn, Debbie Thomas, senior saxophone player, sells Doug Whitaker, junior, something to munch on during his third period algebra class. Band members raised \$5000 selling flavored popcorn to help finance their May trip to San Antonio where they marched in the Fiesta Patrias Parade.

Features and Action; Answers “Why” or “How”

Selling another bag of vanilla popcorn, first chair symphonic band saxophonist, Debbie Thomas, senior, reaches her goal of high sales person in the band's fund raiser. Doug Whitaker, junior, buys his fourth bag of popcorn as Thomas sells her 304th bag to help the band earn money for their San Antonio trip.

Dependent Clause; describes “How” or “Why”

Because charter buses were expensive, band members sold 5000 bags of popcorn to help finance their trip to San Antonio to march in the Fiestas Patrias Parade. Contributing to the cause, Doug Whitaker, junior, buys his fourth bag of vanilla popcorn from high sales person Debbie Thomas, senior.

“Ing” Form of verb; features action or interesting detail

Raising money for the band trip to San Antonio was a between class activity for all 225 band members. Debbie Thomas, high sales person and senior first chair saxophonist, sells vanilla pop corn to Doug Whitaker, junior, who quickly identifies himself as “top buyer.”

Infinitive phrase; to plus the verb

To charter six buses to San Antonio, band members sold flavored popcorn. Saxophonist Debbie Thomas, senior, sells Doug Whitaker, junior, one of the 5000

bags that helped send the 225 member band to the May Fiesta Patrias Parade in San Antonio.

Prepositional phrase; begin with prepositional phrase and feature one aspect of the story

With vanilla popcorn in hand and San Antonio on her mind, saxophonist Debbie Thomas, senior, sells the popular treat to Doug Whitaker, junior, in her 3rd period algebra class. Popcorn sales helped finance the band's trip to march in the Fiesta Patrias Parade in May.

Direct Quote

Any of the above examples could use one or two direct quotes. It's obvious the reporter asked specific, detailed questions in order to get the information used. Make sure the quotes you use do not repeat any other information.



175+ Ways to Begin a Caption

List partially compiled from JEA Listserve

Trying to collect...
Fluffing and stuffing flowers...
Fighting the...
To achieve the...
While his brother keeps close watch...
After following through...
Abandoned by...
After having...
In honor of his birthday...
As she kneels...
Sweeping her off her feet...
Coaxing her dog (cat, pig, steer, horse, etc)...
After finishing...
In preparation for...
With dinner time approaching...
Upon Arriving at...
As the crowd...
Celebrating the end...
Caught in the spirit of...
To get ready for...
During a...
Adjusting the...
Taking time out for...
As Christmas/Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, Easter, Eid, etc)...
Carefully trying...
With a few extra minutes...
While waiting for...
Sifting through...
Trying to hide...
While skimming through the...
Frustrated with...
Unable to...
Contrary to...
Behind the scenes...
Psyched for the...
After the ceremony...
To add a little fun...
Grimacing with pain...
In anticipation of...
While explaining...
Helping seniors (juniors, sophomores etc.)...
With eyes focused on...
Wishing a...
To do research...
Looking for...
Trying to avoid...
Rarely found deserted...
Despite his/her efforts...
Trying to escape...
To drown background noise...
While taking a breather...
Capturing the attention of...
On his/her way home...
Amidst the cafeteria racket...
At the end of the day...
Acquainting themselves with...
After trimming...
Before playing...
To receive his/her schedule...
With a steady hand...
While trying...
To obtain a...
In an effort to...
Ready to jump...
While others waited...
Unusual aspects of...
In hopes of...
Cutting and shaping...
Trucking along the parade route...
Because Susie Smith (name) missed the...
Working on the...
To clarify a problem...
Enjoying the music...
Sporting his/her new look...

To secure his/her...
While adjusting the...
Putting in their share...
Accompanied by...
Stopping to...
Completing the chores...
As he/she escapes...
In a hurry after...
As a final part of...
Before going out...
Concentrating on the...
Right in step with...
Reaching for...
In his/her spare time...
Painting the...
To try out the...
With an effort to...
Constructive criticism...
Paying special attention to...
In order to...
Acting as...
Reviewing for a...
Skillfully shooting the...
Amused with the...
Frustrated after the...
As the season approached...
Just before the...
While a junior (senior etc.)...
Forcefully pulling his/her opponent...
Searching for the...
To gain necessary...
Flipping through the...
After scoring...
Tired of...
On his/her way to...
After a long afternoon...
Discussing the...
Warming up before...
Focusing on the...
Keeping up the...

With their eyes glued to the...
Having the support of the...
Utilizing the...
Twisting into a...
Carefully watching the...
After completing his/her...
Trying to stay...
Loosening up before...
With his/her sights on...
Studying the...
Heading back to...
Scooping up the...
With a look of determination...
Holding the...
In search of...
To impress...
Surrounded by...
Unable to concentrate...
To start the year...
Sounds of stomping feet...
In an intense discussion...
In need of a rest...
Each portraying their own style of...
Victory is captured...
As the bus arrives...
After plugging in his/her phone charger...
In the midst of...
With one foot down...
Through the intense volume of music...
With hair flying...
Dressing up for...
Due to...
Determined to get...
With the aid of...
While on a break...
Practicing for...
With a smile...
Surrounded in...
Pumped up for...
Showered with confetti...

Awarded with...
Soaked in sweat...
With a desperate attempt...
With a perfect beginning...
Double checking his/her options....
Total concentration...
Ready to go...
With a watchful eye...
Hand in the air...
With book in hand...
Bewilderment fills his/her face as...
Getting some tips...
While in the library...
Under the bleachers...
Maneuvering crowded hallways...
Through rain or shine...
With hopes of making it to the finals...
Before the big show...
Trying on costumes...
When it come to talent...
Putting on make up...
Traveling in...
Performing with...
Maintaining his/her pace...
Placing 1st at the.....
During a game vs.....
Supporting from the sidelines...
During 3rd quarter...
Mixing.....
Waiting for a signal...
Making sure...
Peeling an egg...
Gathering at the flag pole...
Seeking inspiration...
Taking a stroll...
Last minute...
All in good fun...
During half time...
At the meet and greet...
The coach calls a time out to....

As his/her name was called...
After running on the beach....
Sprinting to the finish line...
Winning in the 2nd round of playoffs...
In a pre-game ritual...
While pacing themselves...
On the medal stand...
Cleaning the aquarium...
The pit flares...
While painting faces...
The 100th day of school...
Serving as guest conductor...
Placing their signature on...
Pizza, books and.....

Caption Writing Practice

Use these photos to interview the person next to you, Write down or record your notes, then write a story caption on the back of this page. When it's your turn to be interviewed, make the person work for the information.



1.



2.



3.



4.



5.



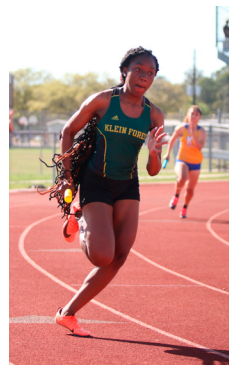
6.



7.



8.



9.



10.