A picture is worth a thousand words
(but only if it's got a really good cutline, too!)

Photo captions and cutlines 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 and cutlines than for other type. As with headlines, captions and cutlines must be crisp. As with stories, they must be readable and informative.

Note: Captions and cutlines are terms that are often used interchangeably, particularly at magazines. For our purposes, we will make the following distinctions.

Captions: Captions are the little "headlines" over the "cutlines" (the words describing the photograph). See example.

Cutlines: Cutlines (at newspapers and some magazines) are the words (under the caption, if there is one) describing the photograph or illustration. See example.

Example:

Obama vs. Palin

caption line

President Obama and former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin have agreed to disagree over the rules of a "death match" scheduled between the two in the Capitol Rotunda. Betting odds in Las Vegas give the nod to Palin, who has been known to shoot a moose, after the two met on Thursday.

cutline

Note: Not all photographs carry a caption line. See "Tips and terms" below.

Reader behavior

When writing a cutline with or without 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 and cutlines 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).

Required information

The specific information required can vary from one photo to the next. But for most pictures a reader wants to know such information as:

- Who is that? (And, in most cases, identify people from left to right unless the action in the photograph demands otherwise.)
- Why is this picture in the paper?
- What's going on?
- When and where was this?
- Why does he/she/it/they look that way?
- How did this occur?

Simply stated, cutlines should explain the picture so that readers are satisfied with their understanding of the picture. They need not — and should not — tell what the picture has made obvious. It should supply vital information that the picture cannot. For example, a picture can show a football player leaping to catch a pass, but it likely does not show that the result was the winning touchdown. The cutline should give that information.

Tips and terms: Be concise; be precise; don't be trite

Cutlines should be as concise as possible, but they should not sound like telegrams or machine guns. Unlike headlines (and caption lines), they should contain all articles and conjunctions, just as do sentences in news stories. News picture cutlines should be straightforward and clear.

Trite writing should be avoided. Do not point out the obvious by using such phrases as “looks on,” “is shown” and “pictured above.”

Don't editorialize. The cutline writer should never make assumptions about what someone in a picture is thinking or try to interpret the person's feelings from his or her expression. The reader should be given the facts and allowed to decide for herself or himself what the feelings or emotions are.

Avoid the known; explain the unknown. The cutline writer should avoid characterizing a picture as beautiful, dramatic, grisly or other such descriptive terms that should be evident in the photograph. If it's not evident in the photograph, your telling the reader won't make it happen. However, the cutline should explain something about how the picture was taken if it shows something not normally observable by the human eye. For example, was a wide-angle lens used? Or time-lapse photography? Explanations also are needed for special effects, such as the use of an inset or a picture sequence.

Reflect the image. Cutline writers should make sure that the words accurately reflect the picture. If a picture shows two or more people, the cutline writer should count the number of identifiable people in the photo and check the number and sex of the people identified in the cutline to make certain that they match. Special precautions should be taken to make sure that the cutline does not include someone who has been cropped out of the original photo.

Always, always, always check spelling. The cutline writer should check the spelling of names in the story against the names that a photographer has provided to see if there are discrepancies. The editor also should be sure that names in the cutline are the same names used in the story. It should not be John Smith in the cutline, but John P. Smith in the story.

"Wild art." Photographs that do not accompany stories often are termed "wild art." The cutlines for wild art should provide the same basic information that a story does. Such things as the "five W's" (who, what, when, where and why) are good to remember when writing such cutlines. If you don't have all the information you need, get on the phone and get the information. Don't try writing the cutline without needed facts. Sometimes, wild art is used on a cover page to tease (refer) the reader to a story inside. But, unlike television, don't tease the reader in the cutline. Give as complete a story as possible, giving the reader the option of going inside for more details. Most cutlines for wild art also have a caption line (overline). See example above.

Accompanying art. If a picture is running with a story, a lengthy cutline is usually not needed. Sometimes a single line is sufficient to identify the people or situation shown in the picture and to make clear their relationship to the story. Remember that most cutline readers have not yet read the story. Many of them will read nothing but the cutline and the headline. So the cutline must strike a delicate balance between telling enough information for the reader to understand the photo and its context while being as crisp and brief as possible.

Shorter is better. Cutline writing triggers a temptation to use long sentences. Avoid that temptation. The cutlines that accompany Associated Press photos are notorious for their rambling sentences. They need to be rewritten into clear crisp sentences.

Time elements

Most newspapers use a cutline writing style that calls for the first sentence to be written in the present tense and for subsequent sentences to be in the past tense. The rationale is that the first sentence tells the reader what is happening in the photo. Subsequent sentences tell the context and background for what happened.

A common flaw is incorrectly placing the time element in the first sentence: **. . . carries 3-year-old Tina Wilson out of her burning home Friday night.**

It is incongruous to have both the present tense verb and the past-tense time element (as adverbial information) in the same sentence. The easiest solution is moving the time element to a subsequent sentence as in the example above. It also is possible to avoid the incongruity by using the time element as adjectival information: **. . . carries 3-year-old Tina Wilson away from the Friday night fire that destroyed her home.**

Some publications omit the time element from single-line cutlines. Critics (including me) argue that this practice often mars reader understanding. Always include a time element to inform the reader when the action pictured was taking place.

"What, you say, fiction? Never!" Well, you'd be surprised. Newspapers, including the Kansan

and the Journal-World, often slip into it. It usually happens when the photographer shows up to shoot something, but there's no action or nothing really to show. For example, when a Kansan photographer needed to shoot a photo about a CD being released locally, he went to the store. What he found was a bunch of the CDs lined up on the shelf. And, of course, it's nice to get someone in the photo. So the photographer had one of the store employees go to one of the shelves to hold one of the CDs slightly askew so it could be seen. No problem, except the cutline said the clerk was rearranging the shelf. Nope. Pure fiction. In this case, simply say the emplyee "displays" the CD. Readers won't mind. In other situations, figure out the best way to say it; just don't do fiction.

Even if a picture is worth a thousand words, it still needs a caption to draw readers, provide context and tell the story. Here are some tips for writing effective captions.

- Check the facts. Be accurate with credit lines, details and anything else that might catch a reader's eye.
- Captions should add new information. Don't merely repeat the story headline or summary, and avoid stating the obvious elements that are captured in the image. The caption should add context to the image, not just duplicate what the reader already sees.
- Always identify the main people in the photograph.
- A photograph captures a moment in time. Whenever possible, use present tense. This creates a sense of immediacy and impact.
- Conversational language works best. Write the caption as though you are talking to a family member or friend.
- The tone of the caption should match the tone of the image. Don't try to be humorous when the photo is not.

How to write a Caption Correctly the First Time

A **caption** is a *title, short explanation, or description* accompanying an illustration or a photograph.

The *importance of a caption is to relate to the reader what the picture or illustration is and how it ties into the article*.

Writing a caption takes knowing when the picture was taken or what the artist of the illustration was going for as far as what they wanted to relate to their reading audience.

I. Write out the questions every reader/viewer normally asks:

Who (Who did it?)
What (What did they do?)
When (when did they do it?)
Where (Where did they do it?)
Why (Why did they do it?)
How (How did they do it?)
So What (Why should this be considered news? The six classic news values: Proximity, Prominence, Timeliness, Conflict, Impact, Novelty.)

III. Unite the questions and answers into a single paragraph-like form.

IV. Clean up the paragraph making coherent sentences.

SIMPLE SIZZLIN' SUGGESTIONS FOR CAPTION SCRIBING
Photo captions are an integral part of newspaper storytelling, but they are often the most underdeveloped element in the mix of words, graphics, and photographs in a newspaper. A poorly executed caption can destroy the message of a photo or the story package of which it is part. The reader/viewer expects nothing less than accurate, complete, and informative information, including captions. Here are a few suggestions to follow when writing captions.

-Check the facts. Be accurate!

-Avoid stating the obvious. "Dennis Rodman smiles as he kicks a broadcast photographer in the groin."

-Always identify the main people in the photograph.

-Don't let cutlines recapitulate information in the head or deck or summary.

-Avoid making judgments. "An unhappy citizen watches the protest..." Can you be sure that he is unhappy? Or is he hurting. Or just not photogenic. If you must be judgmental, be sure you seek the truth.

-Don't assume. Ask questions in your effort to inform and be specific. Be willing to contact and include the visual reporter.

-Avoid using terms like "is shown, is pictured, and looks on."

-If the photograph is a historic or file photo, include the date that it was taken. Mayor David Dinkins, 1993.

-A photograph captures a moment in time. Whenever possible, use present tense. This will creates a sense of immediacy and impact.

-Don't try to be humorous when the picture is not.

-Descriptions are very helpful for viewer. The person dressed "in black," "holding the water hose," "sulky from chagrin," or "standing to the left of the sofa, center" are helpful identifying factors. (Photographers must ferret out this kind of material.)

-Be willing to allow for longer captions when more information will help the reader/viewer understand the story and situation.

-Use commas to set off directions from the captions to the picture. "Kachira Irby, above,..."or "Kennetra Irby, upper left..."

-Quotes can be an effective device, be willing to use them when they work.

-Conversational language works best. Don't use clichÈs. Write the caption as if you're telling a family member a story.
(from http://www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=4355)

Readers love captions, so it’s important to get them just right. They are often the ‘entry point’ – the first thing a reader looks at on the page. Captions should simply say exactly what is in the picture and when it was taken.

They should also have a ‘slug’ or ‘kicker’ no more than one or two words long. Don’t underestimate the power of these words – a funny or clever kicker adds professional polish to the finished product. For example: 'Hair we go: Fundraisers shave their heads for charity'