

Visual Literacy Exercise

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Visual literacy, the ability to read and understand pictures, is a basic skill for working with prints, photographs, drawings, and other pictorial materials. You need to learn to recognize subject content. You also need to consider the intent of the image creators, the influence of production techniques, and the role of visual expression conventions. Awareness of your own, possibly false, assumptions is as important as spotting discrepancies between what a picture shows and what its caption says.

The following exercise can help you improve your observation abilities.¹ A sample photograph is on the next page to practice with. For more information about visual literacy, consult the sources cited in the “Visual Literacy and Picture Research” section of the Visual Materials: Processing & Cataloging Bibliography, which is available online at <http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/resource/vmbib.html#research>.

Exercise

1. Find an interesting picture and look at it for two minutes. (Don't read the caption yet.)
 - a. Capture your first impression in a few words about what the image shows.
 - b. Name everything you see in the image.
 - c. Look at each part of the picture again.

2. Write a narrative caption about what the picture means.
 - a. Read any existing information that accompanies the image.²
 - b. Add a short paragraph to account for who made the picture, why, when, where, and how. Also describe what the picture shows.
 - c. Identify any assumptions with question marks.

3. Finalize the caption
 - a. Verify the original and additional caption information in reference sources.
 - b. Show the picture and caption to colleagues.
 - c. Ask what they agree with and what they see that you missed.

¹ Exercise adapted from Nancy Malan, “American Women Through the Camera’s Eye,” in *Clio Was a Woman*, eds. Mabel E. Deutrich and Virginia C. Purdy (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1980), 260-302.

² The caption for the sample photograph on the next page is: *Women workers employed as wipers in the roundhouse having lunch in their rest room, C. & N.W. R.R., Clinton, Iowa*. Color transparency taken by Jack Delano, April 1943 for the United States Office of War Information. (LC P&P number LC-USW36-644)

Sample Photograph

From the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division.

To view a color digital copy file made from the original color transparency (number LC-DIG-fsac-1a34808), go to: <http://memory.loc.gov/service/pnp/fsac/1a34000/1a34800/1a34808v.jpg>

