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Captions: Stepchildren of the Newsroom*

(* The phrase "stepchild of the newsroom" first came to my attention in Ken Kobre's book, "Photojournalism: The Professionals' Approach." The concept was widely known, but unnamed, by many whose pre-academic careers including reporting, photography, copy editing and newsroom leadership. Community editors, for example, have difficulty getting staff to even try doing captions.)

Here's what some experts at a national journalism think-tank had to say about it:

"In most newsrooms, even the most routine story goes through several editors, while photos and graphics may be plugged into pages at the last moment." —*Monica Moses, Poynter*

"The picture speaks, but the caption tells. Effective editors use both." —*Jacky Hicks, Poynter*

"A poorly executed caption can destroy the message of a photo or the story package of which it is part." —*Kenneth Irby, Poynter*

Caption criteria and tips

Several sources say a news caption should answer those of the 5Ws and H that are not apparent in the picture.

Context matters. Caption text can reinforce, or undercut, both the information and the emotion of a photo. Why is this photo historical? Caption far below*

The *Associated Press Stylebook* caption guide could apply anywhere. It says describe the action, identify the participants, give the when-where, in one present-tense active-verb sentence. A second sentence can set up background, tell a later outcome, or otherwise flesh out the package. Here is an excerpt from AP standards: "We do not ask people to pose for photos unless we are making a portrait and *then we clearly state that in the caption. We explain in the caption the circumstances under which photographs are made.*" (emphasis added)



Several newspaper shops have guidance similar to this:

- Remember that captions, like headlines, are the most widely read parts of most publications.
- NEVER write a caption unless you are looking at the picture —as cropped and sized.
- Account for every identifiable person; count them on your fingers, or on paper, if necessary.
- Know what the accompanying story says. Make sure names are spelled correctly, consistently.

- Get a second set of eyes on the picture-and-caption if possible even if inconvenient.
- Don't make the viewer-reader guess.

Some editors avoid mixing present- and past-tense wording in a sentence. Some use all past-tense.

This tip list is based loosely on one webcast by Kenneth Irby at the Poynter Institute:

- Check the facts. Be accurate!
- Avoid stating the obvious.
- Identify the main people in the photograph.
- Don't just recapitulate the head or deck or summary.
- Avoid making judgments (or leapt-to conclusions)
- Don't assume. Ask questions... be specific.
- Avoid lame terms like "is shown, is pictured, and looks on."
- Beware unfounded humor, double meanings, cuteness in bad taste....
- Use quotes, conversational language.

<http://www.poynter.org/uncategorized/1753/hot-tips-for-writing-captions>

*Another principle of captioning, deliberately violated here, is: "Make the caption and its relationship to the picture easy to find and follow." The June 22, 2011, speech by President Obama was about Afghanistan, but the AP still photographer at right, Pablo Martinez Monsivais, was the first ever to be allowed in the room during an actual live presidential TV speech. Until a fuss, originating May 2 in Reuters photographer Jason Reed's blog, the White House followed the little-known historical practice of re-enacting parts of the speech for previously noisy still cameras. Wire-service captions might state re-enactment, but widely published captions generally did not. Now, a pool shooter with blimp-silenced gear and radio-transmission gets to sit in. The **New York Times** website used one of his photos while the speech was under way. Photo by White House staff photographer Pete Souza, formerly of the **Chicago Tribune**.