



# Creating Captions They'll Love

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Photo captions offer one of our best shots at grabbing and holding a reader's attention. If the headline doesn't do it, the photo and the words we use to accompany the photo may do the trick. Here are a few ideas to encourage excellent captions:

- 1) Accuracy. OK, this sounds way too basic, but captions – which are at least glanced at by so many people – are a critical credibility component. Especially with photos taken by our own staff, we need to be sure names are spelled correctly. Double-check and then triple-check them against the photographer's caption AND any references in the story.
- 2) Don't repeat the reporter's exact wording from a story in a caption and/or headline. For example, if the story says "Joe Jones was indicted in a sweltering courtroom in the murder of 55 mud hens," and the headline says "Jones indicted in sweltering courtroom in murder of 55 mud hens," we don't want a mug shot of Jones to be captioned "Joe Jones was indicted in a sweltering courtroom in the murder of 55 mud hens." Try to look for another angle for the caption that will pull in a reader if the headline doesn't: "Joe Jones was arrested at a sporting goods store in Torrance" or "Joe Jones' mother forced him to eat mud hens every day as a boy."
- 3) If there's room in a caption, a quote from a story can be an excellent way to draw in readers. Instead of the dull "Billy Jonah is seen posing in his office in Quantum City at Bloomathon Corp., which grows flowers in Southern California," go for " ' Growing flowers in Southern California is like pulling cows from a swamp,' says Billy Jonah, who runs Bloomathon Corp. from this office in Quantum City." Maybe the reader will want to go into the story to find out why Jonah would make a comparison like that.
- 4) If space is tight, however, don't use details from the story at the expense of making the subject of the photo unclear. For example, if we run a photo of downtown El Segundo to illustrate a story on new doughnut shops, don't just say "Doughnut shops are rising in cities all across the country, making doughnut shop architect O.D. Nutty wealthier by \$12 million last year." Readers will want to know what the photo shows. Add the words "including El Segundo"

and dump some of the details.

5) Here are a few examples of good captions from the Daily Breeze. Again, the question to ask as you write a caption is, “Given the specifications, what can I say in the caption that will most likely pull in a reader?” This requires you to think like a reader (what would they immediately need or want to know?).

A) Cleona and Harold Crozier still live in the Birch Avenue home, far left, that they bought 63 years ago for \$2,850. “The first time I saw him in high school I said, ‘That’s the man I’m going to marry!’ “ recalls Mrs. Crozier, seen on her wedding day in 1931, above. (Lots of interesting facts on a couple of oldtimers, and a fun quote to boot.)

B) “If you’re obnoxious and you get mad, you get nothing,” says George Kiryama of Gardena. (Good quote and a community tie-in for Kiryama.)

C) Redondo Beach police say the crime spree at The Dolphin bar may have been the work of gang members under initiation or training. (For a photo of just a building, this sure beats “This photo shows The Dolphin, a bar in Redondo Beach.”)

D) Daryl Hamilton has served as principal or assistant principal at each of the five schools in the Centinela district. He says he’s “sad about leaving but happy for the chance to do other things.” (The photo showed Hamilton at his desk. That was obvious. The caption offered an opportunity to say things the headline couldn’t.)

E) Yehudi Menuhin began sharing his music at the age of 7, when he astonished a San Francisco audience with his violin genius. (This ran with an obituary mug. We already know from the headline that he had died, so this was a great way to give a reader who might be in a hurry more information, and to possibly draw that reader into the full obituary.)

F) Gen. Wesley K. Clark heads NATO’s campaign in Kosovo. (This caption for a “thumb” mug was very basic, but it offered information the headline about the conflict did not.)

For more help, see Kenny Irby’s “Hot Tips for Writing Photo Captions” under his section of Poynter Institute’s Visual Journalism Web pages at [www.poynter.org](http://www.poynter.org).

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