

Reading a Photograph



1. Start with First Impressions: What do you notice?

If a picture is worth a thousand words, what is this picture saying to you? Allow yourself to take in all the elements collectively, and then tuck your observations away for a moment. As you look at more specific details you may be surprised that your first impressions aren't always accurate.

2. Evaluate the content

What time is this photo taking place? Determine not just time of day but the occasion as well. Where is the setting located – in both a general and broad sense? This alone will influence the story being communicated if there are different cultures involved.

3. Relationships: Subject to subject or subject to viewer

What can you see about the people within the picture? How close are they? How do they feel about each other? Also consider if there is anything being said between the subject and you as the viewer. Are there emotions that meant to be communicated to you? What does this leave you feeling?

4. Concepts: Actions and connections within the setting

Sometimes subtle details within a photo can make a dynamic impact on the message. Hand gestures, direction of gazes, etc. What do all these details communicate about the message of the image?

5. View: Does it make you a participant or a viewer?

Powerful photos are often the ones that draw us in and make us a participant rather than those that leave us as simply a viewer. How does this influence your take and feeling about the photo?

6. Direction: Where does it take / leave you?

This question goes beyond simply eye flow. After evaluating all the subtleties and details, ask yourself how they all come together to support the overall message or idea of the image. What thoughts do you have? What conclusions are you drawn to?

Adapted from Christina N. Dickson, "How to Read a Photograph" (Photo by Shutterstock)