

## FOCUS ON PHOTOGRAPHY: A CURRICULUM GUIDE

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This section is an excerpt from *Focus on Photography: A Curriculum Guide*

Written by **Cynthia Way** for the **International Center of Photography**

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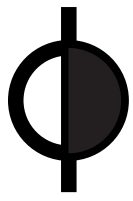
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International Center of Photography

# Focus on Photography

## A Curriculum Guide

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by Cynthia Way for the  
International Center of Photography

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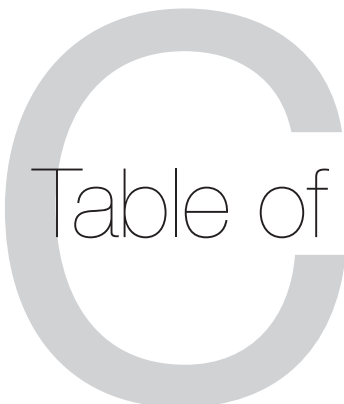
**“ A knowledge of photography is just as important as that of the alphabet.”**

Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Photographer, 1932<sup>1</sup>

*Focus on Photography: A Curriculum Guide* is a comprehensive resource featuring effective strategies, curriculum, lesson plans, and activities that will help K-12 educators bring the rewards of photographic education to their students.

<sup>1</sup> Moholy-Nagy, Laszlo. “A New Instrument of Vision” (1932), in *Moholy-Nagy, Documentary Monographs in Modern Art*, edited by Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), p. 54.





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# LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

From its founding, the International Center of Photography (ICP) has been a museum and school dedicated to the understanding and appreciation of photography. Since the early years, ICP's Community Programs department has partnered with many underserved communities to explore photography and has taken a leadership role in cultivating the power of the image as a tool for communication and as an agent for social change. ICP's education programs for young people explore photography as a way of understanding ourselves, the bonds that form a community, and the world in which we live.

ICP provides high-quality photographic education programs, augmenting a partnering organization's integrated approach to art education. Because of the caliber of teaching artists and vital connections to the field, the programs often address professional applications of photography and inspire young people to envision larger possibilities for themselves.

Over the past 15 years, more than 150 photography courses through school partnerships and after-school programs have served our many communities. The result is that thousands of elementary, junior high, and high school students have had contact with photographers and teachers who inspire them to imagine what it is like to be an artist—to be a creative person. From these experiences, common themes and effective strategies emerged and were refined, and now they are distilled in *Focus on Photography* for any educator to adapt to their needs.

ICP would like to express its gratitude to the numerous volunteers, educators, philanthropic foundations, corporations, state and government agencies, and individuals—whose generous contributions made these programs possible and, in turn, enriched and changed lives. Most importantly, ICP would like to thank the participating young photographers who have taught and continue to teach us what the meaning of “possibility” is.

Willis E. Hartshorn  
Ehrenkranz Director  
International Center of Photography



# F Foreword

“

*To collect photographs is to collect the world.”*

– Susan Sontag<sup>1</sup>

Figure 1

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Photographs tell stories of birth and death, love and war, freedom and oppression. They present the dynamics of life in the country and the city. They represent historic record, and they can shatter our definition of history. Photographs preserve our memories and inspire us to become aware. They reveal our dreams and our nightmares. They excite us and repel us. They clarify and mystify. The joy of photography lies in its infinite possibilities. Each photograph offers the extraordinary pleasure of discovery.

Viewing, discussing, and creating images can be a passage to self-discovery that enhances self-esteem. Studying photography can be the conduit to a further understanding of various cultures and different ways of seeing, believing, and thinking. Photography broadens our conception of ourselves and the world.

Photography is not just about technique; it is about perception and communication. Because the power of photography lies in its ability to communicate our perceptions of the world, photography can intersect with many areas of study. Thematic photography projects can impart an understanding of the medium itself as well as reinforce studies in such disciplines as science, social studies, English, and languages.

As Coordinator of Community Programs at the International Center of Photography (ICP) for nine years, I witnessed how photography can play a transformative role in schools and after-school learning centers. Whether designing curricula with faculty or speaking with students about their work, I have noticed how the interaction with photography creates meaningful connections both personally and educationally. In this book, I hope to synthesize ICP's experiences and provide useful essays, curriculum ideas, and practical information that will bring the rewards of photography to a broad audience.

*Focus on Photography: A Curriculum Guide* will help educators use photography to enrich students' learning experiences. These resources provide effective ways for educators to incorporate photographic education into their teaching—within schools, museums, libraries, or community centers. Whether the goal is to create a visual learning experience, supplement academic topics, build communication skills, inspire community development, or foster a mutual sense of respect, the focus is on photography in the curriculum.

Cynthia Way

<sup>1</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Delta, 1973), p. 3.



# Introduction

## Overview

*Focus on Photography: A Curriculum Guide* is designed to inform educators about the many possibilities and interdisciplinary applications of photographic education in school and after-school settings, grades K-12. Drawn from ICP's experiences, *Focus* distills what educators need to know to design a stimulating photography project that is both affordable and appropriate for their students. *Focus* presents effective strategies for designing curriculum, teaching photography, meeting educational goals, and making connections between photography and other disciplines. Educators of all levels of experience with teaching and photography will find information and practical resources that they can apply to their setting.

# Contents

*Focus on Photography: A Curriculum Guide* is organized into four parts.

**Part I: Visual Literacy**—strategies, definitions, discussion questions, and reflection activities for understanding the elements of photography

**Part II: Teaching Photography**—strategies for designing curriculum for different grade levels; teaching the history, techniques, aesthetics, and practice of photography; and meeting educational goals

**Part III: Curriculum Connections**—case studies and curricula illustrating ways to integrate photography with academic disciplines and other art media

**Part IV: Resources**—a collection of all the *Focus* lesson plans, activities, discussion questions, worksheets, writing activities, hands-on photographic activities, and reflection activities ready for use

## APPENDICES

**Appendix 1: Basics of Photography**

**Appendix 2: A Brief History of Photography**

**Appendix 3: Building a Traditional and a Digital Darkroom**

**Bibliography**—resources on photographic technique, history, and education as well as links to online image collections to use with this book

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*Note: In Focus, the term “photography” includes different types of images created with light, ranging from black-and-white prints to digital images. While the techniques vary, the same educational principles apply for interpreting, discussing, and creating all kinds of photographic images. Educators should use the technical manuals that accompany their equipment for use with this resource.*

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# How to Use This Book

As a comprehensive resource on photographic education, *Focus on Photography: A Curriculum Guide* is designed to accommodate various needs and interests. Beginning teachers will find a thorough discussion of how to design and teach a balanced curriculum that covers the history, techniques, aesthetics, and practice of photography. Teachers with little experience in photography will broaden their approaches to viewing, discussing, creating, and responding to images. Experienced photo-educators will expand their repertoire and find inspiration in project examples and activities. Teachers and school leaders who are concerned with designing a photographic education project that meets educational standards will find useful information and resources in *Focus*.

**Focus Links:** As you read through the strategies and curricula in *Focus*, you will find links to *Part IV: Resources*, including lesson plans and hands-on activities, which are a useful starting point for designing your own projects.

Educators can approach *Focus* through multiple pathways.

- 1 Read the chapters in order for a broad picture of photographic education.
- 2 Read chapters in *Part I* and *Part II* that provide a foundation in teaching and try the *Focus* activities and lesson plans in *Part IV*.
- 3 Skip to those chapters in *Part III* that address curricular topics and adapt the *Focus* lessons and activities to your school setting.
- 4 Revisit chapters and read case studies to spark teaching ideas.

Some suggestions are presented below:


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 **For all readers,** *Part I, Chapter 1: Why Photographic Education?* is a good starting place because it provides a brief overview of photographic education.

Educators with a beginning knowledge of photography and teaching may prefer to read the book chapter by chapter to build an understanding of the many educational options.

**Suggested pathway:** Review the basics of photography by reading *Appendix 1: Basics of Photography* and *Appendix 2: A Brief History of Photography*, and then read the chapters in order.

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 **For those with a strong technical knowledge of photography but little experience teaching,** spend time absorbing the foundation of teaching presented in *Part II*.

**Suggested pathway:** Read *Part II*, especially *Chapter 4: Teaching the Basics*, to understand important concepts in teaching. Read *Part I, Chapter 2: The Language of Photography* and *Chapter 3: Visual Literacy* for guidance in discussing photographs. *Part III, Chapter 17: Photography & Professional Applications* shows how to capitalize on technical expertise.

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- 🌟 **For those interested in using technology,** *Focus* has a chapter dedicated to digital imaging. The educational principles throughout *Focus* apply to digital imaging.

**Suggested pathway:** Read *Part III, Chapter 16: Photography & Digital Imaging* and *Appendix 3: Building a Traditional and a Digital Darkroom*. See *Part II, Chapter 4: Teaching the Basics* to understand how to incorporate digital imaging into any curriculum. In particular, sample curriculum using digital imaging appear in *Part II*, chapters 4, 6, and 7, and *Part III, Chapter 16*, as well as lessons in *Part IV*. See *Part II, Chapter 6: Meeting Educational Goals* to see how digital imaging can address educational technology standards.

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- 🌟 **For educators with a specific interest in designing a curriculum connection in a school,** whether they will teach the class or hire a teaching artist, *Part III* presents teaching strategies, case studies for inspiration, and links to *Focus* lesson plans and activities.

**Suggested pathway:** Read *Part III, Chapter 9: Making Curriculum Connections*. Select a chapter in *Part III* relating to the discipline of interest (e.g., *Chapter 10: Photography & History*). To understand how to adapt the case study curriculum, refer to *Part II, Chapter 4: Teaching the Basics*, *Chapter 5: Strategies for Developing Projects*, and *Chapter 6: Meeting Educational Goals*.

- 
- 🌟 **For those who have been teaching photography but wish to deepen their approach and expand their repertoire,** review chapters that provide a foundation and those that illustrate specific project ideas.

**Suggested pathway:** Select *Part II, Chapter 7: Documentary Photography Projects* or *Chapter 8: Portraiture Projects* to explore a genre that appeals to young people. Read *Part II, Chapter 4: Teaching the Basics* and *Chapter 5: Strategies for Developing Projects* to affirm teaching strategies. Use *Part I, Chapter 2: The Language of Photography* as a resource for ways to discuss elements of photography. Skip around among chapters and case studies in *Part III* to find project ideas.

- 
- 🌟 **For experienced photo-educators who wish to jump right in and teach photography,** *Part IV* contains sequential lesson plans that are the building blocks of all *Focus* curricula.

**Suggested pathway:** Review the 10 lesson plans in *Part IV* and compare them to how you have been teaching photography. Review the case studies throughout *Part III* for project ideas. If you are concerned about meeting educational standards in a school, review *Part II, Chapter 6: Meeting Educational Goals*.



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☼ **Those who need to develop a program, seek funding, and provide a rationale** for photographic projects will find many resources in *Focus*.

**Suggested pathway:** Read *Part I, Chapter 1: Why Photographic Education?*; *Part II, Chapter 5: Strategies for Developing Projects*; and *Part II, Chapter 6: Meeting Educational Goals*. The introductory section of each chapter also provides useful rationale. See especially those in *Part III* for integrating photography into school curriculum and meeting educational standards.

In addition, *Focus* can serve as a useful resource for professional development in schools, whether part of a formal series of teachers' workshops or an informal study group. (See *An Approach to Professional Development* at the end of *Part I, Chapter 3: Visual Literacy*.)



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FOCUS ON PHOTOGRAPHY: A CURRICULUM GUIDE

PART I



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Visual  
Literacy



## FOCUS ON PHOTOGRAPHY: A CURRICULUM GUIDE

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# 1

## Why Photographic Education?

### OVERVIEW

This chapter discusses why photographic education is beneficial in K-12 settings.



Figure 2: Cornell Capa, *Savoy Ballroom, 1939*

*You've Captured Our Hearts  
Developed Our Minds and  
Our Love for You Will Never Rewind.*

Mario Hyman, eighth grader  
East Harlem, New York, 1994

## Capturing the Imagination

Intrinsic to photography is the pleasure of discovery. Both the process and the results compel us to wonder, reflect, and reveal. Whether capturing a moment of action with the camera, watching an image appear in the darkroom, or noticing the play of light and pattern in a photograph, learning photography is fascinating. Teaching this artistic medium provides the types of engaging activities that educators strive to bring into their curriculum. By becoming image makers and image readers, students learn powerful communication and problem-solving skills and become more equipped to navigate our increasingly challenging and visual culture.

From the first photographs young people create, they demonstrate a sensitivity to graphic form and fresh approach to design that becomes more thoughtful, personal, and playful as they gain control of the camera. If at first students handle the fragile, manual camera with caution and timidity, they soon learn to count the clicks as the aperture opens or closes and to adjust the shutter speed fast enough to catch the next action shot. Crouching down low and shooting up endows a classmate with power, while taking a portrait from the top of a park bench makes a classmate look small in a large world. These young photographers are learning to compose pictures and express their point of view.

When working on photographic assignments, students respond visually and emotionally to the whole scene, and they also solve technical problems (considering lighting, determining the angle, calculating exposure). They think critically about the subject matter and make choices when shooting, editing, and printing. The resulting pictures are a map of seeing, frame by frame, becoming increasingly sophisticated in approach to subject matter. Their images provide clues to how they think and feel and what they know and wonder about. "What are the positive qualities in my photographs?" says Kathy Quilan, an ICP high school intern, "They are my ideas and thoughts. I worked hard on them."

## What Photographic Education Looks Like in Schools

The richness in photographic education comes from the “image”-ination—from helping students see and make creative connections between the art form and their lives. Photography is an immediate and accessible medium, making it a useful educational tool. A balanced curriculum in photography incorporates studies on the history, techniques, aesthetics, and practice of the medium. This hand-on approach—at once grounded in the image and open to the imagination—most effectively advances students’ knowledge and skills. Whether teaching photography or another discipline, in a school or after-school setting, educators can capitalize on a visual learning experience that motivates students to learn.



Figure 3

Photography's role in K-12 education has as many manifestations as the medium itself and its range of techniques, styles, and genres. Because of this eclectic range, photography can also be woven into other disciplines. Kindergartners can learn how light creates a photograph as they compose sun prints outdoors. Elementary school students can tell stories about their lives by combining pictures with drawing and writing. Middle school students can make portraits and write poetry to share their deepest concerns. High school students can create photo essays and portfolios that explore their emerging role in the world. Advanced students use photography to show a place of peace (Figure 3 by Darkeem Dennis, 18), to capture a dynamic action (Figure 4 by Ileia Burgos, 18), to portray the courage of a blind grandmother (Figure 5 by Ebony Peartree, 18), or to focus on the artful steps of a dancer (Figure 6 by Joseph Gilmore, 14).

As for the options, imagine schools outfitted with darkrooms, lighting studios, and computer stations, integrated with digital photography and video and connected to the Internet. This is happening now, where there are the resources and administrative support, but other low-cost options can take advantage of available school resources. Photographs are created with a variety of cameras: handmade pinhole cameras, disposable cameras, digital cameras, 35mm SLR cameras, and large-format cameras. For a school with scant resources allocated to art, a creative and frugal teacher can design group projects where students play different roles, use available images, and combine photography with other media. Because it is more likely that a school can invest in a computer lab than dedicate space and resources to a darkroom, digital imaging is more easily integrated into school curriculum. Students can create images with a digital camera, retouch and resize them, and combine them with text. As they learn about artistic techniques, they build computer literacy, another valuable skill for their future. Most important, they learn how the visual image communicates.



Figure 4

Figure 5



Figure 6



## What Visual Learning Offers

Understanding the language of photography is integral to harnessing its educational power. By deepening a knowledge of the history, techniques, aesthetics, and practice of photography through a balanced curriculum, students and teachers alike become more visually literate.

Loosely defined, visual literacy is the ability to read or decode visual images; it is “the use of and transformation of various kinds of symbols” (Gardener, 1990, p. 9). These symbols are articulated through the visual language of the art form—its formal, technical, and expressive qualities. We interpret visual images with our senses, our emotions, and our minds. Many researchers have described how this interaction with art is a cognitive activity. As Rudolf Arnheim states in *Visual Thinking*, “Visual perception is visual thinking” (1969, p. 14). And, he continues, “the arts are the most powerful means of strengthening the perceptual component without which productive thinking is impossible in any field of endeavor” (p. 3). When we say that students are “seeing photographically” and have developed “visual literacy skills,” we mean that in their photographs and responses, they demonstrate that they have developed the perceptual and thinking skills to understand how the visual image communicates meaning.

Visual literacy leads to a rich understanding of the arts in terms of both perception and creation. This results in a connection to the legacy of the arts and art’s powerful way of communicating the values, aspirations, and conflicts in our lives and throughout human history. Studying art helps us to connect to ourselves and each other, to cultures both familiar and unfamiliar, and therefore informs our growth individually and as a community. To build visual literacy skills at school is an essential way to prepare young people to contribute to our global society.

As Harry S. Broudy says in *The Role of Imagery in Learning* (1987): “The way in which the poet, novelist, artist, and composer perceived the time in which they lived and the way they personified the values of the time in images are important resources for the educated response to social problems” (p. 23). Studying the history of the art form, learning how artists have used their craft to respond to the world, practicing these techniques to make our own contributions, and uncovering how images connect us to our past, present, and future—all make us more literate.

To truly teach students, educators themselves need to be visually literate detectives. Educators need to understand how the visual image communicates and how students are approaching their art-making in order to track student progress and adapt their instruction to students’ needs. With an understanding of the possibilities of photographic education, educators can integrate photography into school and after-school programs and meet their educational goals. Photographic education meets national and local educational standards for visual arts when the instruction

builds students' knowledge and skills in the aesthetics, techniques, processes, and applications of the medium.

It is important to develop criteria for photography projects that reflect both artistic and academic learning goals. When assessing student progress and evaluating art projects, educators can focus on quantitative aspects (attendance, participation, outcomes) and qualitative reflections of the educational process (students' reactions to the classroom experience, progression in skill development, and the quality of resulting artwork). Comments from students show the best evidence of what they learned. Fifth-grade student Antoinette Briguglio writes:

*I learned a number of things. We learned about light, color, speed, and depth of field, and we learned how to hold and operate a camera, and how to predict what our picture will look like. I really enjoyed the outings we took to take pictures. It was a fun way to express myself and my feelings.*

(ICP course evaluation)

## Rewards of Photographic Education

As students learn about photography, they benefit from an integrated learning experience that nurtures their minds, hearts, and souls. This is well expressed by Mario Hyman, an eighth grader from East Harlem, who made an illustrated thank-you card as his reflection on the ICP photography program:

*You've Captured Our Hearts  
Developed Our Minds and  
Our Love for You Will Never Rewind.*

While photographic education offers many of the same rewards as art education in general, there are also several aspects particular to the medium of photography.

**(1) Active learning:** Students must work hands-on with cameras in a setting where they can create images; this encourages students to interact with and know about the world. In contrast, musicians, painters, and writers often can create artwork from their imagination and in the privacy of their rooms.

**(2) Point of view:** Creating an image with a camera trains the photographer to select a point of view, to frame a picture in the particular way that communicates what he or she wants to say. This has a tremendous personal benefit for students, as they broaden their communication skills and see value in their perspectives.

**(3) Applications of the medium:** Because the use of photography is widespread in professional, educational, and personal spheres, learning to create and understand images is a powerful, relevant skill. To move beyond the snapshot and comprehend more complex visual statements, such as in advertising and art exhibitions, offers students access to a communication skill that is part of their education, family lives, community history, and future careers.

In high-quality photographic education projects, educators will see many areas of personal and artistic growth in their students:

- mastery of photographic skills, techniques, and concepts
- deeper understanding of self-identity and connection to the world
- enhanced problem-solving and communication skills
- increased self-confidence and motivation to learn

Says Kathy McCullough, director of The Earth School, of a 1995 collaboration:

*The ICP photography program gives young people a new language to express their thoughts and feelings. With the program's dual emphasis on technique and creativity, students experience and understand art and science, as well as the rigor and planning involved in realizing their visions.*

## Support for Art in Education

One premise for art education is that studying art can develop thinking skills as well as artistic skills. Increasingly, academic institutions are supporting this theory. Research in many universities, such as Harvard University's Project Zero, has acknowledged the value of visual learning experiences in promoting cognitive development (Gardener, 1990; Perkins, 1994). Furthermore, Howard Gardener's theory of multiple intelligences presents a broader view of human capacity that has informed approaches to bringing art into the context of education (Gardener, 1990, 2003).

National studies have documented and examined the impact of art education. Gaining the Arts Advantage (1999), a two-year study of nearly 100 schools nationwide, identified critical factors for developing and sustaining district-wide arts programs (see: <http://www.pcah.gov/gaa/index.html>). In another national study, *The Champions of Change* (1998), researchers found that students in art education programs improved their abilities to express thoughts and ideas, exercise their imaginations, take risks in learning, cooperate with others, and display their learning publicly, among other assets (p. 58). The study concluded:



*Ultimately the skills and discipline students gained, the bonds they formed with peers and adults, and the rewards they received through instruction and performing fueled their talent development journey and helped most achieve success both in and outside of school. (p. 78)*

Teaching photography in art class or integrating photography into other disciplines can provide the types of engaging learning activities that both research and practice say are effective. Some examples are: curriculum activities focused on a project or theme, active and experiential learning centered on students' needs, students working collaboratively and learning from more experienced peers, and teachers working in teams (for up-to-date best practices linking research and practice, see The Knowledge Loom at <http://knowledgeloom.org>). Moreover, connecting art to the academic curriculum can have positive, motivating effects; for example, teacher/researcher Jeffrey Wilhelm discusses how he used the visual arts to help students become more engaged in reading and better understand a story (see *You Gotta BE the Book*, 1995).

Art education provides many of the materials and methods that educators seek. Ramon Cortinez specifies these attributes in the introduction to *Gaining the Arts Advantage* (1998),

*Educators say they want materials and activities that are “constructivist,” that is, concrete and hands-on. They seek materials that are multi-modal, multicultural, appealing, and challenging to the classroom’s diverse range of learners. They look for activities that provide not just one means of assessment but multiple ways to track and evaluate a student’s progress. They want materials that promote critical thinking. They look for activities that are interdisciplinary.... Research confirms what we always knew intuitively: the arts teach all of us—students and teachers alike—innovation, novelty, and creativity. (p. 6. See: <http://www.pcah.gov/gaa/introduction.html>)*

According to current research on education reform, when a school's curriculum, instruction, and structure respond to students' learning needs and interests, student performance improves (Sizer, 1992; LAB at Brown University, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 2002). Students need to see how what they are learning in school connects to their lives and the next step to work or college. They need to feel trusted and empowered to shape their future. This student-centered approach is at the heart of art education, which uses creative tools that motivate students to learn, to express their point of view, and to visualize their future possibilities.

Outside of education, the world of work values the skills promoted by art education. For a workplace that is being transformed by technological innovations and social and economic forces, creative vision and well-developed communication skills are essential. Joyce Hergenhan, former president of the GE FUND, acknowledges what art education offers:

*Tomorrow's workforce—and especially, its leaders—will need broad abilities beyond technical skills. There will be a demand for people who are creative, analytical, disciplined, and self-confident—people who can solve problems, communicate ideas, and be sensitive to the world around them. Hands-on participation in the arts is a proven way to help develop these abilities.* (Longley, 1999, p. 71)

However, the greatest obstacle to art education is the financial cost of resources, materials, and faculty. To bring photographic education to schools and community centers, our Community Programs at the International Center of Photography (ICP) received generous corporate and private support. But, for art education to become central to the learning experience, there needs to be greater awareness of the value of art education and investment in the public schools nationwide. Still, the creative integration of photography into existing programs with available resources can effectively introduce students to the medium.

Even with all the supporting research and practice, educators still find themselves justifying to many audiences why the arts are beneficial. When teaching, it is therefore important to return to the heart of the matter: art itself. In *The Arts and the Creation of Mind* (2002), Elliot Eisner, professor of education and art at Stanford University, emphasizes the importance of placing the fundamental nature of art as a creative medium at the center of the teaching.

*Experience is central to growth because experience is the medium of education. Education, in turn, is the process of learning to create ourselves, and it is what the arts, both as a process and as the fruits of that process, promote. Work in the arts is not only a way of creating performances and products; it is a way of creating our lives by expanding our consciousness, shaping our dispositions, satisfying our quest for meaning, establishing contact with others, and sharing a culture.* (p. 3)

A high-quality art education program fosters an understanding of the art medium, while also supporting the school's educational goals, and most important, celebrating the students' first steps as artists and their mastery of a powerful new communication tool for reflecting on their lives.

## Conclusion

*Focus on Photography* endeavors to draw from ICP's experiences and distill what makes photography work well in school and after-school settings and what educators need to know to establish a stimulating photography project that is both affordable and appropriate to their distinct audience.

To help young people embark on their future, we need to teach them the language of their newly changing country. Growing up in a visually dominant culture, young people know that images communicate; teaching them how the image works helps decode images—to distinguish harmful stereotypes and to apprehend the various sides of more complex statements. Teaching the language of photography and image-making skills empowers young people to describe the world and claim their place in it. Art education supports national goals for training and motivating our next generation of leaders, by making students literate and therefore connected to their past, present, and future. Photographic education capitalizes on the intrinsic power of images and of art to communicate to our minds, hearts, and souls. Photography's role in K-12 education, integrated within imaginative curriculum, is to enlighten.

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## FOCUS ON PHOTOGRAPHY: A CURRICULUM GUIDE

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This chapter is an excerpt from *Focus on Photography: A Curriculum Guide*

Written by **Cynthia Way** for the **International Center of Photography**

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# 2

## The Language of Photography

### OVERVIEW

This chapter explores how photographs communicate and presents definitions and discussion questions on elements of photography.

Figure 7: Vik Muniz, *Action Photo I (After Hans Namuth)*, 1997-98



## How Pictures Speak

The word photography is derived from the Greek words “photo,” which means light, and “graph,” which means writing. Photography is writing with light. As a type of writing, photography has a visual language, an alphabet of tone and hue, a grammar of line and form. Its visual patterns are its sentences. The photograph is silently articulate, communicating its message through an arrangement of color and shape.

The language of photography is distinguished from other visual arts by its two essential elements: light and the camera. Light rays reflect off surfaces and into the camera, where light-sensitive film or a digital disk records the image.

**Note: Boldface words appear in the glossary.**

The resulting photograph describes the world in a tonal spectrum end-marked by the highlights and the shadows. Technical considerations such as lighting choices, film, and camera type determine the final look of the image. Camera controls such as **shutter speed** and **aperture** produce photographic attributes such as **focus** and **blur**. Looking through a rectangular frame, the photographer views and creates images. **Framing**, **cropping**, and **vantage point** or **point of view** are other characteristic elements of photography.

Photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson coined the phrase “the decisive moment” to describe the instant when an event takes place in the camera, when a photographer sees all the graphic forms in the camera frame and decides to take the picture. (For example, a photographer watches as a man walks down the street, and the photographer takes the picture when the man’s hat fits squarely in the window frame.) Photographers make artistic choices when creating, editing, and producing their images. These choices take into account the elements of photography: photographic attributes (e.g., focus and blur); the composition of the image; the subject or content; the photographer’s style (or voice); genre (or intended use, such as advertising or fine art exhibition); and the meaning that the photographer intends to communicate. The resulting images have many meanings depending on how they are interpreted. In some cases, they present more questions than answers. In other cases, these artworks bear a close relationship to the look of the real world and to the moment at which they were created; they resemble our own faces, homes, and lives so closely that we consider them to be mirrorlike truths of the world.

Photography—the reaction of light and silver crystals—translates the world into a collection of dots that our eye and mind synthesize into pictures: a moment of happiness shown on a face, a glimpse of an ordinary day, an incongruous situation that makes us laugh, a place of beauty, a scene of conflict, a historic event, a moment that should not be forgotten. The process of synthesis, or seeing, is as fluid and rapid as the roaming movements of the eye itself and the synaptic lightning of our thoughts. It happens immediately; this language is accessible.



Living in a media-saturated culture, we consume visual images, responding with our senses, emotionally, cognitively, all at once and somewhat hungrily, as if we are popping a chocolate into our mouths. We interpret photographic images in the same way as we navigate through the world by visual signs every day. We are well aware of the power of visual images to communicate something mysterious and something clear. For creators, image making is a way of projecting our thoughts and emotions and leaving a tracing of ourselves in the world. For viewers, visual images are a way to connect to ourselves and to one another. Between creator and viewers, photographs carry on a dialogue with the past, present, and future.

It is important to remember that photographs can play tricks on us, just as our eyes can deceive us. For example, in *Action Photo 1 (After Hans Namuth)* (see Figure 7), Vik Muniz recreated a painting by Hans Namuth portraying an artist at work. To create the image, Muniz poured Bosco chocolate syrup on a light table in thin lines that imitated the Namuth painting, then he photographed the liquid design. Muniz had to work quickly, before the syrup melted under the hot lights. In the resulting photograph, the viewer sees the dark lines, shapes, and angles and interprets a man creating art on a canvas. When the viewer acknowledges that it is a photograph of chocolate syrup, a variety of reactions emerges (surprise, laughter, hunger).

Muniz calls attention to the process of seeing, how we interpret visual information and “the fallacies of such visual information and the pleasure to be derived from such fallacies. These illusions are made to reveal the architecture of our concept of truth....Art directly or indirectly has always to deal with illusion.”<sup>1</sup> Muniz plays with the gap between the image and reality. He reminds us that art is the re-presentation of life, a play for the mind, a delight for the senses, and nourishment for the soul.

Art is essentially a communication. Art speaks in the language of its media; it uses techniques that are designed to inspire responses. As Muniz shows us, art-making and the interpretation of art are best approached in the spirit of play and with an appreciation for the many, wondrous responses it inspires.

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<sup>1</sup> Vik Muniz, *Seeing is Believing* (New Mexico: Arena Editions, 1998) p. 16.

# Elements of the Language of Photography

Following is a comprehensive list of important elements of the language of photography. The elements are arranged into categories: photographic attributes, composition, content, style/genre, and meaning. Definitions and guiding questions explore each element.

In *Focus*, the term “photography” includes different types of images created with light, ranging from black-and-white prints to digital images. While the techniques differ, the same educational principles apply for interpreting, discussing, and creating all kinds of photographic images. (For more information on the technical aspects of photography, see *Appendix 1: Basics of Photography*.)

While reading this section, you may find it useful to consider the elements and the questions in regard to a sample photograph. Because this is such a comprehensive list, one approach is to review the elements relevant to a particular class discussion or elements about which you have particular questions. This material is intended for educators to review and adapt as necessary for their students. For guidelines on discussing these elements with your students, see *Chapter 3: Visual Literacy*. Also for direct use with students are the resources in *Part IV*, including discussion questions, worksheets, and activities that build students’ knowledge of the elements of photography.

## PREVIEW OF ELEMENTS BY CATEGORY

### PHOTOGRAPHIC ATTRIBUTES

Light  
Focus  
Time  
Motion  
Vantage Point/Point of View  
Framing  
Cropping  
Technique

### COMPOSITION

Shape  
Line  
Angle  
Color and Tone  
Pattern  
Depth  
Composition Overall

### CONTENT

Subject  
Background  
Foreground  
People  
Story  
Mood/Feeling  
Symbol/Metaphor

### STYLE & GENRE

Style  
Genre

### MEANING

Artist’s Intention/Purpose  
Meaning

## Photographic Attributes: A – H

### A) Light

Light is the defining element of photography. Light literally brings the photograph to life, and the type and quality of light have the strongest effect on the resulting image. Often, photographers are inspired to create a photograph because the light is so lovely, casting on the subject a quality uniquely rendered by film.

- Describe the type and quality of the light.
- Type/source: Is the light natural (e.g., from the sun) or artificial (e.g., from a lamp, flash, studio strobe)? How does the type/source of lighting affect the look of the image?
- Quality/direction: Is the lighting coming from above, below, the side? At what angle? Are there any shadows? Does the direction of the light create an effect of dimension?
- Quality/characteristics: Is the light soft or hard? Are the shadows thin or thick? Do light and shadow make a pattern?

Light and shadow, the light and dark tones in the image, often provide the most compelling patterns in a photograph.

- Look closely at the light and dark tones in the image.
- Find the shadows.
- Describe the pattern that light and shadow make.
- What kind of effect and mood do the light and shadow create?

### B) Focus

The word **focus** means center of attention. This uniquely photographic attribute is created by both the focus and the aperture controls on the camera.

The focus control centers on a part of the image, and when in focus the area is clear, sharp, and detailed, with distinctions between forms. When out of focus, the area is cloudy, indistinct, and vague, with blurriness between forms.

The **aperture** control creates **depth of field**, the area that is in focus. Aperture measures the distance from the end of the focus area to the focal center (imagine the perimeter of a circle and its center). A shallow depth of field is in focus only to a small degree around the focal center.

For example in Figure 8, the tree trunk is clearly rendered, while the branches in the foreground are blurry. Figure 9 shows a wide depth of field, a large area in focus around the focal center: the bench, shrubs, and trees are all clear.

- What can you see clearly in the picture?
- What is unclear?
- How does focus capture our attention? Can sharp focus capture our attention as well as blurry focus can?
- As a result of focus, does the subject gain or lose significance?
- Does the subject seem realistic or idealized?

Figure 8



Figure 9



## C) Time

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Photography has a unique relationship to time, in part because the image is created by the interaction among light, a lens, and light-sensitive film during a particular moment. Light rays refracting through the lens trace the image onto film; this happens in an instant and reflects the instant in which the image was created. A drawing or painting may describe a particular time and place, but it can be rendered over time through the artist's perception or memory. In contrast, a photographer and camera need to be there, responding to the world, in order to create the image. Photographs have the quality of capturing a moment in time, of "being there."

- Describe the sense of time that comes across in the image. Does it seem like a fleeting instant captured in a snapshot (e.g., a person walking down a chaotic street) or does it carry the timeless quality of a painting (e.g., a couple standing still for a portrait)?
- Consider the composition, technique, content, and style of the image. How do these elements contribute to the attribute of time?

## D) Motion

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In a photograph, motion can appear frozen in time and space or be described through blur. These effects are achieved mainly through the shutter control and the aperture. The shutter, triggered by your finger when you take the picture, opens and shuts like a blinking eye, letting in light. The aperture affects how much light comes into the camera; it works like the iris of an eye, widening in the dark to let in more light and narrowing in the bright sun to let in less light. In order to achieve a correct **exposure**—the right amount of light to make the picture, the aperture and shutter speed must have the right relationship. When there is a lot of light, the shutter speed is fast; and when there is little light, the shutter speed is slow. The faster the shutter, the more able the camera is to freeze motion, such that someone jumping could be forever suspended in mid-air. A slow shutter speed creates blur when figures are in motion. You can also create a sense of motion by moving the camera when you take the picture, called "panning" the camera, resulting in blur.

- Is anything moving in the picture?
- How can you tell?
- Is it blurry or frozen in space?
- Can you guess how the effect is achieved?

## E) Vantage Point/ Point of View

Vantage point or point of view is the photographer's stance, both in terms of how the photographer is positioned when he or she takes the picture and what the photographer's attitude is toward the subject. How the photographer perceives the subject influences how the photographer chooses to position himself or herself in relation to the subject. This is similar to how your opinion about something affects the tone of your voice and the language you use to communicate.

Point of view is one of the most important concepts to convey to young people because it shows that they have the creative control and power to reveal their perspective through the camera. An understanding of point of view also encourages image makers to move around the subject and determine the most interesting and revealing approach.

- Where was the photographer when he or she took the picture?
- Was the photographer standing or crouching or lying on the ground?
- Did the photographer take the picture from above, below, or the side?
- Did the photographer tilt the camera or keep it parallel to the horizon?
- Can you guess what the photographer's attitude is toward the subject?
- How does the vantage point affect the way you look at the resulting picture? For example, a picture taken from above may give the impression of superiority, from below of inferiority, and a host of other interpretations.

## F) Framing

Whenever photographers create a photograph, they are selecting a slice of the world as described through a frame. In terms of content, framing is like point of view: It presents the photographer's frame of reference with regard to the subject. Graphically, framing affects composition, because your eye follows the visual movement created by lines, shapes, and angles in the picture. In addition, the information that is included in the frame determines how we read the picture, just like how clues lead to the solution of a mystery.

- What is included in the frame, and what is excluded?
- Draw what you see in the frame, and draw what you imagine is outside of the frame.

- Hold an empty slide frame to your eye and view your surroundings.
  - See how you can create images by framing.
  - Watch how the relationship of the forms changes as you move the frame to different places and tilt it at different angles.
  - Look for “the decisive moment,” when the forms come to a point of harmony or look interesting to you.

## G) Cropping

Sometimes when photographers frame a photograph, they crop or exclude from the frame a portion of the subject, foreground, or background. The frame may cut off the man’s hat, an arm, half of the chair. To make sense of the image, viewers don’t need to see the whole person or object because there is enough information to imagine the rest beyond the frame. Cropping calls attention to the fact that you are looking at an artist’s selection of a scene (as opposed to an unadulterated view of reality).

Used effectively, cropping can add dynamism to the composition or make the photographic statement more concise. Used ineffectively, we may wonder what’s missing, why the image looks awkward, its message unclear.

- What effect does cropping have on the graphic composition of the image?
- How does cropping help draw attention to what the photograph is saying?
- How does cropping affect your perception of the subject?
- Consider the use of cropping by photographers and other visual artists, especially after photography was introduced in the late nineteenth century (e.g., Edgar Degas, Paul Gauguin, Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, and others). What have these painters learned from photography?

## H) Technique

When photography was first invented, photographers carried a large-format camera, tripod, black drape, glass plates, and bottles of chemistry in a covered wagon that served as a darkroom to process the wet plates. Now photographers carry studio strobes, tripods, lighting stands, Hasselblad cameras, 35mm SLR cameras, digital cameras, and even disposable cardboard cameras, which they can tuck into their vest pocket. Images are processed in labs or downloaded to a computer. The choice of

camera, film, lighting source, and other techniques greatly affect the look of the resulting images. (See the bibliography for resources on technique and consult the manuals that come with your equipment for more technical information.)

- Try to discern or gather information about techniques:
  - Cameras: large format (4"x 5" or 8"x 10"), medium format (2 ¼" negative), 35mm camera, alternative cameras such as pinhole and Holga (plastic camera), or a digital camera
  - Film: color or black-and-white film; grainy film (Do you see lots of dots?) or smooth (Similarly, the low or high resolution of a digital image can make the dots more or less noticeable.)
  - Lighting: artificial (flash, studio strobes) or natural (sunlight)
  - Final print: gelatin silver, digital, platinum, palladium, handmade paper, Polaroid transfer, color Cibachrome, C-print, etc.
- Describe the effects that the techniques have on the resulting image.
- What do the techniques tell you about the photographer's working habits and aesthetic?



## Composition: I – O

### I) Shape

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In a photograph, shapes are definite forms created by objects, figures, and shadows. They are rendered in colors or shades of gray.

- Can you find different shapes in the image?
- Look for circles, squares, rectangles, triangles, and organic forms.
- Look in the shadows for more shapes and echoes of shapes.
- Think about how the shapes in the image create balance and structure.

### J) Line

---

In a photograph, lines are the borders between shapes.

- Let your eyes follow the lines in the image. Or make a drawing of the outlines of shapes. How does photography differ from drawing or painting in terms of line and shape? Sometimes you have to “see through” what the image is of (e.g., a cat curled on a sunny step) in order to find the shapes and lines that compose it (e.g., a black circle, a series of parallel lines).
- What qualities do the lines have: strong and bold; light and thin; curvy or straight; diagonal or circular?
- Think about the effect that the quality of the lines has on your visual experience of the image: Is it activating, calming, or unifying?

### K) Angle

---

Angles draw our attention in certain directions.

- Study the angles created by the intersection of lines and shapes in the image.
- Point out the direction of the angles. What do they lead your eyes toward? Do they draw your attention in or out of the frame?

## L) Color and Tone

A color photograph can offer a range of the visual spectrum of colors, but not all the colors that the eye can see. Some photographers pay attention to creating color palette, or a pattern of complementary and contrasting colors, just like in a painting. The tones in a black-and-white photograph are the various shades of gray from white to black, and they can be bright or pale.

- Describe the colors or tones in the photograph.
- Do you see patterns of colors or tones?
- How do the colors or tones make you feel?

## M) Pattern

Patterns of visual forms—shapes, lines, colors or tones, light and shadow—create balance and structure in a composition and also can emphasize the main ideas of the photograph.

- What types of patterns can you find in the image?
- Can you find any repeated shapes or colors?
- Does this pattern create rhythm and emphasis? (Think of pattern in music.)
- Describe the quality of the pattern: loud, quiet, busy, delicate, heavy.
- What does the pattern draw your attention to?

## N) Depth

Depth in a photograph is an illusion created by the way forms are rendered on a two-dimensional surface. Perspective (point of view) creates a sense of depth, especially when it results in a composition with lines and angles that draw your attention to a distant point. A sense of depth also comes from areas of light and shadow and the clarity of detail or focus. Photographers use perspective, composition, lighting, and focus to create a three-dimensional effect.

- Does the photograph look flat and two-dimensional, with the forms appearing to be on the same plane?
- Or does it seem like a three-dimensional world into which you could slip? Do you feel like you could hold the objects in your hand?
- Consider the relationship between forms by comparing the size of different elements in the image. What seems close up or far away? What is clear or blurry?
- Are there areas of light and shadow in the image? Is the light creating a sense of depth?

## O) Composition

Taken together, the shapes, lines, angles, colors and tones, patterns, and depth of the image create the composition. Figures and objects in the image are considered the “positive space” of the composition. Consider the “negative space,” too—this is the part of the image between the actual forms and the frame: the white sky or the gray floor, for example.

- Study how the composition keeps your eye busy with its shapes, lines, and angles. Where is your eye drawn?
- Look at the way the forms work together. Consider the shape that several forms, like three people in a triangular formation, make together. Is there a prominent shape or diagonal in the composition?
- What are the main elements of the composition? A pattern, figures, color? What are the complementary elements? Shadow, background?
- Overall, does the composition lead your attention to one thing or to many things?
- Does the composition “work,” effectively contributing to the meaning?

## Content: P-V

### P) Subject

What is the subject of the picture? A trickier question than it seems, the subject of Muniz's photograph, for example, can be creativity or Hans Namuth or chocolate; it can be an abstract idea, a representation, or specific content. (See Figure 7.)

All the visual elements are drawing the viewer's attention to the concrete subject (what is literally portrayed) and the abstract subject (the main idea that the photographer is trying to communicate). Sometimes the subject of art is an idea; in conceptual art, the idea often is the point of the artwork. In narrative art, the subject portrays a story or part of a story with the rest implied. In figurative art, the subject is the person, place, or thing that is represented. The genre of the artwork is a good clue to the abstract idea that the artist is addressing.

**Concrete subject:** What is the photograph of? This is what you see in the image.

**Abstract subject:** What is the photograph about? This is how you interpret what you see in the image.

- To discover the subject:
  - Can you tell what genre it is?
  - What is your eye drawn to? What is the concrete subject?
  - What is the main idea that the picture makes you think of? What is the abstract subject?
  - Describe what you see in the picture that gives you information about the subject and main idea.
  - Write a caption for the picture that describes the concrete subject and another that expresses the abstract subject.

## Q) Background

The background creates a context for the photograph. It can be a color, a blurry shape, or a highly detailed scene. Color creates a mood. Details offer hints about the subject. The background provides valuable information on how to interpret the photograph because it sets the context.

- What do you see in the background? Do you see mainly colors or shapes? What effect do they create? Do you see details? Describe them.
- How does the background connect to the subject?

## R) Foreground

The foreground is the area in front of the subject. It also contains valuable information that reflects the subject, and it can affect the mood of the image and the access the viewer has to the subject. Space in the foreground can create a feeling of distance from the subject. Shading in the foreground can create dimension. Activity or cropped forms can add dynamism to the composition, even a sense of mystery. Sometimes there is nothing in the foreground, giving you direct access to the subject.

- Describe what you see in front of the subject.
- What effect does the foreground have on how you see the subject?

## S) People

Every day we observe people, and from their expression, gestures, and actions, we interpret who they are and how they are feeling. When we study a portrait of someone, we use the same skills, assumptions, and acts of imagination in assessing the subject's identity and mood.

**Action:** What are the people doing? What is the purpose of the action?

**Motivation:** Can you guess why they are doing it?

**Expression:** Describe their expression. Can you guess what they are feeling?

**Clothing:** Describe what they are wearing. What can you learn about them through their clothing? Can you guess where they work or what they like to do? What age are they? Where are they from? What time period are they from?

**Gestures:** Describe what they are doing with their hands. Can you guess what signals they are giving?

**Pose:** Describe how they are standing or sitting. Can you guess what their attitudes are?

**Character:** From all the concrete details you can observe in the photograph, can you guess what characteristics the people have? Are they proud and principled? Lost and tired? Happy and motivated?

## T) Story

Photographs are a wonderful tool for storytelling. They capture a moment in time that can be the beginning, middle, or end of a story. In a photograph, you can often see a character in a situation that poses a question or presents a mystery leading to story.

**Single image:** When considering how a single photograph tells a story, ask three questions: What is happening in this photograph? What might have happened before the photograph was taken? What might happen next? Also consider what else you know about the people, situation, or time period. How does your knowledge add to the story?

**Sequence:** If you are looking at a series of photographs, try to figure out what is happening in each image in the sequence, what you imagine happens between images, and how the sequence paces the story.

**Image and text:** If you are viewing a combination of image and text that tell a story, consider how the two media resonate and work with each other. What does each medium communicate? How does each contribute to story and meaning? How does the text direct your interpretation of the image and vice versa?

**Setting:** What place and time period are shown in the photograph? Describe the details that you see in the setting.

**Character:** Describe the people in the photograph. What are they like? Describe some of the characteristics that they seem to have. What are they doing? What do you think they want? Can you imagine why? What challenges do they face?

**Situation/plot:** Describe the situation that the characters are in. What is happening in the picture? What do you think happened before the picture was taken? What do you think will happen next?

## U) Mood/ Feeling

Many attributes of a photograph can create mood: lighting; the colors and tones; the shapes, lines, and angles; texture of the print; the subject; and even the expressions of the people in the picture. Texture refers to the photographic material (e.g., smooth glossy paper, rough matte paper, or a Polaroid transfer on handmade paper). Images can also have a tactile quality reflecting how a viewer may think an object would feel if touched (e.g., the soft furriness of a dog's ears). Colors inspire an emotional reaction: Some colors in the blue family seem cool and in the red family, hot. Mood is connoted by visual elements but depends on each person's subjective response.

- How does this picture make you feel?
- What elements (lighting, colors, shapes, texture, the subject) make you feel that way?

## V) Symbol/ Metaphor

A symbol is something that stands for or represents something else besides the thing in itself (e.g., the red, white, and blue pattern that is recognized as the American flag).

- Can you see any symbols in this photograph?
- Would they be familiar to other cultures?

A metaphor is a comparison drawn between two apparently dissimilar things to show their underlying connection.

- Is there anything in the photograph that could be read as a metaphor?
- Is the whole picture a symbol or metaphor for a state of mind or a cultural movement?

## Style & Genre: W-X

### W) Style

Everyone has got style! Style is attitude; style is taste. Just as you have a taste for certain types of clothes, photographers have likes and dislikes for certain techniques, compositional elements, and working methods.

- Consider the **vantage point** of the photograph. How would you describe the attitude the photographer has toward the subject?
- Look at a series of images by the same photographer. Do you notice similar techniques, common elements in the composition, a favored tilt to the camera?
- Can you determine the method and aesthetic of the photographer?
- Is the style bold and confrontational, or subtle and contemplative? Describe the photographer's style.

### X) Genre

Genre is a type or category based on the photograph's style, content, and intended purpose.

- Based on the style and content, can you guess what the intended use was for the photograph (e.g., advertising, gallery display, personal photo album)?
- Can you place the photograph into a genre: portraiture, still life, fashion, documentary, photojournalism, conceptual, narrative, figurative, etc.?
- Research the photograph in books at a museum or library and on the Internet to learn more.



## Meaning: Y&Z

### Y) Artist's Intention/ Purpose

Without a direct quote from the artist, you can only guess about the artist's intention. Your observations on intention are based on what you can see in the image and information provided about the techniques used. The style, content, and use of the image indicate its purpose (e.g., magazine illustration, fine art still life).

- Consider the photographer's purpose in creating the image. Was the photograph designed for use in a magazine, advertisement, or fine art exhibition?
- Can you find any information on what the artist was trying to communicate?
- Check the caption or wall text in an exhibition, publications, interviews, and the Internet for more information.

### Z) Meaning

Viewers arrive at an understanding of the photograph's meaning through various pathways, which can include their personal responses, knowledge of allusions to artistic traditions, and an evaluation of whether the photograph "works" (i.e., communicates its message).

The important thing to remember is that photographers make choices—from among the elements of photography described above—when creating, editing, and producing their images in order to get their message across. By understanding what those elements are and how they work together, viewers can decode the image and interpret its meaning. One of the joys in art is that there are many possible interpretations.

For example, one reading of Vik Muniz's photograph (Figure 7) is that the angle of the point of view draws you into the image, the rhythm of lines and curves create an animated feeling, Muniz's techniques (drawing with liquid and photographing on a light table) demonstrate speed and skill, and the selected materials (e.g., chocolate) please the senses and challenge perception. The subject of the picture is an artist at work, but the image seems to be in the genre of conceptual art. Overall, the picture communicates virtuosity and play in the artistic enterprise. It also opens up questions and options for individual interpretation.

- What is the photograph saying?
- Describe how the elements of photography—photographic attributes, composition, content, style and genre—communicate this meaning.

**Personal response:** Each person responds to a photograph differently based on their background and interests.

- How does the photograph make you feel?
- What does it make you think of?
- Do you feel any connection between the photograph and your life, experiences, memories, dreams, hopes, and fears?
- Does it inspire you to work creatively?

**Allusion:** Allusions are connections to other photographs, photographers, art history, literature, and other disciplines.

- Does the photograph reference other artworks? If so, what do you think the photographer was trying to comment upon?
- Does the photograph follow in a particular tradition?

**Evaluation:** An evaluation judges how well the photographic attributes, composition, content, style, genre, and meaning—the language of photography described above—communicate that main idea.

- What is your conclusion about the main idea that the photograph is communicating?
- What elements in particular communicate this idea?
- Does the photograph “work”? Do the elements work together to clearly communicate a strong idea?
- What questions or ideas does the photograph make you wonder about?

## Working with Your Students

As you were reading through the definitions and questions, some areas may have resonated with you more than others. Similarly, your students will connect more readily to some topics. For example, an English class may swiftly understand the story or the theme of the photograph, whereas an art class may be more sophisticated in terms of technical and visual knowledge. You may choose to begin where students are strong to build confidence or to review, then move to areas where they need to develop. Have patience: A deep understanding of the medium and a sophisticated approach to reading and creating images develop over time. Many ways to advance visual literacy skills are explored in the next chapter. In addition, *Part IV* presents a range of activities that explore the elements of photography.

# EDUCATORS'

## QUOTES



*Teaching at ICP has been invaluable to my growth as a photographer. Every time I teach a class, I am forced to reevaluate photography and my place in the medium. In addition, I have learned never to underestimate children. They constantly demonstrate their perception of the world and challenge me to make strong images.*

*I was introduced to ICP's Community Programs by first being a docent, leading tours through the ICP galleries. Each featured photographer met with the docents so I had the opportunity to meet established photographers (such as Chester Higgins, Jr., Fazal Sheikh, Micha Bar-Am) and discover what was important to them and what they wanted to convey to their audience. I learned how to view photographs critically and how to talk to others about them. This experience proved very useful for my work as a teacher.*

*In the summer of 1999, I led my first ICP class for teenagers, entitled *Summertime in the City*. This four-week teen workshop enrolled 14 teenagers (13 girls and 1 unintimidated boy) who took pictures, developed film, and made their own prints. It was the best group of students I have had to date. They brought tremendous enthusiasm and energy to every assignment. And they made some fantastic images.*

*A few exercises worked really well for the class. One in particular was an assignment to make a portrait of their home or neighborhood. I advised them to photograph the familiar and print their favorite images. Students then had to describe*

*their work. The results were as varied as the students (from the piano in a living room to a backyard pool to pit bulls in East Harlem). My favorite image and description came from Mayone Butler, who described her picture of a homeless man holding a sign asking for food. She said, 'We see homeless people on the street holding signs all the time, but most times we just walk right past without reading them. This picture forces you to read the sign.' Mayone was using photography to call attention to the homeless in her community and show a bit of her daily experience.*

*Here is a list of what I stress with students:*

- 1) Photography is fun.*
- 2) Photography is about light: Learn to look for it, observe it, and capture it.*
- 3) Your vision of the world is unique!*
- 4) You are a photographer, and you have control over your images. The harder you work in my class, the more control you'll have.*
- 5) Always take credit for your images, whether they are intentional or 'lucky accidents.'*
- 6) Learn from mistakes and try to reproduce any 'lucky accidents.'*
- 7) Think critically about your pictures and learn to talk about your work. (Even the youngest students can speak critically about photography if you give them the tools to express themselves.)*
- 8) Talk about what you've created. (Concepts 'stick' better if they are reinforced at the end of each class. Gather the students in a circle and let them discuss each other's images.)*

## Favorite Exercises

Figure 10



### ***Focus Link 25***

#### **1 BIRDS AND WORMS**

See *Part IV: Resources*

The object of the Birds and Worms exercise is to teach students about point of view. It is a great first assignment for younger students because they can easily understand the concepts and return at the end of the exercise with good examples of different points of view. Older children stretch the limits of the assignment and can be creative with their interpretation of how a bird or worm sees the world.

### ***Focus Link 20***

#### **2 TITLING YOUR WORK**

Teenagers can learn a lot about their work by being forced to create titles for their images. Many times it helps students focus on what subjects they want to photograph, as well as helping to add coherence to a set of images they see as disjointed. It is also fun and introduces humor into the class. My favorite title was by a student named Jane Hong, whose picture 'First Base' showed the clasped hands of two of her teenage friends."

Mark LaRocca, Photographer/ICP Instructor

## FOCUS ON PHOTOGRAPHY: A CURRICULUM GUIDE

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This chapter is an excerpt from *Focus on Photography: A Curriculum Guide*

Written by **Cynthia Way** for the **International Center of Photography**

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# 3 Visual Literacy: Concepts and Strategies

## OVERVIEW

This chapter presents strategies for building visual literacy skills through reflecting on images and having active discussions with students.

Figure 11: Ernst Haas, *London*, 1951

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## Visually Literate Detectives

In *London* by Ernst Haas, we see many expressions of seeing: a glance, a stare, a regard, a study, and non-seeing—averted eyes, the backs of heads. We see pictures within pictures, each offering limited glimpses of life on London streets in 1951. At the same time that these mirrored reflections offer bits of information, the photograph withholds. The photograph invites and challenges us to see.

As visually literate detectives, we detect, decode, and synthesize the information from the visual image as if within lies the solution to the puzzle. We ask ourselves what we are looking at, how the artist created the image, why the photographer made certain choices, what the photograph is saying. Our eye moves around the image, entranced by the relationships among forms. As we look at the picture, feelings rise, and we think of associations between the image and our experiences. We may be reminded of other artists or traditions in art history. We assemble clue after clue, looking thoughtfully and sensitively at the image, until finally we see.

There is delight in seeing: in revealing a mystery, considering a new perspective, discovering what was hidden. Ways of seeing are different for each individual. Seeing means coming to an understanding, and each of us does that differently. As artist Vik Muniz says, “The visual world is like a crossword puzzle; we all have the same puzzle but each of us stores it differently.”<sup>1</sup>

### What is visual literacy?

Visual literacy is the ability to decode visual symbols into meaning.<sup>2</sup> Looking at art involves responding—to what we see in the artwork and how that connects to what we see in ourselves and in the world around us. Thinking about visual art transforms our personal responses into “visual literacy”—we construct a visual language so that we can “read” the visual information.<sup>3</sup> When we read images, we are synthesizing our sensorial, emotional, and cognitive responses to the photograph into meaning. We also construct a visual dictionary, a mental store of images that serve as definitions when we compare and contrast images.<sup>4</sup> As visual literacy advances, we make more sophisticated judgments about images based on what we see and what we remember seeing.

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<sup>1</sup> Vik Muniz, *Seeing Is Believing* (New Mexico: Arena Editions, 1998), p. 25.

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<sup>2</sup> Howard Gardner, *Art Education and Human Development* (Los Angeles, CA: The Getty Education Institute for the Arts, 1990), p. 9.

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<sup>3</sup> Rudolf Arnheim, *Visual Thinking* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

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<sup>4</sup> Harry S. Broudy, *The Role of Imagery in Learning* (Los Angeles, CA: The Getty Education Institute for the Arts, 1987), p. 18.

Literacy, when traditionally referring to verbal literacy, is the “ability to read, speak, listen, write, and think effectively.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, visual literacy includes the abilities to “read” or decode visual images; to articulate to others your perception of what the image communicates and listen to others’ responses; to create visual statements (e.g., to adjust the lighting and framing to communicate what you want to say or to edit a series of images); and to think through problems visually (e.g., to draw as you think, to compose images, and to stage elaborate studio shoots). (For more information on visual literacy, see the bibliography and *Chapter 1: Why Photographic Education?*) Building these visual literacy skills takes time and involves looking at images, discussing visual elements, creating images, and reflecting on both the process and the results. Reflecting and discussing are critical processes; posing questions that encourage thoughtful responses helps students to get more and more out of the image.

It is important to note that educators are guiding students along a natural process when reflecting on images in this way. Visual literacy is related to basic functions of our eyes and mind. Cognitively and emotionally, we use imagery to make sense of the world. Every day, navigating the streets as we go to work or to school, we interpret visual signs. We also create images to remember our experiences; in our mind’s eye we can see our home or family. These visual images are sensory patterns, produced by the eye and stored by the brain.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, as we look at and think about a photograph, our eyes and mind take in the sensory pattern and interpret what the image signifies. We see the arrangements of shapes, respond emotionally, and think about their meaning.

This is a natural process, one that connects art and life, and yet we must train ourselves to see. All too often our disposition is to race through a gallery just like we pass by a poster on the street, in both cases allowing our quick glance and hasty judgment to tell us what we need in order to make it from one place to another. However, to truly understand art, and for that understanding to have an impact upon our lives, education, or our own artwork, we need to take the time to see thoughtfully and intelligently. Reading images in this way unleashes their power.

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<sup>5</sup> Julie Meltzer, *Adolescent Literacy Resources: Linking Research and Practice*. (Providence, RI: LAB at Brown University, 2002) p. 6.

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<sup>6</sup> Harry S. Broudy, *The Role of Imagery in Learning*, (Los Angeles, CA: The Getty Education Institute for the Arts, 1987) pp. 11-15.

# Reflecting on Images

Spending time looking at and thinking about images is an activity that needs to be encouraged. In *The Intelligent Eye*, David Perkins proposes doing a “seeing,” or writing for 10 minutes a stream-of-conscious response to art<sup>7</sup> (p. 37). Part of this process involves asking yourself questions that focus more and more on specific attributes of the artwork, describing what you see—from the literal subject to the formal qualities—and then interpreting what you see. As Perkins says, “By looking longer and in more refined, informed, systematic ways, we can come to see what at first we missed.”<sup>8</sup> This approach allows us to use our intuitive, emotional, and cognitive resources to respond to art, all the while guided by interpretative questions that take us further into the artwork. It can make the experience of looking at art richer.

Based on this concept, the following *Focus* activity engages educators or students in a process of reflection about a single artwork using guiding questions to inspire thoughtful looking and free writing. Responses from this activity can be used as a diagnostic tool to discover what elements of a photograph are hard for educators or students to comprehend. (This activity is provided in *Part IV, Focus Link 44.*)

## SEEING ACTIVITY

Select a photograph. Look at it closely and thoughtfully for 30 seconds. (Time yourself; it will feel much longer than you may expect.) Then use the following questions to guide your “seeing,” and write your responses quickly and freely. Skip questions that are too hard and come back to them later. This activity should take about 20 minutes.

### FIRST IMPRESSIONS

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- List ten details that you see in the photograph.
- What else do you see?

### COMPOSITION

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- Where is your eye drawn?
- Describe the pattern, shapes, and colors.
- Look away and then look at the photograph again. What caught your eye first?
- Why does that stand out?

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<sup>7</sup> David Perkins, *The Intelligent Eye: Learning to Think by Looking at Art* (Santa Monica, CA: The Getty Education Institute for the Arts, 1994) p. 37.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p. 17.

## PHOTOGRAPHIC ATTRIBUTES

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- Find the pattern of light and shadow. What does the lighting draw your attention to?
- Describe what is in focus.
- What is the photographer's point of view?
- What else do you notice about how the photograph was made?

## CONTENT

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- What is the subject of the photograph?
- What questions do you have about the subject?

## STYLE & GENRE

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- Use an adjective to describe the style of the photograph.
- Can you guess what genre this photograph represents? What makes you say that?

## MEANING

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- How does the photograph make you feel?
- What does the photograph make you think of?
- Why do you think the photographer made these artistic choices?
- What do you think the photograph is saying?

## LAST IMPRESSIONS

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- Look once more at the photograph and find something you haven't described yet.
- What is your reaction to this exercise? Did anything surprise you?

## SELF-ASSESSMENT

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- What areas were difficult to answer? Photographic attributes and technique? Composition? Content? Style or genre? Meaning?

## USING THE SEEING ACTIVITY AS AN ASSESSMENT TOOL

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- If there were areas that were challenging, review the related categories in *Part I, Chapter 2: The Language of Photography*. In addition, *Part IV* contains a variety of reflection activities, discussion questions, and worksheets that you can use with students and other educators to promote visual literacy skills.

## Discussing Images

Discussing images—either student images or historical and contemporary artwork—is a wonderful way to both assess and foster visual literacy skills. As students voice their impressions of the photograph, educators can find out where they are in their visual literacy skills. Are they able to describe the effects that certain techniques have, or do they need to know more about the craft of photography? Do they recognize that photographers make creative choices, or do they think that photography is not art? Can they figure out their own ideas about what the photograph is saying, or do they want someone to tell them what is good and why? When students articulate their interpretations of the images and listen to others' responses, they develop a greater awareness of how the elements of photography work together. In addition, the fluid nature of a discussion creates the opportunity for students to learn from others who may be more sophisticated or who have different backgrounds, knowledge, and cultural experiences to share.

This section introduces strategies for building visual literacy skills and presents sample discussions so that you can see what to look for in your students' responses and how to apply these strategies. Though developed in the museum setting, these strategies can apply to any classroom where students can see and discuss pictures together. You can project images using a slide projector in front of the class, show images from a museum's online collections on students' individual computer screens, or pass out prints and postcards for small-group discussions.

Figure 12



## Museum education strategies

In a museum setting, students and educators have a wonderful opportunity to look at original artwork up close and talk to museum staff who may have additional information about the artwork.

At ICP, tour guides follow an inquiry-based methodology in which they pose questions to inspire responses and thoughtful study of the artwork. This encourages viewers to spend an extended period of time studying and discussing a selection of photographs. As the guide facilitates the discussion, students make discoveries about art based on what they see instead of what they are told.

### **Basic Discussion Questions:**

- What do you see in this picture?
- What makes you say that?
- What is going on in this picture?
- What information do you see in the picture that makes you say that?<sup>9</sup>

The idea is to continually redirect the viewer's attention into the artwork, to look and look again. Information is not presented in a lecture format. Rather, questions are posed and responses are paraphrased to facilitate a dialogue that develops visual literacy skills.

During tours, information is only presented when viewers ask questions and therefore are ready to receive and process that information in a meaningful way. This layer of contextual information is an important ingredient in making the gallery visit educational and in promoting visual literacy skills. An inquiry-based method of discussing visual art is common in museums and is highly recommended for classroom discussions as well. To work with this method, educators must be attuned to the group's level and advance at its pace.

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<sup>9</sup> Visual Understanding in Education, 2000. Available: <http://www.vue.org>

## Research in the museum

The above basic discussion questions have been drawn from the Visual Thinking Strategy, developed by Abigail Housen and Phillip Yenewine. The Visual Thinking Strategy presents a way of discussing visual art that empowers viewers to come to their own interpretations (for further information on the Visual Thinking Strategy, see <http://www.vue.org>).

For over 20 years, cognitive psychologist Abigail Housen researched the behavior patterns of viewers in museums by observing, interviewing, and analyzing viewers' stream-of-conscious interpretations of art. From these broadly based, international studies, she developed a Methodology and Stage Model of Aesthetic Development. This informed the development the Visual Thinking Strategy in 1995 in collaboration with Phillip Yenewine, then director of education at the Museum of Modern Art. (ICP tour guides were trained in the Visual Thinking Strategy by the Museum of Modern Art.)

In the Methodology and Stage Model of Aesthetic Development, Housen identified five distinct patterns of thinking about art that are useful to consider when trying to gauge individuals' visual literacy skills and teach the class accordingly.

It is important to note that this is one of many excellent approaches. The bibliography contains references to other valuable resources in visual literacy. Periodically checking favorite Web sites at universities or art education organizations can access current trends in these theories, continually informing new approaches.



## METHODOLOGY AND STAGE MODEL OF AESTHETIC DEVELOPMENT

**Stage 1: Accountive Viewers** are storytellers. Using their senses, memories, and personal associations, they make concrete observations about the work of art which get woven into a narrative. Here, judgments are based on what is known and what is liked. Emotions color the comments, as viewers seem to enter the work of art and become part of the unfolding narrative.

**Stage 2: Constructive Viewers** set about building a framework for looking at works of art, using the most logical and accessible tools: their own perceptions, their knowledge of the natural world, and the values of their social, moral, and conventional worlds. If the work does not look the way it is “supposed to”—if craft, skill, technique, hard work, utility, and function are not evident, or if the subject seems inappropriate—then this viewer judges the work to be “weird,” lacking, and of no value. The viewer’s sense of what is realistic is a standard often applied to determine value. As emotions begin to go underground, this viewer begins to distance him or herself from the work of art.

**Stage 3: Classifying Viewers** adopt the analytical and critical stance of the art historian. They want to identify the work as to place, school, style, time, and provenance. They decode the work using their library of facts and figures, which they are ready and eager to expand. This viewer believes that properly categorized, the work of art’s meaning and message can be explained and rationalized.

**Stage 4: Interpretative Viewers** seek a personal encounter with a work of art. Exploring the canvas, letting the meaning of the work slowly unfold, they appreciate the subtleties of line and shape and color. Now, critical skills are put in the service of feelings and intuitions as these viewers let underlying meanings of the work—what it symbolizes—emerge. Each new encounter with a work of art presents a chance for new comparisons, insights, and experiences. Knowing that the work of art’s identity and value are subject to reinterpretations, these viewers see their own processes subject to chance and change.

**Stage 5: Re-creative Viewers**, having established a long history of viewing and reflecting about works of art, now “willingly suspend disbelief.” A familiar painting is like an old friend who is known intimately, yet full of surprise, deserving attention on a daily level but also existing on an elevated plane. As in all important friendships, time is a key ingredient, allowing Stage 5 viewers to know the ecology of a work—its time, its history, its questions, its travels, its intricacies. Drawing on their own history with one work in particular, and with viewing in general, this viewer combines personal contemplation with views that broadly encompass universal concerns. Here, memory infuses the landscape of the painting, intricately combining the personal and the universal.<sup>9</sup>

Reproduced with permission from Visual Understanding in Education, 2000

## Strategies for Building Visual Literacy

Active learning is key to the development of visual literacy skills. While students learn best through creative hands-on projects, discussing and reflecting on images deeply informs their image making and builds their understanding of how images communicate. Discussing images is an opportunity for learning interactively with peers and teachers and for making clear one's ideas by talking through them.

To hold active discussions, educators need to develop their own questioning strategies. Posing questions invites viewers to consider and assimilate information more actively than if they were just receiving information. That is, questions keep the thinking going, whereas statements tends to undercut new observations. By questioning and seeking answers, viewers at all levels become engaged in the act of seeing, and they are empowered to trust their own interpretations of art.

The goals of the questioning strategies are:

- to advance students' knowledge of visual art in general and photography in particular
- to develop students' critical thinking and communication skills
- to help students discover the pleasure and power of finding multiple meanings in art

How can you tell what questions to ask when? The following framework is a useful starting point for developing questioning strategies to generate a class discussion about visual images. Strategies and sample dialogues are grouped by level, relating to Housen's five stages described above. In addition, while any age group can be at any level, the framework draws some generalizations about audiences for the sake of clarity. However, it is important to note that visual literacy is a fluid process, and these levels and stages are neither fixed nor fully capture the complexity of interpretation. Even within a class, different students will have varying levels of visual literacy. Educators face the challenging task of adapting their teaching to the needs of each student as well as to the movement of the group. Therefore, the strategies are the most important tools to remember.

Sample dialogues refer to the photograph *London* by Ernst Haas, Figure 11 at the beginning of this chapter.

## Level 1: Personal connection to the photograph

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### CHARACTERISTICS

- Storytelling and recounting personal associations, which may or may not relate to the photograph
- For example, the viewer might quickly look at the photograph, then turn her back to it and say, “My aunt has a dog just like the one in the picture.”
- Relates to: Housen’s Accountive Stage; beginning viewers; commonly, elementary or middle school students
- Beginning viewers often come to photography with several false assumptions:

*Assumption 1: Photographs are snapshots; taken quickly, they do not involve much thought or technique.*

Educators can address this assumption by defining what a snapshot is and introducing other types of photography, such as portraiture, documentary photography, fine art, and conceptual photography. (Of course, if what they are looking at is a snapshot, then that is what it is! Educators can discuss how a snapshot is like a quick sketch or a visual notation that captures a personal moment.)

It is very important to discuss the choices that photographers make, the techniques used, the planning, creating, editing, and printing.

*Assumption 2: Photographs show reality, like documents, and when used in newspapers and magazines they represent the way things are.*

Educators can address this complicated assumption by focusing on point of view. Discuss the idea that just as two people in the class see things differently, two photographers create different images of the same event because of the way they use technique to convey their individual responses to the event.

*Assumption 3: The school or the museum is the authority and knows something they, the viewers, do not or cannot know.*

It is essential to help viewers understand that their interpretation of the artwork is just as valid as a teacher’s or a curator’s. The curator or teacher may have more information beyond what can be seen in the artwork, but this invisible information (e.g., research on the artist, art historical context) adds to the experience and does not invalidate a viewer’s interpretation with or without that information. Art truly lives when viewers interact with it; art is designed to communicate and express to an audience. The idea is to build students’ interpretative skills, so that they can approach artwork with less fear and greater confidence and find the value inherent in the artwork.

## STRATEGIES

- Understand that beginning viewers may be intimidated and are trying to find a **personal connection** to the artwork.
- **Make a personal connection to their lives:** Try to find something in the picture that relates to the audiences' experiences and knowledge base to help them enter into the picture. If the picture is from a different time period, ask students to compare the past and the present.
- **Redirect them to what they see IN the picture:** Allow them to find a personal connection but also continually remind them to respond to what they see IN the picture. Say: "That is an interesting observation, what in the picture makes you say that? Describe what you see in the picture."
- **Focus on people:** If there are people in the picture, focus on describing and reacting to them. Viewers connect easily and reflectively to people, their expressions, moods, actions, what they are doing, and why.
- **Keep it fun:** Viewers respond to the story that the photograph tells. Bring out any narrative, or any mysterious, surprising, or puzzling elements in the picture. Have viewers guess what might have happened before the picture was taken and what might happen next, to discover the many possible stories. See **Focus Link 17** in *Part IV*. If you are dealing with young viewers (elementary school students) try to create a game out of seeing. "Can you find... Can you guess... How many circles do you see?" You can design a treasure hunt activity, which encourages students to look in the picture for visual information. See **Focus Link 25** in *Part IV*.

### To progress to the next level:

- begin to define terms like focus and point of view
- describe formal elements such as composition
- ask students to describe the formal and technical choices that the photographer made

Educators can tell when students are ready to move on by how much they retain of these terms. When students start to inquire about why and how the photographer created the image, then they have "put together" the formal and technical elements and are trying to understand the choices that photographers make.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Level 1A Building observation skills

- What do you see in this picture?
- Can you describe it more?
- What else do you see?
- What is going on in this picture?
- What information in the picture makes you say that?

### Level 1B Building vocabulary

- Can you guess where the photographer was standing when he or she took the picture? Above the subject, looking down, or below the subject, looking up? This is called **point of view**.
- What is included in the picture frame? What is not included? This is called **framing**. (Think of ways to demonstrate these concepts. Use your fingers to create a frame, for example. Or have some students crouch down and some stand tall to illustrate how you see things with different points of view.)
- Describe the composition. What shapes do you see? What other patterns do you notice?

## SAMPLE DIALOGUE

### VIEWING THE PHOTOGRAPH, *LONDON*, BY ERNST HAAS (See Figure 11.)

What do you see in this picture?

*A man.*

Can you describe the man more? What is he wearing?

*A hat. A coat. Glasses.*

Describe his expression.

*Serious. Mad. My uncle looks like that.*

Okay, so the man in the picture is serious, and he is wearing a coat, hat, and glasses.

Why is he wearing a coat?

*It is cold outside.*

Where is he?

*On the street.*

What else do you see on this street?

*Signs. People.*

What do the people look like?

*Cold.*

What makes you say that?

*They are wearing coats, too.*

Where are the people? Look closely in the picture; this is a tricky question.

*Silence.*

What do you see in the background of the picture? The background is the area behind the subject, behind the man.

*I see mirrors.*

Are the people on the street or in the mirrors?

*Mirrors! Street! Both!*

Why do you think the photographer included the mirrors in the picture? He could have been up close to the man, so you wouldn't see the mirrors, or he could have framed the picture differently. Who can tell me what framing is?

*It is what is in the picture frame.*

Good. Why did the photographer choose to frame the picture this way?

## SUMMARY OF DIALOGUE

In this dialogue, questions are based on what students say. If they mention people, then the educator poses follow-up questions regarding people in the picture. While the students have some success in learning terms, their difficulty with the last questions shows that they are not ready yet for higher level questions. The educator can go back to discussing the subject of the picture, to encourage students to look in the picture for visual information. This helps students to get a sense of the man, the street, the mood of the picture. Then, they can even write a story based on the character and setting. This creates a personal connection to the image, via their imagination. See **Focus Link 17** in *Part IV*.

## Level 2: Technical connection to the photograph

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### CHARACTERISTICS

- An interest in determining what it is and how it is made; building definitions of formal composition, techniques, and aesthetics
- At this stage, viewers commonly ask, “How did they do that?” and “Why is photography art?”
- Relates to: Housen’s Constructive Stage; beginning viewers in transition to intermediate; commonly, middle and high school students, and adults with little exposure to art
- At this stage viewers are beginning to see that the photograph is more than a snapshot. They are appreciating the thought and craft that go into creating an image. They are beginning to formulate their ideas about art, what it is, how it works, and what its value or impact is. They want to know more and more, and they want to feel impressed by technique at the same time that they want to feel like they can do it, too. They need lots of formal and technical information, and hands-on activities if possible.

### STRATEGIES

- **Focus on the choices photographers make.** Pose questions and deliver information about the technical and aesthetic choices photographers make and why. This builds an understanding of photography as an art form.
- **Keep students interested:** Continue to build knowledge of technique and aesthetics, and tell any behind-the-scenes anecdotes of how the photographer “got” the shot. However, don’t forsake a personal connection to the artwork for technical discussions. Continue to keep it relevant to their lives.

- **Ask them how they might photograph this person or topic.** What choices would they make in film, time of day, color, angle?
- To address such a complex question, **Why is photography art?, discuss the choices photographers make** to show how photography is an art form. Discuss how art is essentially a communication, and ask students what and how this artwork is communicating. Turn the question back to them and ask them to define art. Acknowledge that the question, What is art?, has been puzzling art historians, philosophers, and artists for centuries; it is important for each person to develop a working definition. You could share your personal definition, as well.

**To progress to the next level:**

As intermediate viewers become more comfortable about techniques and process, they begin to ask for more information about art history, artists' intentions, working methods, and so forth. At this level, visual literacy is promoted through asking why.

- Why did the photographer make these choices in technique and aesthetics?
- What is the photograph saying? How? Why?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**Note:** The starting point is always with questions from Level 1, such as What do you see in the picture?, to engage students in looking at the image for visual information.

### Level 2A Building technical knowledge

- What techniques did the photographer use?
- What is the point of view?
- How is the picture framed?
- Describe the quality of the lighting. What direction is it coming from? Point out the pattern of light and shadow.

### Level 2B Building an understanding of the choices photographers make

- What choices did the photographer make?
- Why did the photographer choose to use that technique?
- Why did the photographer choose to compose the picture this way?
- What is the photographer's point of view? What effect does it have?
- Why did the photographer choose to frame the picture this way?
- What does the composition emphasize?
- What does the lighting draw your attention to?



## SAMPLE DIALOGUE

### VIEWING THE PHOTOGRAPH, *LONDON*, BY ERNST HAAS (See Figure 11.)

What techniques did the photographer use?  
*35mm camera.*

Yes. How did you guess that?  
*Because with a large-format camera, things look more posed, and here the man is caught while he was walking on the street.*

Good. What other techniques did he use?  
*Black-and-white film.*

Why did the photographer choose black-and-white?  
*To have patterns of light and dark.*

Good, describe the pattern of light and dark.  
*It is busy and circles the subject.*

Tell me more about the composition. What shapes do you see?  
*Circles.*

Where?  
*In the glasses.*

Are there any other curves in the composition?  
*In the man.*

Where?  
*There, his shoulder, and his hat.*

Where else?  
*In the people in the mirror.*

What shapes are the mirrors?  
*All kinds of shapes. Geometrical forms.*

What lines do you see?  
*Vertical lines on the wall in the background.*

Do you see any other designs?  
*Swirling patterns on the mirrors.*

Numbers?  
*61.*

Text?  
*It says "perfect."*

What's perfect? What does that mean?  
*It means there are no mistakes or problems.*

Why include the text?  
*Silence.*

We've talked about techniques and composition, and the patterns of light and dark.  
Why did the photographer choose to compose the picture in this way?

## SUMMARY OF DIALOGUE

These students have a lot to offer in their knowledge of technique and observation skills but are still working to put that knowledge together with how a photograph communicates its message. The end of this dialogue shows that they still need more experience in thinking about why photographers make certain choices and interpreting for themselves.

## Level 3: Contextual connection to the photograph \_\_\_\_\_

### CHARACTERISTICS

- Placing the artwork into the context of history and culture
- Further assembling of knowledge about formal composition, techniques, and aesthetics
- Also characterized by the personal, emotional reaction going underground—putting the artwork into a scheme and making it “safe”
- For example, viewers become overly reliant on the art historian’s viewpoint and might say, “What makes this photograph good?”
- Relates to: Housen’s Classifying Stage; intermediate viewers; commonly college students and adults partial to art history

### STRATEGIES

- **Keep students interested** by providing more information about art history, aesthetics, cultural history, artists’ intentions, working methods, and career paths. Help them to build definitions and classifications relating to genre and other topics.

- **Encourage personal or emotional associations with the artwork** so they don't fixate on categorization or value judgments. The danger of this stage is that the original spirit of the artwork and emotional connection can get lost, as can confidence in the validity of a personal interpretation of art.
- **Discuss the subject matter, the people in the picture, concerns relevant to this audience, or point of view. Ask them if they have any questions** about the subject to encourage them to think for themselves.
- If viewers ask "What makes this photograph good?", turn around the question by asking them what they think of it, and how they define good and bad. Discuss the limits of personal judgments such as good and bad, or "I like this/I don't like this." It is more appropriate to discuss the **elements of the photograph and how well they work together to communicate meaning.**

**To progress to the next level:**

- Encourage them to talk about **what the photograph is saying**, what it means, and **how technique and craft are used to forward that meaning.** Soliciting and **discussing varying interpretations** calls attention to the subjectivity of artistic interpretation, which helps take them to the next level.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**Note:** Subject matter and visual information are always the starting point. Then, you can use other questions on composition, technique, etc.

### Level 3A Understanding the context and intended use of the photograph

- What was the photographer's purpose or the intended use for this image (e.g., a magazine assignment, photo essay, fine art exhibition)?
- Can you tell what genre of photography this is?
- What do you know about the time period in which this photograph was made?
- What does the photograph communicate about this time period?
- Can you make comparisons to other photographers or artists working in this time period?

### Level 3B Relating context to subject and meaning

- What choices did the photographer make? Can you guess why?
- What is the photographer drawing your attention to? How is this accomplished?
- What is the photographer's point of view? What effect does it have?
- What do you notice about the subject? Or the people in the picture?
- Do you have any questions about the subject? Or the style of the picture?
- What is the photograph saying? Does anyone have a different interpretation?

## SAMPLE DIALOGUE

### VIEWING THE PHOTOGRAPH, *LONDON*, BY ERNST HAAS (See Figure 11.)

What do you see in this photograph?

*A man, mirrors. Alienation.*

Interesting, what creates the feeling of alienation you mentioned?

*He is a solitary figure surrounded by distant images of people in the mirrors.*

Look at the people inside the mirrors. What are they like?

*Serious, busy, tired, cold, like the man.*

What makes you say that?

*Their facial expressions, hunched shoulders. Tweed clothing, hats, and coats.*

Judging by the style of clothing, when would you say this photograph was created?

*1951. (They are reading the caption.)*

Okay, even without the caption, would you have guessed it was the fifties from the style of clothing, the hats men wore, the dresses women wore?

*It seems retro, like the fifties' styles.*

The caption also tells us it is London. What do you know about London in 1951?

*The postwar climate was difficult. The country was rebuilding itself. Is this a good documentary photograph?*

What do you think?

*Yes, it is.*

Why do you think so?

*Because it is showing the way London was in 1951.*

What is documentary photography?

*Photography that provides a record.*

Good. Let's discuss it more. What is a document?

*A fact.*

Is a photograph a fact?

*Yes. It can be. You can use it as evidence in court.*

Yes, but a photograph is created by an individual who makes technical and artistic choices. The photographer we discussed last week had a different perspective; what was it like?

*More light and animated.*

Yes. So there are two different perspectives. That makes things interesting. What does Ernst Haas's picture say about London at this time?

## SUMMARY OF DIALOGUE

This discussion shows that the students know about genre but make value judgments and rely on prescriptive information such as a curatorial caption. The educator encourages them to think for themselves.

## Level 4: Meaningful connection to the photograph

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### CHARACTERISTICS

- Ability to find meaning and to combine formal, technical, and aesthetic knowledge with subjective reactions
- The understanding of how personal experience, stylistic and formal analysis, the knowledge of technique, and the impact of context all shape meaning
- Relates to: Housen's Interpretative Stage; advanced viewers; commonly, art educators

### STRATEGIES

Discussing art at this point is fun because the group can quickly cover different aspects of the image and compare various conclusions.

- It is important to encourage varying interpretations of art to **keep their eyes and minds open.**

#### **To progress to the next level:**

- With time and encouragement of the creative impulse, viewers will define in the final stage their personal relationship to art, perhaps a lifelong interest.
- The most common creative blocks are the admiration for other artists and the “I can't do what they do” syndrome.
- The point is not to do what others do, but for each individual to do what he or she is uniquely capable of doing at each stage.
- **Encourage students** about where they are and where they are heading; remind them that it is a continuous, gradual process.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(Use a variety of questions; relate the questions to discovering meaning.)

### Level 4A Finding meaning

- What choices did the photographer make?
- Does this element contribute to the photograph's meaning, or is it distracting?
- What was the photographer's purpose in creating this image? What was the intended use of the image? How well does it work in this context?
- What is the photograph saying?

### Level 4B Relating meaning to creative choices and larger issues

- What is the impact of this image?
- What are some issues it raises?
- How might you approach this topic matter?

## SAMPLE DIALOGUE

### VIEWING THE PHOTOGRAPH, *LONDON*, BY ERNST HAAS (See Figure 11.)

What else do you see in the picture frame?

*There are prices for food and a sign that says "perfect."*

Why did the photographer include that?

*To show the postwar context. Perhaps to play on what is perfect, or the hope for things to be perfect.*

Good. So the framing sets a context. What other techniques did he use?

*Handheld camera. 35mm, black-and-white.*

What effect do the techniques have?

*Sense of spontaneity, timelessness, a moment in the past. Calls attention to patterns of light and dark. Also mirrors are part of the SLR camera so the mirrors in the background reference photographic technique.*

How does that further the photograph's meaning?

*The photograph is about seeing, different ways of looking, the limits and possibilities of both seeing and photography as a tool for seeing.*

Good. Would you use this technique to approach this topic matter or another one? Why?

## SUMMARY OF DIALOGUE

This discussion addresses how technique contributes to meaning and begins to relate technique to students' creative decisions.

## Level 5: Creative connection to the photograph \_\_\_\_\_

### CHARACTERISTICS

- A fluid movement from the personal, technical, contextual, and meaningful stages of interpreting the photograph, and using that experience to create art
- Relates to: Housen's Re-creative Stage; advanced viewers; commonly, artists

### STRATEGIES

- Deepen the understanding of the medium by fostering dialogue among students
- Compare and contrast the photograph to other artworks and media
- Ask what questions the work raises for them

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(Note: In this stage, you can use any variety of questions. Choose a salient quality of the photograph to get the discussion going or raise issues.)

#### **Level 5 Discussing what the image shows, means, and influences**

- Which technical or formal elements work well in this photograph?
- What do these elements draw your attention to?
- What is the photograph saying?
- What is the impact of this photograph?
- How does the photograph make you feel?
- What does it make you think of?
- Does it inspire you to work creatively in any way?

## SAMPLE DIALOGUE

### VIEWING THE PHOTOGRAPH, *LONDON*, BY ERNST HAAS (See Figure 11.)

**Tell me about the composition. Where is your eye drawn?**

*To the man. He is in profile, so we see the curve of his back, the curve of his hat.*

**Describe the pattern in the background.**

*Different picture frames to look at. The mirrors create a busy background with lots of information in it, but the composition also holds together because of the repeated octagonal shapes. Also, there is the white wall, which draws everything into another frame and keeps the background from being too busy and dispersed. This way, the attention is focused on the man.*

**How else does the background work to enhance your sense of the subject?**

*The man fits into the edge of the white frame. So the background keeps our eye moving and looking for more information, but it also draws us back to the subject. The curves of the man, his sloping back, the similar curved line around his nose and cheek, soften the subject in contrast to the sharp forms behind him. That helps to draw our eyes to him. And he is looking right at us; it catches our attention when someone is looking directly in our eyes.*

**So what is the photographer drawing your attention to?**

*The man, the gaze.*

**What is the photograph saying?**

*It's talking about the act of seeing in bits and pieces.*

**How does the picture make you feel?**

*The picture makes me feel curious but challenged, as if I were being offered something but also prevented from attaining it.*

**Does it inspire you to work creatively in any way?**

*To use photographic technique as a metaphor for reflection.*

## SUMMARY OF DIALOGUE

These comments indicate a fluid movement from subject to techniques to aesthetics to meaning. The discussion can continue by making comparisons to other pictures in the gallery or further exploring issues raised by the picture.



## Working with Your Students

The strategies in this chapter focus on looking in the photograph for visual information and describing interpretations based on that information. This approach has many benefits:

- empowering students to articulate their interpretations in their own words and with new vocabulary
- building critical thinking and observation skills
- making photography accessible
- increasing the skills and confidence to interpret more artwork

Educators can guide students to interpret the photograph by discussing the elements of photography in a way that is appropriate to students' levels of visual literacy. (To develop lessons that incorporate such discussions, use the Discussion Questions in *Part IV*, **Focus Links 11-15**.) Most important is to build the students' confidence about their own interpretive powers.

As you work with students, you may notice that they often vacillate between levels as they learn and that they may freeze in patterns of looking, keeping them at a certain level. To gauge the group's level, listen carefully to their comments. Then, you can gear your language and approach more effectively to the needs of each student and the class. Remember that any age can be at any level and that viewers approach artwork at multiple stages all the time. You may be surprised by the acuity of children, the fresh observations of beginners, and the various interpretations sophisticated viewers offer; the process will enlarge and enliven your relationship to the artwork as well.

Consider where you are starting out. We are living in an image-saturated culture: On the way to school or work we see advertisements on the street and in the subway; we receive news about the world through images in print and on TV; for some events, catastrophic or heroic, we seek images as catharsis; images inspire cravings and desires and reflect our obsessions; we divert and entertain ourselves with images in magazines, videos, TV, or movies. Inundated, we therefore know that images communicate, but to learn how the image works—to decode and read images—harnesses their power.

ICP educators have found that students are visually attuned simply because of their exposure to image use in the media. Young people don't necessarily trust everything they see; rather than believing the photograph is reality, they consider artifice. They've developed preferences in terms of design and composition. Their observations can be wise, their images fresh re-workings of time-honored themes. Still, they are not visually literate until they have the power of seeing under their grasp, until they look at and think about art intelligently.

## An approach to professional development

Determining where students are in their visual literacy skills and how to guide them requires educators to be visually literate as well. Professional development can help educators to utilize visual art and photography in their teaching. Opportunities such as photography courses, team discussions and projects, and extended teachers' workshops can help school staff build their own visual literacy skills and design a photography project appropriate to their distinct setting.

To bring photographic education to a particular school setting, educators need to know—and professional development should address—the following:

- the needs and interests of students
- how students learn most effectively
- what activities engage students most
- how art programs can support both academic learning and personal growth
- how photographic education can be integrated into the school structure
- concepts and strategies in visual literacy
- principals in teaching photography
- picturing what the photographic education program could be in a particular school
- what resources are needed (ranging from financial support to time for professional development)

Most important, professional development can create an environment where educators are learning from each other.

One approach is to begin with the Seeing activity in this chapter as a diagnostic tool, then work with other educators or organizations to develop visual literacy skills in targeted areas. An educator can take a photography course to build technical skills, or a group of educators from different disciplines can take a photography course together and arrange follow-up meetings to discuss how to connect photography to their subject area.

An interdisciplinary team of teachers can work with the art teacher or outside photographers to think of ways to integrate photography-based projects across the curriculum. Teachers can conduct a collaborative photography project together before working with their students (e.g., visit a museum, discuss an image, role-play, create and discuss images, design a curriculum connection). As part of an existing professional development program, discussions can address how to use *Focus* as a resource to create a photographic education project appropriate to the school environment. School leaders can brainstorm how to capitalize on a school's existing photography lab or computer lab.

An extended series of teachers' workshops can help build visual literacy skills among staff and clarify a school's focus on integrating photography into the curriculum. Inviting educators from museums, arts organizations, and technical assistance providers to conduct workshops for teachers can help incorporate many of the ideas presented in *Focus*. With objective eyes, consultants can help identify what is needed to expand the school's capacity to use art to foster student learning.

Effective teachers' workshops contain the following elements:

- collaborative activities that allow educators to experience photographic activities as their students would, and from that experience to discuss what would work well with their students
- discussion time to exchange ideas and strategies with one another and thereby enlarge the educational possibilities of the photography project
- a supportive environment in which educators can share their thoughts on challenges faced in reaching students and collectively define a strategy to integrate the arts into the school structure

Following is an outline for a sample teachers' workshop in visual literacy. It can be conducted as an informal study group or with the facilitation of outside consultants. The goals are to build visual literacy skills and to integrate photographic education into the school curriculum. Sessions 1, 2, and 3 build visual literacy skills by inviting teachers to discuss historical and contemporary photographs, to practice image making, and to reflect upon their images. Sessions 4 and 5 are dedicated to planning ways to use photography in the classroom. **Focus Links** refer to lesson plans and activities in *Part IV*.

# SAMPLE TEACHERS' WORKSHOP IN VISUAL LITERACY

## Related Focus Links:

## Workshop

See *Part IV*.

### SESSION 1 INTRODUCTION

- Define photography, what it is and what its significance is
- Show slides or view pictures in a gallery
- Discuss the work using the Discussion Questions in *Part IV* (A different member of the group leads the discussion each time.)

### SESSION 2 CREATING IMAGES

*Focus Link 5*

- Using Polaroid cameras and materials, do the activity on point of view
- Discuss which images are most successful and why
- Arrange similar images by composition, subject, and sequence

### SESSION 3 DISCUSSING IMAGES

*Focus Link 16*

- Select one image for a writing exercise
- Read the writing exercises out loud
- Discuss the relationship between the image and the text
- Reflect upon the medium of photography and its uses

### SESSION 4 MAKING CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

- Discuss class projects using photography, using case studies from the chapters in *Part III*
- Brainstorm ways to apply photography to specific curriculum areas
- Each teacher will develop and do an exercise related to his or her discipline

### SESSION 5 DISCUSSING CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

- Discuss the exercises and how they would work with students
- Discuss what it would take to incorporate photography into the curriculum
- Develop a school project (newspaper, exhibition)
- Prepare a project timetable
- Arrange a time to reconvene and evaluate how photography has been used in classes

# EDUCATORS'

## QUOTES



“*The greatest difficulty I have found teaching adults is helping them to ‘unlearn’ what they have learned. By the time people have become adults, particularly if they have never taken a photography or art class, they have been bombarded by images and have an almost subconscious understanding of what a ‘good’ picture is. This ‘good picture ideal’ is technically correct, consists of ‘famous photographs’ and the advertising images, postcards, and calendar pictures that we see every day. In adults you find a strong desire to take a ‘good’ picture, something technically correct that includes a complicated set of ideas about what a ‘good picture’ is.*

*This problem manifests itself in different ways: either the adult student does not take that many photographs (they stop themselves from taking the picture) or they take photographs they have seen before. Fixing the technical problems is easy in comparison. As a teacher you show your students how to expose properly. You teach them the tools: depth of field, motion, light, and composition. If their photographs seem too far away, you tell them to come closer. But sometimes you tell them to come closer because you hope what they see will become clearer to you. I usually begin by asking questions such as, ‘Tell me, where is this place you are photographing? What significance does it have for you?’*

*I like to show my students the work of other photographers, primarily more personal, unpolished, technically sophisticated work that breaks conventional photographic rules. This helps to illustrate the idea of making something different, strong, and individual. Most important is for them is to begin to develop their own unique way of seeing not to begin to reproduce your own vision or someone else’s.”*

Karen Furth, Photographer/ICP Instructor

