

**One picture may be worth a thousand words**, but it cannot tell readers the who, what, where, when, why or how of the picture. That is the caption writer's job. It is not a task that can be completed by sitting in the yearbook room or by any method of second-guessing about what might be going on in a photograph.

### Rule #1

A good caption begins with a good interview. It is imperative that the caption writer interview the person/people in the photograph to collect vital, interesting information. Interviewing will also boost book sales, because a student will generally purchase a book if he knows he is going to be pictured.

#### The "Do's" of Caption Writing

- Captions are a natural extension of the photo; there is no need to state the obvious. Well-written captions provide information that the reader would not otherwise know without reading the caption.
- The first three to five words grab attention, act as a teaser, and link the photo to the rest of the caption.
- The lead-in should state the obvious in an unobvious way.
- Typically, the first sentence is written in present tense and the second sentence is written in past. All captions must be a minimum of two sentences.
- Complete captions include the 5W's and the H and incorporate as much detail as possible. For example, if the photo is of a student at a dance, the caption should explain which dance, what song was playing, who the student went to the dance with, etc...
- Consider what was going on before the photo, during the photo and reaction to the event after the photo.
- Use active voice—where the subject of the sentence performs the action of the verb.
- Keep captions factual
- Interview teachers, sponsors, officers, coaches and other sources to get enough facts to write intelligent captions
- Use a variety of sentence patterns (see 10 Ways to Write a Caption)
- Identify all people pictured (up to seven and then just the main participants); use complete names.
- Use a variety of adjectives and adverbs
- Use strong, visual, specific nouns
- Use colorful, lively, vital action verbs
- Use complete sentences.
- All copy/style rules apply.

#### The "Don'ts" of Caption Writing

- Don't use name or label leads and don't begin with A, An or The.

- Don't use the same caption lead-in more than once on a DPS.
- Avoid excessive use of verbals (-ing words).
- Don't use "Pictured above" or "Shown above."
- Avoid the use of to be verbs (is, are, was, were).
- Don't use "seems to" or "appears to."
- Don't use gag or joke captions.
- Don't comment, question or talk to the picture.
- Don't editorialize. Your opinion is no more welcome here than it is in a news story.
- Don't take caption writing lightly. Studies indicate that captions are more widely read than any other part of a publication.

#### Special Caption Considerations for Sports

- Identify both the school's players and opponents by jersey # and name
- Add depth to the description of the action by stating the position of the player.
- Consider covering the plays which led up to this action shot.
- Tell the result of the play or provide other background information the reader would not have readily available. DO NOT give the score unless additional information is provided. (This win gave Fenton sole possession of the Metro League title.)

#### Special Caption Considerations for Posed Group/Team Pictures:

- Begin with the name of group and row ID in all captions (VARSITY FOOTBALL/ FRONT ROW: )
- Identify students from left to right, but don't write that as part of the caption.
- Row designations should be in all caps and proceed from SECOND ROW, THIRD ROW, BACK ROW, etc...
- Do not use "and" before the last name in the row; put a period after the last name in each row.

#### Types of Captions

##### Candid ID Captions-

Name individuals and provide a brief insight.  
Example: Freshman Jill Smith sells cookies for NHS at Parent/Teacher Conferences.

##### Summary Captions-

Answer the 5W's and the H.

Expanded Captions-Answer the 5W's and the H with more details.

## 10 Ways to Write Caption Leads

Varying your lead is the key to good caption and feature writing. Note the many ways to write the same facts in the examples below.

**1. An Adjective Lead:** begins with an adjective describing the subject of the copy. Adjective leads provide color and descriptive appeal.

*Example:*

Sweets. M&Ms and appreciative looks leave sophomore John Marsh as he sells another box of candy to Julie Jones, a junior in his trigonometry class.

**2. An Adverb Lead:** begins with an adverb. Adverb leads provide active description in the first few words.

*Example:*

Rarely seen without his M&Ms, sophomore John Marsh, trumpet player, sells junior Julie Jones candy to munch on in her fourth period English class. Band members raised \$3,000 selling candy to finance their February trip to New Orleans to march in the Mardi Gras parade.

**3. A Casual Lead:** emphasizes the reason or cause of the action and begins with such words as “because” or “since.”

*Example:*

Because money was scarce and buses were expensive, band members sold 4,200 boxes of M&Ms to finance their February trip to Mardi Gras. Contributing to the cause, junior Julie Jones buys her seventh box of chocolate-covered peanuts from top salesman John Marsh.

**4. A Gerund Lead:** begins with a verb ending in “ing” in a noun-like form. Use gerund leads sparingly.

*Example:*

Raising money for the band trip to New Orleans was a between-class activity for the 175 band members. Sophomore John Marsh, high salesman in the campaign and first chair trumpet player, sells M&Ms to junior Julie Jones, who readily identified herself as a high buyer.

**5. An Infinitive Lead:** uses a verb form along with “to.” Infinitive leads provide action at the beginning of the copy.

*Example:*

To charter buses to New Orleans, band members sold M Ms. Trumpet player sophomore John Marsh sells Julie Jones one of the 4,200 boxes of candy that helped send the 175-member band to the February Mardi Gras parades.

**6. A Participle Lead:** begins with a verb ending in “ing” or “ed” in an adjective phrase. It can incorporate both action and description in the first word. Use participle leads sparingly.

*Example:*

Selling another box of M&Ms, sophomore John Marsh, first chair trumpet player, reaches his goal of high salesman in the band’s candy campaign. Junior Julie Jones buys her seventh box.

**7. A Prepositional Lead:** begins with a prepositional phrase and provides description.

*Example:*

With M&Ms in hand and New Orleans in mind, sophomore John Marsh, first chair trumpet player, sells a sweet treat to Julie Jones, a junior in his trigonometry class. Candy sales financed the band’s February trip to Mardi Gras.

**8. A Proper Noun Lead:** begins with a proper noun or name when that person or thing is the most important part of the story. Because proper noun leads don’t imply action; use them sparingly.

*Example:*

Sophomore John Marsh, three-year band member, sells the seventh box of M&Ms to Julie Jones, a junior in his trigonometry class. The class sale of candy was one of the most popular ways of raising money as 32 different groups sold 11 kinds of candy during the year.

**9. A Temporal Lead:** features a time element and often begins with “while,” “where,” “as” or “since.”

*Example:*

While some band members work hard to sell their M&Ms, top salesman sophomore John Marsh makes it look easy with over 300 sold, junior Julie Jones buys her seventh box, one of 4,200 sold to finance the band’s trip to march in the Mardi Gras parade.

**10. A Quotation Lead:** begins with a quote from the subject of the picture. It is good only if WHAT is said is more important than anything else.

*Example:*

“I may get zits and a stomach ache before I go, but the trip to New Orleans will be worth it,” sophomore John Marsh, first chair trumpet player, said. The band’s trip to Mardi Gras was funded by the sale of 4,200 boxes of M&Ms. A favorite customer, junior Julie Jones, buys her seventh box.

### Caption Contents

1. *Lead-in:* Serves as a mini headline for the caption.

2. *First Sentence:* Identifies and describes the action or reaction of the photo showcasing the most important 5 W’s and the H details.

3. *Second Sentence:* Adds information and insights featuring the outcome or consequences of the action not obvious in the photo.

4. *Quote:* First person account from someone in the picture or close to the activity.

5. *Random Facts:* Little known facts that enhance the photo/caption story.

(source unknown)

## How Good Is Good Enough?

1. Long practices in the field by the cowpath kept band members busy most of the fall quarter. For Cherresa Johnson, Kokomo freshman, that meant long hours lugging around a heavy baritone.
2. Near the end of the 500-freestyle race, Fred Wellman gasps for breath. Wellman, the only freshman to swim for the Pioneers, finished in last place against Principia. Kirkwood lost the meet, 102-70
3. With a little soap and water and a lot of elbow grease, Rosemary Schemp adds the finishing touch to a fender during the Sept. 27 senior car wash. The class took in \$160 in profits to add to their class gift.
4. Summer Job. Sacrificing the chance to sleep late, senior Joe Young tackles the school's front lawn on July 27. Students like Young in need of summer employment, worked at the school for five weeks of the summer to pay a portion of the upcoming year's tuition.
5. The sound of scuffling feet down the hall and the crumple of paper bags meant one thing to yearbook and newspaper staffers who spent time after school: dinner was on its way. Juniors Mary Kay Rensch and Allison Comp grab their goodies from the errand boy of the day, senior David Lambert.

**Caption Grading**

1. First five words are strong, interesting	1	2	3	4	5
2. Lead states the obvious in an unique way	1	2	3	4	5
3. Includes 5 Ws and the H, with emphasis on the why and how	1	2	3	4	5
4. Identifies all people in the picture (up to seven)	1	2	3	4	5
5. Considers before, during and after the action	1	2	3	4	5
6. Uses a variety of adjectives, adverbs	1	2	3	4	5
7. Uses complete sentences	1	2	3	4	5
8. Minimum of two sentences	1	2	3	4	5
9. Uses correct tense (1st sentence-present; 2nd sentence-past)	1	2	3	4	5
10. Caption is factual; no gag captions	1	2	3	4	5

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