

# Captivating Captions

Welcome to the caption revolution! Captions can change the world! Not really, but well-planned and well-written ones can change a yearbook.

Good captions are the heart of any respectable yearbook. They are the most-read copy of all which makes them the most important copy of all. But how does one learn to write good captions?

For starters, staff members can't sit in the yearbook room to write them. People pictured in the photos must be interviewed. Staff members must take the photo to the subject(s) and then ask questions. Lots of questions. Questions that include the 5 W's and the H (who, what, when, where, why, how). Make the subject tell something significant. Have them tell the basics (5W/H) but don't stop there. Be nosy. Ask about clothes, hobbies, favorites (food, classes, friends, sport, game, holiday)—you get the idea. Research a caption the way a story is researched—digging for the details. This way, more information than needed is discovered, but better to have too much to write than not enough. Editing is easier than adding more lines when captions are too short.

Plus, showing a subject their picture and letting them know they are going to be in the yearbook accomplishes two purposes. One, the caption will be accurate. Two, if they know they are going to be in the book, they will be first in line to purchase a copy. After all, the goal of any yearbook staff worth its salt is to sell a yearbook to every student. One way to accomplish that goal is to write accurate, informative captions.

Now comes the hard part. Every picture in the book must have a caption. And each caption must be a serious effort to answer every reader's questions about the photo. In well-done, journalistically sound yearbooks, gag captions aren't even considered, let alone printed. The only thing gag captions do is put the staff in jeopardy of a lawsuit.

There are basically three types of captions: sports captions, group captions and general captions. All need details, but for each, the writer's focus will change.

Sports captions must include specific information particular to the sport.

Always include the name of the subject as well as the name of the opponent. This isn't as hard as it seems. Many times, athletes know the names of their opponents. So a good place to find an opponent's name is to ask the subject in the photo. If that doesn't work, an editor armed with the jersey number of the player in question can get an answer by phoning the opposing school's athletic department. But sports captions need more. Sports photos demand that the caption writer tell the result of the action shown. That means that the reader must be told if the basketball player made the basket or was fouled, if the football player made a touchdown or was tackled, if the baseball player hit a home run or struck out. These are questions that must be answered when the photo subject is being interviewed. Ask what happened. Ask how many points they scored in the game, the season, their career. Ask if this was a good game or a forgettable one, and make them explain why. Here is where good quotes will be elicited, quotes that can be printed. Remember a yearbook's job is to capture a year in pictures and words.

One thing that sports captions tend to be in danger of is editorializing. A caption is there only to supply the facts. If a coach or team member is quoted as saying that this was the greatest game ever, then OK. But the caption writer can never say that. A yearbook's job is to record the year, not to make personal comments about it.

Finally, the basics. Use colorful, action verbs – remember this is sports – action is the name of the game. Avoid starting with names; instead begin with words that capture the impact of the photo. Vary the part of speech for each caption. Don't start every photo on the track spread with a gerund. Use participles, infinitives, dependent clauses. In this way, the captions will be as interesting as the photography.

Group captions seem easy enough, but there are two rules. One is consistency. Always begin with the name of the group and identify from left to right (but don't say that in the caption). Give specific row information and set that and the group name in a different emphasis than the student names. Second, list both first and last names of each person and spell them correctly. To be sure all staff members are entering group info the same way, make a pattern and put it in an obvious place. And remember, ALL groups are listed the same way – from varsity basketball to honor society.

Finally general captions talk about all other activities and take the same research as sports captions. Talk to the person(s) pictured. Don't state the obvious; tell something that can't be seen. Add to the knowledge of the reader by anticipating the questions they will have when they see the photo. Do not editorialize but do use the subject's quotes if possible. Captions are the most-read part of the book, so they must be well written. Always keep in mind the yearbook's ultimate purpose – and that is to create an honest, accurate body of information that will stand up to reader scrutiny for decades.

What better way to record a moment than through the words of the subject pictured. And never be afraid to tell the truth. If it was a great year – or even just one great game, good. But if it wasn't such a good year – and perhaps, not such a good game, don't hesitate to record that.

The responsibility is there to record the moment as it happened without ignoring unfortunate losses to focus on a few victories. If it wasn't such a good game, ask why and what could have been changed to make it better. Record the truth and your readers will respect you for it.

By: Sandra Strall

One hesitation must be noted here however. Don't fall into the trap of printing any remarks that may be pointed at one specific group or individual. It is easy for a subject to blame a coach or a teammate for a loss. If that is the response to a staff member's question, then the reporters must dig deeper and not settle for this easy answer.

By training the staff to write top-notch captions, you accomplish many things. The yearbook is seen as a credible journalistic publication, the subjects of photos know they are going to be in a candid or action photo, and the captions are easier to write because staffers have a precise set of guidelines to follow. And the most-read copy in the book is more interesting than ever before. ●

When your staff standard is three-sentence captions (5 Ws and H, followed by fun fact, followed by a quote), you need to make sure you leave ample space on your layouts for captions. It's not unusual for detailed captions to be 7-12 lines deep (and 2-3 grids wide).

If your sectional design calls for grouped captions that are currently popular in magazines, make sure that you still have space for several sentence of details and that there's some visual indication at the start of each new caption.



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