

from *The Photo Scribe*

Nine Tips for Writing Cameo Narratives

One way to more effectively use photographs to tell your lifestory is to create what I call *cameo narratives*. These are short narratives (usually 50 to 150 words long) that are paired with photos or created to fill a story gap when there is no photograph to illustrate a particular incident or event.

A bare-bones caption adds a bit to the story your photo already tells, but not much. Cameo narratives tell a larger story, and give readers and viewers an insight into emotions, motivations, ideas, and other concepts that might not otherwise be told. There are nine important tips you should keep in mind as you write your cameo narratives.

1. Cameo narratives are independent pieces of writing.

They are meant to figure alone on the scrapbook page. You do not need to create grammatical or thematic links between cameo narratives — at least most of the time. Let each one stand by itself. The net effect when paired with your photos will be to create a rich story collage.

You would not throw a photo away because there is no discernible link between it and the photo that precedes or follows it. Bring the same attitude to your cameo narratives. It is a contribution to your scrapbook to record any memory that is vivid enough to have lasted through the years. Become comfortable with letting cameo narratives stand by themselves on the page.

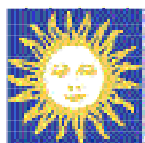
2. Be specific and clear.

Just as photo annotations, whenever possible, use precise dates, include in your cameo narratives the names of people and places (correctly spelled) and refer to relationships. Start this work by jotting notes on scratch paper. Then use these notes to write your cameo narratives. The number and variety of notes you've generated will help you to determine whether you should write a brief cameo narrative or invest in a full-blown lifestory.

3. Honor the tangible.

As you write, think of yourself as a movie camera. Movie cameras can only reveal tangible things. From these things, observers infer meanings.

For instance, movie cameras do not tell us that people are happy. They show us people being happy, doing happy things. The observe can then infer that the people are



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happy. With the movie camera model in mind, don't write: "I was sad." Instead write: "I sat down and closed my eyes and, for the longest time, I cried." This is a tangible action; being sad, on the other hand, is intangible.

In the same way, don't write: "I was poor." Instead, write: "My jumper had been Faye's and it did not quite fit me, but it was clean and I was warm in it." Again, the first thought is intangible, while the other is tangible. The reader or viewer can interpret the facts for himself or herself, and come to a conclusion about whether you were poor or not.

Haven't you had the experience of listening to a person say something like, "I was a poor kid"? Later you found out that what the person meant by poor and what you mean by poor are not the same condition. Wouldn't the communication have been clearer had the person simply said (using an image to convey her thought), "I was the only person without a live-in maid in my circle of friends? Our maid left every evening after dinner." Now would there have been any misunderstanding about whether you and the speaker meant the same thing by poor?

4. Use all five senses.

In addition to taking a lesson from a movie camera, you can also respect how people access knowledge: through our five senses. In your writing, make use of these marvelous senses to tell your story and to make it vivid and accessible. Sense details will give your writing immediacy. Ask yourself: what do the people in the photo see? hear? taste? touch? smell? You can write about the smell of apple blossoms, about the touch of velvet, about the taste of licorice. Always refer to specific sensations and avoid referring to vague words like nice and good. Remember: SHOW, don't tell.¹

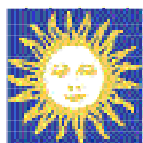
5. Be concise.

After nine words, you should think about ending your sentence. After fifteen, end it! As a rule, always try to tell your story with as few words as possible — but be sure to use as many as you'll need! Cameo narratives are not a good medium to get wordy in!

6. Be simple.

Use words everyone can understand. Don't try to reach for the unusual turn of phrase. Perhaps more poor writing is created by people still trying to impress their high school English teacher (who still reigns supreme in their memory!) than was ever created by illiteracy. So just keep writing simple declarative sentences and be proud of them!

¹ This rule can be successfully broken by a practiced writer, but it is not easily ignored by the novice.



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7. Be fresh and spontaneous.

Trade in your clichés (“Isn’t that just like a Scot for you?”), stereotypes (“Men enjoy roughing it.”), and stale, cute phrases (“Oops, here we go again!”) for real information about the scene or the personality you are writing about.

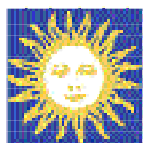
8. Find a friend/be a friend.

Writing buddies can be very helpful as you write your cameo narratives. They can tell you if your cameo narratives leave them wanting more or are unclear. They also can give you suggestions for improvement.

9. Double-check your facts and information with others.

You may not be as much of an expert as you like to think you are. In fact, your memory is likely to be much dimmer than you’re willing to admit — both in terms of remembering particular details and remembering them accurately. A simple conversation can bring you great rewards in terms of how useful what you write about a photo will be to your album.

Are you sure — absolutely — that everything you wrote is accurate? Would it really be so hard to verify the bulk of it? (Ok, you have permission to give up on the 10% of the info that can only be verified by a cross-country trip or a trip to the Old Country. That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t make the effort to cross town to speak to your brother.)



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