Supplemental Notes: Writing Captions (Cutlines)

Photo captions offer readers important, useful information. They inform, shed light, provide insight, identify, describe, explain, answer questions, show. A reader looks at pictures before he or she reads the caption. The picture raises questions. The caption should answer those questions. As you write captions, be sure they answer these questions:

What is happening in the picture? What is the reader seeing? If what is happening is obvious, go beyond that and explain why or what it means.

1. Who or what are the people, animals, buildings, creatures, things in the photo? Identify the identifiable.
2. When is the action taking place?
3. Where is the action in the photo taking place?
4. Why is the action taking place – if known and appropriate?
5. What else should the readers know about this picture to help the reader understand it or what it has to do with the story?

In writing captions, focus on accuracy, clarity, brevity, as well as completeness, specificity and honesty. If a picture shows a past event taken from the files, say so. If the photo has been arranged, tell the reader. Avoid making judgments or editorial statements. Avoid adjectives such as elderly, attractive or well dressed.

Write clearly and in a normal style with full sentences. Captions should not read like headlines; you need to use articles and conjunctions. Put periods at the end of the caption; use double quotation marks.

Writing Long Captions

Use long captions when there is no story running with a photo. Describe the photo in present tense, but avoid having the date come after a present-tense verb. Instead, put the date in a separate sentence that is written in past tense, or put the date in a prepositional phrase in the first sentence.

Example:
(WEAK) Joe Smith watches Monday as Pioneer City firefighters rescue his cat Lucky from a tree. The animal climbed to the top of the tree after being chased by a pack of stray dogs.

(BETTER) Joe Smith watches as Pioneer City firefighters rescue his cat Lucky from a tree on Monday. The animal climbed to the top of the tree after being chased by a pack of stray dogs.

Don’t use a dateline on a long cutline, but make sure the cutline indicates where the action is taking place.

Example:
Blue Ridge University’s Joe Smith (5) reaches over Pine State University’s Joe Jones for a pass in the second quarter of a college football game in Pioneer City, N.C., Saturday. Smith was called for interference on the play.
Writing Short Captions

Short captions are used when a story accompanies a photo. Make sure that the caption and the photo and the headline work together and do not repeat information.

Use present tense when you are explaining what’s happening in the picture. Because the accompanying story answers the “when” question, don’t mention in the short caption when the photo was taken, unless that information needs to be explained.

**Example:**

Joe Smith watches as Pioneer City firefighters rescue his cat Lucky from a tree.

Identifying People in Photographs

People normally look at pictures from left to right. Almost always identify people in photos in left-to-right order, even when the action in the picture seems to go the other way.

**Example:**

(WEAK) Mayor Joe Smith, right, presents the city’s Good Citizen award to Jane Jones.

(BETTER) Jane Jones, left, receives the city’s Good Citizen award from Mayor Joe Smith.

Note that the identifiers “left” or “from left” are set off by commas. Also note that when two people are pictured, only one needs to be identified by location. The following are times you may not even need to write “left”:

- When one person in the picture is a man and the other is a woman, and their names make that clear.
- When an adult and a child are pictured, and we indicate which one is the adult.
- When there is a famous person in the photo who would be instantly identifiable to most readers.
- When actions or uniforms make it unnecessary.

**Example:**

Pioneer City Police Officer Jane Jones comforts Joe Smith, whose cat Lucky was struck by a car.

When three or more people are pictured, write “from left.” Omit the “to right,” and don’t use abbreviations, such as L-R. Surround “from left” with commas. Avoid beginning the cutline with the “from.”

**Example:**

Winners of the Good Citizen award are, from left, Alicia June, Nicole Benson, Elijah Ikard and Jackson Hartman.

In pictures with three or more people in them, the prominence of one person may occasionally override the left-to-right rule.

**Example:**

Mayor Joe Smith, center, talks with the winners of the Outstanding Scholar award. From left, are Galen June, Danielle Benson, Octavia Ikard and Oliver Davis.