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?

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Figure 8

![Figure 8](image)

Figure 9

![Figure 9](image)
C) Time

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

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.

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?

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
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?
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?
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?

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?
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 furri ness 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?

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?