

**Picture Perfect:  
Developing Guidelines for Evaluating Photography for Magazine Production**

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### **Introduction**

The ability to evaluate photos is a useful skill for professionals in educational and research communications (Currie & Göttert, 2023). There are some specific skills that employers want to see on resumes or applications before hiring. One of these is the ability to communicate accurately and concisely (Association of Public Land Grant Universities [APLU], 2020). Visual literacy allows people of all backgrounds and ages to communicate with each other, which is why teaching photography is so important, especially when it is involved in a publication where the readership may vary in backgrounds and education (Cordell, 2016). While many guidelines surround capturing and editing quality photos, evaluating the quality and value of each photo remains slightly subjective (Cheng et al., 2010; Simon et al., 2005).

Instructors of introductory photography classes are usually tasked with teaching technical aspects of photography (Osborne, 2007). However, we noticed when students are asked to use their knowledge of photography in other settings, such as in publication courses, there is sometimes a lack of understanding on why we should select photos that are not only high quality but also assist in telling a story. Impact is one of the most notable characteristics of a newsworthy article, and the ability to evaluate photos for publications can significantly alter a specific story's impact (Zlatin, 2025). Therefore, the purpose of this innovative teaching idea was to provide a set of guidelines for evaluating photography and discuss additional qualitative factors that can influence the storytelling ability of selected photography in print publications.

### **How It Works**

Guided by Dong and Tian's (2014) *Effective and Efficient Photo Quality Assessment*, we proposed a set of guidelines for students to follow when evaluating photography in a magazine publication production class ( $n = 8$ ) at New Mexico State University to standardize the process of assessing photography for visual literacy and reinforcing elements of storytelling. This course was open to all NMSU majors, but was specifically designed for agricultural communications students, encompassing mostly upper-class students with various amounts of experience in photography and publications. Dong and Tian (2014) detailed several aspects of high-quality photography, elaborating on composition, color, subject/background interaction, sharpness, and depth of field. Yet, assessing the value of storytelling in photography can be subjective, making evaluating photos difficult (Cheng et al., 2010). As a result, we created a checklist for six quantitative guidelines (Dong & Tian, 2014) and two researcher-designed, qualitative principles.

First, we introduced Dong and Tian's (2014) six elements of photography (i.e., composition, exposure, leading lines, focal point, rule of thirds, and color/texture) by explaining and showing examples of good and bad practices when evaluating a photograph. We added a disclaimer about the subjectivity of photography and ensured students understood that there are often additional reasons for selecting photos for print magazine publications, such as their creativity and storytelling ability (Balabanović, 2000). These two factors informed the qualitative elements of the checklist tool. We then provided students with a worksheet that included a grading system of 1–5 to rate selected photos and included space for students to explain their thoughts about their decisions. We placed two sets of four publications from the *ACES Magazine*, around the room, with one spread from each publication highlighted. Spreads contained different numbers of photos and covered a variety of agricultural issues. We then

asked students to go around the room and evaluate each photograph in each publication spread based on the quantitative and qualitative considerations. We provided approximately 45 minutes for students to evaluate the various spreads around the room. At the end of the activity, students discussed their thoughts about the images they reviewed. They gave further explanations for their evaluations, including the value of the qualitative factors and accessibility components that authors and publishers must consider when selecting photos to include in a print publication.

### **Results to Date**

Upon completing the activity, students agreed that leveraging the guidelines allowed them to assess the images more efficiently and provided insight into why an author might include photos that might not follow traditional ideals for composition alone. A few students mentioned the accessibility of photos, such as concerns about some images with monochromatic color schemes and hard-to-grasp focal points, as a reason for rating the image low. Students also discussed the presence of lower-quality courtesy photos. They concluded that such images are needed in biographies and historical spreads to assist in the overall theme of telling the story, and in some settings, these photos were also needed in study abroad stories, or stories highlighting student internships. Although they were not as highly rated when following the quantitative composition guidelines, students agreed that they aided in telling the story and improved the overall quality of the spread because students described those images as more “authentic”. Students were also split on images did not directly assist with the written story, even though they technically met the guidelines of a quality photo. Some students suggested these were necessary to break up heavy writing throughout and add visual breaks in the publication, but some students stated they were unnecessary and distracting to the story.

### **Advice to Others/Implications**

Before starting the activity, we suggest instructors discuss the type of photos they might see in print publications, such as courtesy photos, macro shots, landscape photos, portraits, etc. We then recommend reinforcing elements of photo composition balanced with elements of visual storytelling. Our students were elaborately engaged with the activity and gave detailed responses for each photo. They also expressed being grateful for a scale to evaluate quality photos in print publications as many of them were also deciding which of their personal photos they wanted to use in their upcoming spreads. If time is limited, we recommend providing fewer publication examples to evaluate, so students have adequate time to discuss their findings with classmates, which in our lesson, further reinforced the lesson’s learning objectives.

Incorporating this activity can help students feel confident when selecting images for publication because they are working to assess the value of the images to telling the story (Balabanović, 2000). The real-world examples allowed students to critique work from former students and engage with their peers to invoke critical thinking and improve overall assessment abilities. This skill will be vital in various classes, including, but not limited to, photography, graphic design, media, journalism, and publications. It can inspire creativity and visual storytelling while also supporting students in capturing more visually appealing images.

### **Resources Needed**

Instructors will need access to the Internet and a projector to display and discuss the guidelines for evaluating photos. They should also prepare a worksheet for students to evaluate images, as well as purposively selected publications. There are no other associated costs.

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