

# What's in a name?

**GUIDELINES FOR TITLING PHOTOGRAPHS  
WHEN PROCESSING IMAGE-BASED COLLECTIONS**

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# Photos are their own unique category...

- ▶ Not traditionally titled
- ▶ Dependent on context
- ▶ Naming and describing a photo draw on similar practices...

but their *formatting* is DISTINCT

**Form needs to reflect function.**

# What are the differences?

## Description

### ▶ A full nuanced account!

- Central focus of the photograph
- Outside historical context (e.g., origin)
- Background details
- Handwritten transcriptions

### ▶ Proper grammar and syntax

- Complete sentences
- Proper punctuation and spelling

## Title

### ▶ A kernel statement

- Short, sweet, simple
- Identifies the central focus
- Most basic essence of what a photo depicts

### ▶ Strict format

- Who doing What, Where, When
- Apply what you know!

**Related in focus. Distinct in purpose.**

# WHY?

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## Animal science research on Guernsey cow--Photo 1

Animal science research on Guernsey cow's ear.  
Animals--Research; Oklahoma A & M College



## Animal science research on Guernsey cow--Photo 2

Animal science research on Guernsey cow's back.  
Animals--Research; Oklahoma A & M College



## Architectural sketch of Quonset Style Diesel Laboratory, circa 1949

Drawing of projected Quonset Style Diesel Laboratory architecture. Construction of Quonset  
Drawings; Oklahoma A & M College  
circa 1949

### ➤ Think like a journalist

- What info do users want?
- How do you get users interested in your material?

### ➤ Think like a researcher

- What part of a resource do you see first?
- Where do you have to go to learn more?

**Titles generate interest. Descriptions offer answers.**

# Components of Title

HOW TO IDENTIFY AND FRAME A PHOTO'S FOCUS?

# Title: A flexible framework

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- People
- Activity
- Place
- Time (maybe)



- No people
- No activity
- Place...or...?
- Time (maybe)

**Work with what you know within a framework!**

# #1) WHO?

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## Are people the main focus?

### ▶ Are they engaging with the camera?

- Portraits, group photos
- Deliberate posing

### ▶ Are they performing an activity?

- What's more important?  
The people performing the action?  
The action being performed?
- **TIP:** Day-to-day activity (people)...or singular event (event)?

## Do people have names?

### ▶ YES...

- Who matters more?
  - Individuals?
  - A group entity?
- How many names are reasonable to include?

### ▶ NO...

- Professions?
- Men, women, children, people?

## Are people present & central to the photograph?

# WHO: Known vs. Unknown

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L. D. Harrison and Red Tarver on Lewis Field



- Names are known.
- Photo for the sake of a photo (posing)

Pair of WWI soldiers, portrait--Plate 1



- Names unknown, but profession identifiable.
- Photo for the sake of a photo (formal portrait)



# WHO: Individuals vs. Group

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Dick Hutton lifting Bill Jernigan, circa 1948



- Names are known.
- 3 names or less; we can list them.
- Persons of established individual reputation.

J. G. Griffith and football team, circa 1917



- Group photo.
- Individual player names not known.
- Team takes precedence over individuals.

# #2) WHAT?

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We have 4 possible concepts of “What”...

## 1. What as action/activity

- A person is central to the photo.
- That person is doing something.

## 2. What as event

- “Event”: An occurrence viewed with importance
- An event may become the main subject of a title if no singularly identifiable people are present.

## 3. What as function

- This concept applies in the context of a photo taken and styled for a photo’s sake.
- Portraits will be the most frequent occurrence of this instance of “what.”

## 4. What as object

- The focus is *NEITHER* person *NOR* event!
- Examples: Buildings, landscapes

The most versatile of the 4 title components...

# ‘What’ as action/activity

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Man studying apples



DeWitt Hunt and two men working with airplane models in the Industrial Arts Building, circa 1950



- An established ‘Who’ is in each photograph.
- The action/activity is expressed as a **present participle** (“-ing”), describing the ‘Who’ *in that **THEN PRESENT** moment...*

# 'What' as event

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College Homecoming or Harvest Carnival Parade in Stillwater--Plate 5



Cooking class in the Domestic Science Building kitchen, circa 1912--Plate 1



- An established, named occurrence of significance.
- Activity is implied.
- Action takes precedence over unidentified people present.

# 'What' as function

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Edward C. Gallagher, portrait--Photo 3



<https://dc.library.okstate.edu/digital/collection/cunningham/id/634>

Man with Hereford bull



- Persons or objects are posed for the sake of a photo.
- For specific genre or style of photo, the genre is noted (e.g., "portrait").
- "Standing," "sitting," "posing," "holding": Passive verbs that we **exclude!**

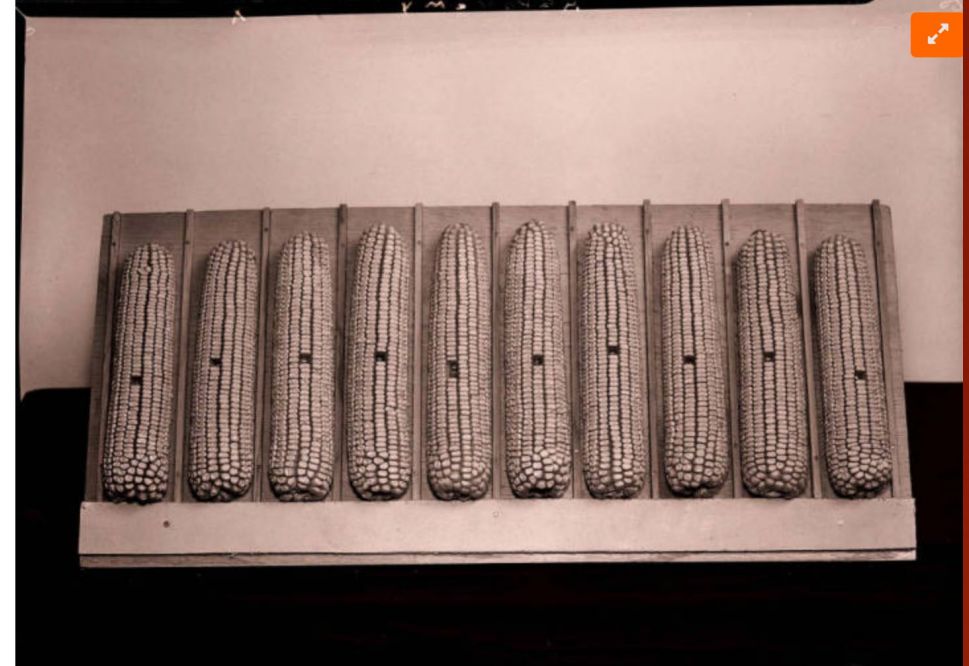
# 'What' as object

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Cotton gin building on Agricultural Experiment Station--Photo 1



Corn cob display



- Conceivable "still life" photos.
- **Buildings, landscapes, objects.**
- No people. No actions.

# #3) WHERE?

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**“Where” will depend on the context of the photo within the collection...**

➤ **Location can be versatile**

- City, state, country
- Building
- Landmark
- Natural region (mountains, woods, fields)

➤ **If photos focus on the same location throughout a collection...**

- you may opt to drop a frequently referenced location to avoid repetition...
- ...but this decision must be discussed and agreed to by the whole curation team!

**Be as specific as possible with available information.**

# #4) WHEN?

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## For TITLE and DESCRIPTION

- ▶ Write out the date, spelling out the month (if known)
  - **DD Month YYYY**
  - **Month YYYY**
  - **YYYY**
- ▶ Add “**circa**” before the date if a time is suggested but not certain.

## For DATE

- ▶ A strictly numeric format
  - **YYYY-MM-DD**
  - **YYYY-MM**
  - **YYYY**
- ▶ **No text.** Leave indication of uncertainty via “circa” to **Title** and **Description.**

**If you don't know “when,” leave it out!**



# Review PROCESS

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## 1. Do all images have a title AND a description?

- These fields are mandatory.
- A description should not merely repeat the title!

## 2. Titles:

- Short and pithy?
- Consistent formatting: Who, What, Where, When?
- Do they capture the focus of the photo?

## 3. Descriptions:

- Complete sentences with proper punctuation and grammar?
- Well written, thoughtful, and readable?

## 4. Spellcheck

**TIP: One person creates; another reviews.**

# Final Suggestions

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## 1. Reverse the approach

- Write the description first. Capture everything!
- THEN, pare the description down to get your title.

## 2. Be open with your colleagues

- Broader scope of whole collection can inform title practices
- E.g.) If describing similar content:
  - ▶ Can better identify related photos/content
  - ▶ Develop consistent titling/numbering system for related content
  - ▶ Get a better sense of what topics are most relevant to the whole collection

**Establish a sense of workflow, teamwork, & support!**

**Thank you! Any questions?**

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