

FOCUS LESSONS



How Photography Enhances
the Teaching of Writing

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This one is for M.M.

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Introduction

First, let's get the jokes out of the way.

It's early spring and I'm crouched at the edge of a pond, photographing hooded mergansers, or trying to anyway. I've got my gear ready: tripod, camera mounted with my longest telephoto lens (the one my sons refer to as my *obnoxious* lens). The jumbo lens definitely draws attention to itself. A young couple comes strolling by. The guy catches my eye and grins.

"Think that lens is big enough?"

He giggles at his original wit; in fact, I've heard that one a few hundred times before. Wisecracks about lens size seem to come with the territory. Believe it or not, the lens is probably *not* big enough for what I'm trying to do. The mergansers are beautiful but skittish; they stubbornly keep their distance. When you're shooting wildlife you almost never have enough "reach" to pull the animal in as close as you'd like. But I play along, offering a shrug along with an easy, what-are-you-gonna-do smile.

Later that day a friend remarks: "Hey, Ralph, I saw those pictures you posted on Facebook. Wow, your camera takes great pictures!"

I've heard that one before, too, but this time I'm ready.

“Yes,” I say, quickly adding: “And my laptop writes great stories!”

I consider this an extremely clever comeback, though it’s possible I’m the only one who does. My friend gives me a puzzled smile.

“Um, yeah, well . . . Anyway I wanted to ask, what kind of equipment do you use?”

“My eyes,” I tell him.



I take photographs every chance I get. I suppose that makes me a photographer. It’s a relatively new field to me, so I really don’t have a deep knowledge of its history. I knew the big names, of course—Diane Arbus, Ansel Adams, Alfred Stieglitz, the controversial Robert Mapplethorpe—but that’s about it. Turns out a Frenchman named Joseph Nicephore Niépce took the first photograph back in 1826. In the United States the Civil War was the first armed conflict documented by photographers (Matthew Brady, Alexander Gardner, and Timothy O’Sullivan).

Those early photographers were pioneers, oddball loners who lugged cumbersome equipment from place to place. Ansel Adams carried a box camera into the mountains when he created his iconic black-and-white landscapes. Gradually, aided by technological advances, photography began to change. Cameras got better, smaller, and more affordable. Kodak released the Brownie camera in 1900. Edward Land introduced the Polaroid instant camera in 1948.

Since then photography has exploded. The art of photography (the word means *drawing with light*) was once considered a rarified activity practiced by a select few experts; suddenly it became available to everybody. In 2015 it was estimated people were taking more pictures in two minutes than had ever existed 150 years ago. (Note: This deluge of images has hurt professional photographers. Fifteen or twenty years ago you could make decent money selling your photos to stock photo companies, but that’s no longer true. Today the supply of visual images is so plentiful the market for stock photos has largely dried up.)

The invention of the digital camera democratized photography. No more film. No more darkroom with pans of smelly chemical soaks. No more paying to have your rolls of film developed and printed.

Think about it: at age ten or twelve most kids in this country get a cell phone. Smartphones come equipped with a sophisticated camera. It’s practically a rite of passage. The photographs we take are supremely important to us. They record our “Kodak moments,” small and large. They function as our



memory banks, often supplanting what actually happened. When it's time to get a new cell phone, we nervously ask the guy at the Verizon store: "Are you sure you can transfer all my pictures to my new phone?"

Although such historical context is important, I hope it doesn't sound as if I'm trying to ride the latest fad, like crowdfunding. This book is rooted in my journey into photography, which has been an intensely personal one. I have always had a deep curiosity about the natural world: spiders, dolphins, elephants, raptors. When I started taking photos, it felt like a door into the natural world swung open. No longer was I limited to seeing exotic creatures on Animal Planet or in the pages of *National Geographic*. Now I could observe them through the lens of my camera. Capturing those images allowed me to savor and study as I "reread" them again and again.

I participated in a trip to Costa Rica led by professional photographers Glenn Bartley and Greg Basco. We took pictures of toucans, tanagers, motmots,

Pallas'
Long-Tongued Bat

and so many dazzling hummingbirds I could scarcely keep track of them. One night we ventured into the rain forest in search of the Pallas' long-tongued bat. We stood for over an hour in pitch darkness. Later that night, looking through the viewfinder of my camera, I reviewed my images.

Look at those wings! That face! That pink tongue! I was astonished to see *that* image in *my* camera. Of course, I can't take all the credit. Mother Nature created the exotic bat. Our trip leaders found the location and suggested the proper settings. Nevertheless, I took the picture. A photo like that went a long way toward fueling my confidence. It wasn't just a pipe dream—that picture provided indisputable proof that I could become a strong photographer. And I knew I would continue to improve if I invested the necessary time and persistence.

Most people know me as a writer. I've written and cowritten books on the craft of writing. I believe that writing is not simply a matter of inspiration, genius, or inborn talent. There are particular ways in which words, sentences, and paragraphs work together to create the effect you want.

In this book I will explore the interplay between photography and writing. I will straddle those two worlds and ferry between them. This book is based on two basic ideas:

***Photography is important in and of itself.** We may tend to think of photography as a fringe subject, a creative elective taken by high school students, but it's much more than that. Like it or not, the world is becoming increasingly visual. The students in our classrooms write the stories of their lives (trips, triumphs, disasters, loves, celebrations) via the photos they take every day with their smartphones. This is a sea change in our culture—we ignore it at our peril. It behooves us to deepen our knowledge of photography.

***There are strong links between photography and writing.** This is true in substance and process, as well as language. The world of photography provides a visual, concrete language (angle, focus, point of view, close-up, panorama) that is enormously helpful in teaching writing. Lo and behold, we may discover that students are already familiar with this terminology. It makes sense for teachers to bring this visual language into the writing classroom.

Moreover, we'll find that there's a great deal of overlap between the craft of photography and the craft of writing. It turns out that photography can illuminate the craft of writing and help us understand it in a whole new way.



Craft Lessons

HOW TO USE THESE LESSONS

JoAnn Portalupi is my wife and coauthor; the craft lesson is our brainchild (Fletcher and Portalupi 2007). We wanted to create pithy, streamlined, high-quality lessons with practical ideas that would stretch young writers. The craft lessons in this section have been created with the same spirit. These lessons draw on the photographic world and build on links between photography (images) and writing (text). They apply to photography and writing and, hopefully, illuminate them both.

Each craft lesson has a section about photography followed by the Writing Connection (a discussion of the craft element in writing). These lessons have been designed to fit into the minilesson portion of your writer's workshop. Here are a few suggestions about how to use them:



1. Take a few minutes and read the lesson ahead of time. It will work best if you've got a clear grasp of the lesson's arc and flow.
2. First talk to students about what the craft element looks like in photography. The actual text is intended as a guideline for the lesson—not a script to be read out loud. Use language that feels comfortable to you.
3. Show students the photograph(s) in the lesson. After they have looked at it, give them a few minutes to turn and talk about what they see.
4. Segue from the craft element in photography to what this element looks like in writing. This transition may feel bumpy at first, but after the first few lessons you and your students will get used to it.
5. Read aloud the writing sample found in the Writing Connection part of the lesson.
6. Invite students to experiment with the craft element in their writing.

It's important that we, as writing teachers, supply rich ideas (strategies, techniques, craft moves) to stretch our students as writers. I would not expect every kid to use the craft element I teach. However, I usually highlight at least one student who tried the new craft lesson. If you have a share session at the end of the writing time, I suggest you select one student who tried the strategy of the day. You have a better chance of bringing these strategies to all your students if they can see their peers using them.

The best teaching often comes at the point of our own learning. I hope you'll bring these lessons into your classroom with a sense of adventure and a generous spirit. Expect the unexpected, as Don Murray would say (Murray 1989). Be alive to the little surprises you'll encounter along the way.

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9 CREATE THE RIGHT MOOD

Mood is rooted in emotion. Mood makes us feel nostalgic, angry, celebratory, etc. If you hope to convey a specific mood in a photograph, you have to feel it yourself first.

In late October I got up early to photograph at Adam's Point, a coastal area in Durham, New Hampshire. I drove to one spot that has ocean on one side and a marsh on the other. Those are usually promising conditions for spotting birds, but today when I climbed out of my car nothing seemed to be moving. I connected the camera to my tripod and waited. Still nothing. I let my eyes wander, roaming near and far over ocean and marsh. A few hundred yards offshore I noticed a blanket of mist rising off the ocean. Just then the sun came out, illuminating the mist directly behind the boat. The sight of that boat, still bathed in shadow, with the bright mist behind it gave me a thoughtful, peaceful feeling. The photo below captures that mood. I like the way the boat engine on the right is counterbalanced by the cormorant on the left.



Early Morning at Adam's Point



PHOTO TIPS

- Think about color. Color is important for establishing mood of an image. Dark, muted colors give a feeling of reflection, sadness, or calm. Bright vibrant colors suggest excitement/happiness.
- Keep an eye on the weather. Photographer David Pritchett has this advice: "To get the best shots, you need to wait until there is a break in the weather to get some really interesting lighting effects from the turbulent sky. It's more of a challenge to portray mood on bright, sunny, cloudless days" (2019).



PHOTO TIP Shooting in low or “dark light” can often create images that are moody and evocative. “Dark light conceals information from viewers,” says photographer Spencer Cox. “It makes a photograph appear mysterious and, depending upon your subject, potentially ominous or refined” (Cox 2018).

In the next photo, the two tree limbs frame the egret’s head. Notice that the egret’s head is in focus; everything else is blurred. This creates a mood of heightened drama and anticipation.



Egret in the Everglades

Writing Connection

Mood is not just a consideration for photos—it’s equally important when you’re writing.

“Mood is the glue that holds all the arts together,” says Trevor Bryan, author of *The Art of Comprehension* (2019). “It’s how we connect to stories and poems.”

I’m acutely conscious of mood in my writing. At the beginning of my novel *Spider Boy* (1997), the main character has moved from Illinois to New York and isn’t happy about it. Bobby has left his good friends behind—he feels dislocated. I wanted to convey the sense of a boy who is not “at home” in his world.

After Bobby hung up he went to his bedroom. He looked around at all the boxes containing his stuff, the posters still rolled up. It looked like he just arrived yesterday. The only thing he had unpacked were his clothes and a few books. The room was long and narrow. With the walls bare, you could see that they needed a

paint job. There were four windows, each shaped like a quarter of a circle. Those windows, Mom said, gave the room character: Four quarters equals a whole. But it didn't add up.

He lay back on his bed. The house was perfectly quiet, as if all human sound had been sucked forever from those four walls. (20)

I deliberately chose details (bare walls, rolled-up posters, eerie silence) to show that Bobby has not settled in to his new house.

Mood should be more than a relish or condiment—it's fundamental to the work and should be a basic consideration for any piece of writing. If you're going to write a scene about getting ready for a backyard wedding reception you need to imagine the prevailing mood around the house. Happy? Tense? Chaotic? How might you describe the characters or setting to best convey that mood to your readers?

Sample pages