

# “Reading” Photographs



Using this picture of the 1897 Poe House as an example, we know it was taken by a professional photographer because the shadow of the camera and the photographer are in the foreground. This photo was given to the museum by the Poe family. What time of year do you think the photo was taken? What time of day do you think the photo was taken?

With smartphones in the 21st century, images of our daily lives are taken instantaneously. On social media apps, these images exist indefinitely. Some digital images are captioned so even years from now, someone who looks at it will have an idea what the photo was about, as well as the time frame in which it was taken, thanks to time stamps. However, we have many family photos that date from the age of developing pictures taken by a camera and printed on special photographic paper.

Printed photos, especially family photos, are kept and stored in albums, attics, and shoeboxes underneath our beds. The people and places in family pictures are forgotten or unknown to the younger generations. In this worksheet, you are invited to “read” some old photographs.

How do you read, or interpret a photograph? Below are some tips to help you learn how to study a picture to learn more about it. Then, try your hand at the four exercises that follow. After completing this worksheet, you’ll be ready to read some of your family photos.

Think about:

- The Photographer — Who might the photographer have been? Do you think the photographer was a professional, family member, a friend? How might you be able to tell who the photographer was? Why do you think the photograph taken? What is the photographer trying to show?
- The Subject of the Picture — Who or what is the photo about? Why was the picture taken? How do you know? Is this a posed picture or a spur of the moment photo, and how do you know? What details in the photo do you notice that might tell you more about the subject, such as work, play, wealth, lifestyle, etc.? Would this photo make a good visual aid if you were telling a story?
- The Time the Picture was Taken — What clues are there that can help you know when the picture was taken? What does the picture tell you about what life was like during the time the picture was taken? What else do you know about the time period you think the photo was taken?
- The Place where the Picture was Taken — Where do you think the picture was taken and how do you know? Why do you think the picture was taken at that particular place? Does the picture give you clues about what the place is?

TRY READING THE FOLLOWING PHOTOGRAPHS AND ANSWER THE ACCOMPANYING QUESTIONS:



1. Who may have taken this picture? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. When do you think this picture was taken? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. What is the photographer trying to show in the picture? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. Is this a "posed" picture? How do you know? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. How well does the photographer represent the times? Explain. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. Who are the women? Why are so many of the dressed alike? \_\_\_\_\_  
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\_\_\_\_\_



1. Did a professional photographer take this picture?  
How do you know?

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2. Was this a "posed" picture?

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3. What was the photographer trying to show?

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4. Where was this picture taken?

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5. What do the details in this picture tell you about life on this farm?

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1. Did a professional photographer take this picture?

How do you know?

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2. Why was this picture taken?

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3. About when was this picture taken?

How do you know?

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1. Did a professional photographer take this picture? \_\_\_\_\_ How do you know? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. Do you think the photographer was chosen to take this picture or did he choose to do it himself/herself?  
How do you know?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. What was the photographer trying to show? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. Is there anything in the picture the photographer may not have intended to take? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. Is this a contrived or "posed" picture? How do you know? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. What do the details in this picture tell you? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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DEVELOPED by: Ruby J. Lanier, History Department, Appalachian State  
University, Boone, N.C. and Natalie G. Tilyor, North  
Carolina Museum of History, Division of Archives and  
History, Department of Cultural Resources, Raleigh.

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— Rebecca A. Foerster, Boone, N.C.  
— Dr. Carl Ross, Boone, N.C.

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910-500-4240

