

Captioning Basics

The ABC's of Captioning.

To write an effective caption, keep the following tenets in mind: accuracy, brevity and clarity.

1. **Accuracy.** Ensure every piece of information within the caption is accurate and complete. This also includes ensuring the captions are grammatically and stylistically accurate, adhering to the guidance contained in this guide. An accurate caption helps ensure an image is newsworthy, is of historical value, and can be more easily retrieved from databases.
 2. **Brevity.** When writing a caption, be certain every word is necessary to tell the story of the image. Many captions must convey a great deal of information in a few short sentences, so they must be written concisely to maximize their effectiveness. Do not use 15 words where five will do.
 3. **Clarity.** To be understood by the end user, a caption must be clear in both intent and expression. Select language to make certain the reader will understand what is happening in the image.
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The 5 W's.

When gathering information to include in a caption, keep in mind the 5 W's: who, what, when where and why. All elements must be present to accurately communicate the story of an image or video clip.

1. **Who.** Who or what is the subject of the image?
 - a. If the subject of a sentence is a person or persons, provide the rank, first and last name, title, and military unit for each person.

Organizational elements should be listed from smallest to largest (e.g., U.S. Marines from Kilo Company, 3rd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division).

When identifying service members, include the service to which he or she belongs. This is not necessary when service members are not individually identified.

- U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. John Brown inspects an aircraft.
- U.S. Airmen prepare for an operational readiness inspection.

People appearing in the background need not be identified unless they are essential to the story of the image.

Do not include the names of minor dependents of military members.

Do not include the names of American citizens, to include service members, receiving medical treatment without the express written consent of the patient.

- b. If the subject of the sentence is an object, provide the equipment name and model, name and ship hull number, or name and model of the aircraft or

vehicle. Include both the name of the object (e.g., C-5 Galaxy) as well as what kind of object it is (e.g., aircraft). For example:

- A C-5 Galaxy aircraft taxis down the runway.
- The Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Dwight D. Eisenhower (CVN 69) gets under way.

Note: Do not include a hyphen between the letters and numbers in the hull number.

- U.S. Soldiers prepare to fire an M-119 105 mm howitzer.

- c. To find the proper way to list a particular vehicle, aircraft or weapon system, refer to fact sheets available on service-specific Web sites. These sites contain a great deal of information about each service's equipment, aircraft and vehicles. See list of references on page 5.

2. **What.** Describe the action captured by the image.

- a. Use active voice when describing the action. When writing in active voice, the subject is doing something, while in passive voice, something is being done to the subject. For example:

- *Active:* U.S. Army Soldiers destroy confiscated ordnance.
- *Passive:* Confiscated ordnance is destroyed by U.S. Army Soldiers.

- b. Do not over-describe the action; let the image speak as well.

- U.S. Navy Builder 2nd Class Susan Johnson, assigned to Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 3, helps refurbish a wooden cabinet as she removes a screw with a cordless power drill at the Nazareth Boys Orphanage in Victoria, Seychelles, Dec. 26, 2005.
- U.S. Navy Builder 2nd Class Susan Johnson, assigned to Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 3, refurbishes a cabinet at the Nazareth Boys Orphanage in Victoria, Seychelles, Dec. 26, 2005.

3. **When.** Provide the date and, if pertinent, the time of day when the image was captured.

- a. Include the date within the caption. Do not use datelines, which are headers placed before the start of the caption, often containing the date and location of the image.

- i. Do not include "on" before the date.
- ii. Days of the week need not be included.

- b. Use the following format:

- U.S. Army Soldiers patrol a neighborhood in Baghdad, Iraq, Aug. 21, 2007.

Months March through July will be spelled out; months August through February will be abbreviated.

When writing just a month and year with no day, do not abbreviate the month: Feb. 27, 2007, but February 2007.

4. **Where.**

- a. Provide the geographic location as well as the name of the base, facility, or organization if applicable.

- ii. Do not use acronyms for terms used only once within the caption.
 - iii. Do not use apostrophes when using a plural acronym.
 - MREs, not MRE's.
 - F-15s, not F-15's.
 - iv. Refer to the DoD Dictionary of Military Terms for official definitions of abbreviations and acronyms (see references, page 5). Acronyms need not appear in the DoD dictionary to be used in a caption.
- b. Avoid jargon. Explain terms and practices that are not commonly known outside of military circles. For example, do not use shorthand references to military units unless they have been previously defined within the caption.
- *Incorrect.* 2-8 Infantry Brigade.
 - *Correct.* 2nd Battalion, 8th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team.
5. Do not editorialize. Stick to the facts as presented by the image and gathered at the scene.
- *Incorrect:* An Iraqi family enjoys a picnic in a park near the Baghdad Zoo in the Karkh district of Baghdad, Iraq, March 30, 2007. Scenes like this one are becoming more prevalent in the city as life slowly returns to normal.
 - *Correct:* An Iraqi family shares a picnic in a park near the Baghdad Zoo in the Karkh district of Baghdad, Iraq, March 30, 2007.
6. Identifying people in an image.
- When identifying people appearing in an image, use the rule of three. Provide the full name and rank and/or title of every person when there are three or fewer people in the image. It is not necessary to individually identify everyone should there be four or more people present, although there may be some cases (such as with high-level officials) where that would be appropriate.
 - a. Indicate position in a caption using commas, not parentheses.
 - U.S. Army Staff Sgts. John Brown, left, and Carl Anderson participate in a training exercise.
 - From left, U.S. Army Gen. George Casey, Ambassador to Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad and Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld discuss foreign policy issues.
7. Do not include quotes within a caption.

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Sample Captions

- U.S. Navy Chief Hospital Corpsman Sam Kim examines a patient during a medical civil action program in Goubetto, Djibouti, March 30, 2008. Sailors and Marines assigned to the 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit saw more than 500 patients during the Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa humanitarian program. (U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. Jeremy T. Lock/Released)

- U.S. Soldiers with Charlie Company, 2nd Combined Arms Battalion, 69th Armored Regiment conduct a mission briefing Jan. 10, 2008, on Forward Operating Base Rustamiyah in Iraq. The Soldiers will conduct a humanitarian aid mission in Baghdad. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Nicholas Hernandez/Released)
- A pair of E-2C Hawkeye aircraft attached to Carrier Airborne Early Warning Squadron 116 (VAW-116) flies over the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln (CVN 72) March 30, 2008, during an air power demonstration while under way in the Pacific Ocean. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class James R. Evans/Released)
- U.S. Marines conduct weapons training for Iraqi police officers and neighborhood watch members in Fallujah, Iraq, March 11, 2008. The Marines are from Kilo Company, 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, Regimental Combat Team 1. (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Lance Cpl. Grant T. Walker/Released)
- U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Sigrid Carrero-Perez, left, and Senior Airman Ian Hunt guide service members into a C-130 Hercules aircraft on a base in Southwest Asia Feb. 16, 2008. Carrero-Perez and Hunt are loadmasters deployed with the 737th Airlift Squadron. (U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Patrick Dixon/Released)
- From left, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Navy Adm. Mike Mullen, President George W. Bush and Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates enter the Pentagon March 26, 2008, for a senior leadership meeting. (DoD photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Chad J. McNeeley/Released)