

Teaching Journalism & Mass Communication

A journal published
by the AEJMC Small
Programs Interest Group



Vol. 7 #1 (2017), pp. 94-97 <https://community.aejmc.org/smallprogramsinterestgroup/publications/journals>

How to Write Visually

Joe Gisondi and Brian Poulter

In his book *Photojournalism: The Professional's Approach*, author Kenneth Kobre describes and defines strategies for making great journalistic photographs based on a hierarchy developed by Joe Elbert, the veteran photo editor at the *Washington Post*.

Elbert explains there are four levels of photojournalism: Informational, Graphic, Emotional and Intimate. Each category can lead to great journalism. These same principles can be applied to writing, where, like in photojournalism, the further one moves up the hierarchy toward intimate, the more likely one will succeed.

Let's address how this photojournalism methodology applies to writing.

Informational

This is the most common type of photography/writing found in news publications, offering mostly basic details related to the who, what, when, and where. This could be a photo of a building that burned down, of an accused person being brought into a court house, or a portrait of someone being profiled.



Dr. John Ryan (photo by Brian Poulter)

This photo of Dr. John Ryan, a colleague in the EIU journalism program, ran with a story in the annual alumni publication so readers could see him in his setting, an office in student publications. Photos like this are important, and necessary, even if they rarely get nominated for Pulitzers.

In writing, journalists rely heavily on informational approaches to citing breaking news in leads such as these:

After deliberating for four hours, a jury of eight women and four men found a 39-year-old former high school teacher guilty of two counts of criminal sexual assault for raping one of his students, a 15-year-old girl, in his classroom in May 2014.

A tornado with winds reaching near 200 mph tore through Chucktown on Monday, killing three residents, injuring 28, obliterating Adams Elementary and wiping out the business district.

Writers also convey essential, basic information in longer stories, such as this one that ran as part of our series on Illinois Route 1, the state's longest road. This section describes a town on the southern point of this 325-mile road.

Little else is going on at Cave-In-Rock on a Friday afternoon, besides folks filtering into Rose's Kountry Kitchen around the corner, walking into the newly constructed Area Bank next door, or driving another 200 yards down a declining Illinois 1 to the ferry ramp. The city hall building across the street is empty, as are most of the structures in a town that is tiny both in size at 0.43 square miles and in population with about 318 residents.

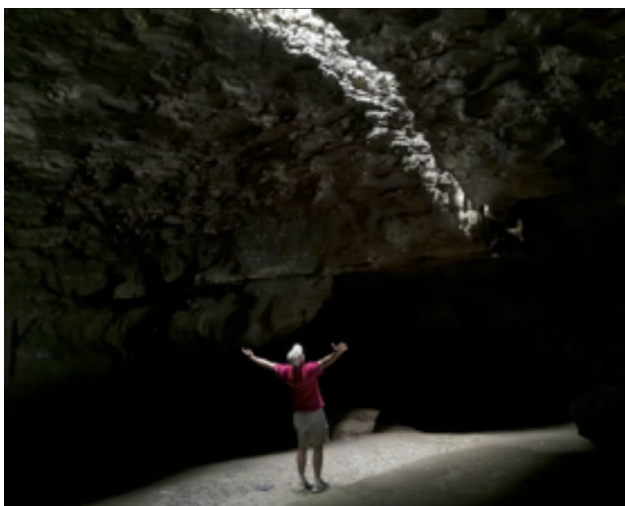
Cave-In-Rock is one of a dozen or so small

towns sprinkled along the final 20 miles of Illinois 1 as it cuts through the Shawnee National Forest, a 288,000-square acre wilderness wonderland that features a Little Grand Canyon carved from sandstone, extraordinary rock formations chiseled from sedimentary rock, expansive, untouched wilderness, aptly called Garden of the Gods, and more wildlife species (500) than total residents in Gibsonia, Lawler, and Spark Hill, which are villages that do not even register on the state maps since they have populations below 225. Harrisburg, with 9,000 residents, is a 45-minute drive northwest of Cave-In-Rock through the national forest, making it the largest regional city.

Residents of towns surrounding Cave-In-Rock, though, prefer traveling across the river and driving 12 miles to Marion, Ky., for their shopping and medical needs. Several nurses take the ferry across the Ohio River in order to work at the Crittenden County Hospital, the closest large medical facility. Without the ferry, locals would have to drive 35 miles north to get across the river on the bridge near Shawneetown or drive 55 miles west to reach Interstate 24, which rolls into Paducah, Ky.

Graphic

Photographs that include vivid, rich details are more likely to make a deeper impression on readers than those that are informative, therefore they rank higher in Elbert's hierarchy. Here is a photo from our series that shows the large cave in the rock along the banks of the Ohio River, where pirates once looted



Cave-In-Rock, Illinois (iPhone photo by Brian Poulter)

and murdered those traveling west. There is a problem revealing what the cave looks like: it's big and dark. So Brian waited until Joe stopped to stand in a shaft of light falling from a fissure in the cave's roof since one's eye usually goes places that are the brightest and reveal the most contrast. This type of composition, or graphics, help construct images that are more clear and compelling.

Writers also need to frame places we want to visualize—in this case, a stretch of road outside a store in a decaying, neglected part of Harvey, one of the most dangerous towns in Illinois and the United States. We selected images that enable readers to see as Shirley does. That way, readers could better understand her struggles. As writers, our job is to describe a compelling and relevant aspect of scenes people typically disregard, like the shuttered homes along Illinois Route 1.

Shirley Rucker looks out the window of her used furniture store, aware that some drivers are too afraid to park and walk inside.

After all, a man busted a bottle over another man's head just outside the door a few weeks earlier. The homeless ask to sit inside the store to rest and alcoholics solicit money for food.

Halsted Resale resides on the first floor of a long, two-story building that blends into the blighted neighborhood. Like much of Harvey, this section of South Halsted is impoverished. Boards cover windows at business buildings on both sides of the furniture store. Windows are busted out of house beside it, weeds covering the front porch and grass growing wildly across a small front yard.

Boards also cover the windows of a shack across the street.

People sometimes collect cans and bottles outside the Finish Line Car Wash, a vacant building on the corner to the east.

Life is significantly different on the northern end of Illinois 1, about 319 miles from Cave-In-Rock and about 20 miles south of Chicago.

Emotional

Photos that evoke an emotional response or capture an outburst from a subject are almost guaranteed to work because they help readers connect, and feel something, about the subject. Laughter (or creepiness) is the natural response to this photo, taken of an older man dressed up for a homecoming parade in



Charleston, Ill. resident Bill McElwee awaits the beginning of the Eastern Illinois University Homecoming parade (photo by Brian Poulter)

Charleston, Ill. Either way, the photo elicits a reaction. Isn't that the point of journalism, to make the reader feel something? That is what emotional response is all about.

Like photographers, writers need to capture emotional moments, showing people as they react instinctively to moments, people and places through descriptions, dialogue and narrative. In the following scene, we describe a 78-year-old woman who recently started attending baseball games in Danville Stadium, an historic stadium where college players compete during the summer. Wilma did not understand baseball's rules, but she clearly adored the young men playing. We hung out with her for a few innings, asking Wilma about her life and her interest in the sport. When she started cheering, we sat back and observed, taking detailed notes.

"We scored another one!" Wilma squealed, without knowing or caring the run didn't count. "That's our boys!"

That's another thing about Wilma. When she cheers, everything is punctuated with an exclamation mark.

"You ain't seen nothing yet," says Cathy, who sits to Wilma's right. "We're always hoarse when we get home."

Wilma's eyes widen when she speaks about the time a month earlier when the Danville players gave her a signed baseball. "I cherish that baseball," Wilma wrote in the back page of a pocket calendar she keeps in her purse. A week ago, the team manager had invited her onto the field, prompting Wilma to hug every

single player and coach. It was the first time Wilma had stepped on a baseball field of any kind. Afterward, she recorded this moment in her calendar as well.

"It was awesome," Wilma tells me. "I just love all of them boys. When they don't win, I'm sad for them."

As we depart, Brian Poulter (the photographer on this journey) kisses Wilma on the cheek, which elicits a howl. "I won't be washing that spot for a while," she says, eyes blazing.

Intimate

Nothing draws in people more than intimacy. It's not hard to tell what this young man is feeling after finishing the last leg of a state final relay race at the Illinois High School Association State Track meet. Many of us will never win a relay race, but we have all known moments of pure joy. Emotions are one of the things that unite us. When a journalist can capture and share those special moments in such a visual way, that is when the reader cares.

To develop intimate stories, writers need to burrow deeper into emotional responses and reveal private fears, joys and anger, which are frequently revealed during unguarded moments, such as this track photo. But writers need to keep digging, learning so much about these moments that they reach omniscience, like a narrator who knows all. This demands one does exhaustive research, connects with sources, and asks more personal questions. In "The Girl," the



Eureka (Ill.) High School's Wes Schmidgall is embraced by Dean Eastman after they and their teammates won the Class A IHSA 4x100-meter relay at Eastern Illinois University's O'Brien Field (photo by Brian Poulter)

Los Angeles Times' Kurt Streeter guided us into several private scenes between a former gang member and his teen daughter that felt so intimate that some readers probably felt uncomfortable. Readers connect more closely to the protagonists during these moments, prompting them to keep reading.

"Do girls box?" she asked, turning to her father one evening. "Is it OK for girls to box?"

"Well, yeah, *mija*, they do," he answered. "Sure, it's OK for girls to box."

They were sitting on the bed in his cramped apartment, faces lit by a flickering TV, eating pizza, watching a pro boxing match. Seniesa loved to watch fights with him, loved the way boxers settled their differences, using fists to express what was inside. She was just a kid, a girl enthralled with a man's sport, but she wanted to express herself like that.

"Dad? Can I box? Can I learn how to box?"

Joe Estrada was shocked, he would remember afterward, but he didn't want to let his daughter down, not with what they had been through. Yeah, he said, eyes still on the TV. "Sure, *mija*,

you can do that, if you really want to. I'll take you to a gym in a couple of days. I promise."

He didn't mean it. Boxing wasn't for girls. Not for his girl, a pretty one with thin bones, a delicate nose and rosy lips. He had lived by his fists, both on the streets and in prison. All he wanted was to protect her. For weeks, he did nothing to make his promise real.

But she grew adamant. She read a book about Muhammad Ali, got a poster of him and tacked it to her wall. She admired his confidence, the way he would not back down, just like her father, she would proudly say, and the way Ali had grown up, just as she had—an outsider looking in. She wanted to become a champion boxer, bold and strong, just like Ali. Besides, if her father trained her, he would be with her, no matter what. Both needed that, desperately. They needed it to save each other.

Joe Gisoni and Brian Poulter are professors at Eastern Illinois University.