

Learning to Look: A Format for Looking At and Talking About Photographs

Describe the photograph briefly (include size, black-and-white or color, and subject) in a sentence or two. Looking carefully at the photograph, discuss the four categories described here. As objectively as you can, address the properties in each category that seem important for the photograph. Note: This exercise works best when comments and responses relate to something seen within the work. It is not necessary to discuss every visual element.

Visual Elements within the photograph—What You See:

light and shadow: Does the light seem to be natural or artificial? Harsh or soft? What direction is the light coming from? Describe the shadows. Are they subtle or do they create strong contrasts?

value: Is there a range of tones from light to dark? Squint your eyes. Where is the darkest value? The lightest?

focus: What parts of the image are clearly in focus? Are some parts out of focus? Note: The range between the nearest and farthest things that appear in focus define the photograph's depth of field.

space: Do overlapping objects create a sense of space? Is the space shallow, deep, or both?

shape: Do you see geometric or organic shapes? Are there positive shapes, such as objects, or negative shapes that represent voids?

line: Are there thick, thin, curvy, jagged, or straight lines?

color: What colors do you see, if any?

texture: Do you see visual textures within the photograph? Is there an actual texture on the surface of the photograph?
Design of the photograph—How Things Are Arranged

angle: From what vantage point was the photograph taken? Imagine the photograph taken from a higher or lower angle or view. How does the angle affect the photograph?

framing: Describe the edges of the view. What is included? What does the framing draw your attention to in the photograph? Can you imagine what might have been visible beyond the edges of the picture?

dominance: Close your eyes. When you open them and look at the photograph, what is the first thing you notice? Why is your attention drawn there? Are there other centers of interest? How are they created? How do the focal points help move your eye throughout the photograph?

contrast: Are there strong visual contrasts--lights and darks, textures, solids and voids, etc.?

repetition: Repetition of visual elements can create unity--a sense of order or wholeness that holds the work together visually. What elements are repeated? Do they contribute to a sense of unity?

variety: Variety often creates interest. Can you see a variety of visual elements such as values, shapes, textures, etc.?

balance: Is the visual weight on one side of the photograph about the same as the other? How about top to bottom and diagonally.
How the photograph was made—Method/Equipment Used

You can discuss anything you know about the photographic techniques, camera, or film that is pertinent to the work.
What the photograph communicates—Feelings/Mood

Based on what you have seen, what do you think the work is about? What does it mean or communicate? How do you know? What words would you use to describe it?