

General Vocabulary Used in Photography

The following words are the basic vocabulary used in describing photographs.



abstract: an image that emphasizes formal elements (line, shape, etc) rather than specific, recognizable objects.



content: the subject, topic or information captured in a photograph.



direct approach: confronting a scene in a straight-forward manner, without using unusual angles or distortion.



documentary photography: photographs whose main purpose is to record a place, person(s) or event.



expressive: concerned with communicating emotion.



geometric shape: simple rectilinear or curvilinear shapes found in geometry, such as circles, squares, triangles, etc.



intention: reason(s) why the artist made a work of art.



landscape: an image that portrays the natural environment.



objective: a point of view free from personal bias, which attempts to consider all available information with equal regard and fairness.



organic shape: shapes based on natural objects such as trees, mountains, leaves, etc.



representational: an image which shows recognizable objects.



subject: the main object or person(s) in a photograph.



theme: a unifying or dominant idea in one work of art or in a collection of works.

Visual Elements

Practice the use of these words by asking the following questions:



focus: what areas appear clearest or sharpest in the photograph? What do not?



light: what areas of the photograph are most highlighted? Are there any shadows? Does the photograph allow you to guess the time of day? Is the light natural or artificial? Harsh or soft? Reflected or direct?



line: are there objects in the photograph that act as lines? Are they straight, curvy, thin, thick? Do the lines create direction in the photograph? Do they outline? Do the lines show movement or energy?



repetition: are there any objects, shapes or lines which repeat and create a pattern?



shape: do you see [geometric](#) or [organic](#) shapes? What are they?



space: is there depth to the photograph or does it seem shallow? What creates this appearance? Are there important negative spaces in addition to positive spaces? Is there depth created by spatial illusions?



texture: if you could touch the surface of the photograph how would it feel? How do the objects in the picture look like they would feel?



value: is there a range of tones from dark to light? Where is the darkest value? Where is the lightest?

Composition of the Photograph

The words here will allow you to think about how [visual elements](#) combine within a photograph to create a composition.



angle: the [vantage point](#) from which the photograph was taken; generally used when discussing a photograph taken from an unusual or exaggerated vantage point.



background: the part of a scene or picture that is or seems to be toward the back.



balance: the distribution of [visual elements](#) in a photograph. *Symmetrical* balance distributes visual elements evenly in an image. *Asymmetrical* balance is found when visual elements are not evenly distributed in an image.



central focus: the object(s) which appears most prominently and/or most clearly focused in a photograph.



composition: the arrangement or structure of the formal elements that make up an image.



contour: the outline of an object or shape.



contrast: strong visual differences between light and dark, varying textures, sizes, etc.



framing: what the photographer has placed within the boundaries of the photograph.



setting: actual physical surroundings or scenery whether real or artificial.



vantage point: the place from which a photographer takes a photograph.