

Photographs: Finding Clues to the Past

Learning to “read” photographs is an important part of studying history. By looking carefully at the images in this Visual Resource Guide you will have the opportunity to see history happening through the eyes of people who actually experienced these historic events.

Suggestions for reading and interpreting photographs:

1. Examine the details of the photograph carefully for several minutes and write down everything that you think is important.
2. When describing a photo on paper or out loud, start with the general and become more and more specific.
3. Identify objects spatial location by noting whether they are in the foreground, mid-ground, or background.
4. For complex images with many details, try breaking the image into four quadrants or sections.
5. Consider what biases the photographer may have, and their motivations for taking the photo. Look for clues to tell you if the photo was staged or natural.

Questions to Consider:

1. What is happening in the photograph? What is the subject?
2. Who took this photo and why? Where do you think the photographer was standing?
3. What is the setting? Are there any buildings or other structures in the picture? What are they? (Hint: look for clues, such as signs, objects in front of the houses or in the windows, etc.)
4. Are there any people in the photograph? What are they doing? What kind of clothes are they wearing? What emotions might they be feeling?
5. Based on your analysis of the people pictured, is there anything you can guess about their lives?
6. Are there any machines or tools pictured? If so, what kind?
7. Do you see animals in the photograph? If so, why are they there?
8. When and where in the past do you think the photograph was taken? How can you tell? Do you already know anything about this time, place, or event?
9. What might have happened just before and just after this picture was taken?
10. What might be pictured just outside the frame of this photo?
11. Put yourself in the scene pictured. What would you be doing? Imagine what might have happened to you that day.
12. Is there anything else you notice?