

Goldie's ✕

Visual Literacy

How to Read an Image



Introduction

You can read a book, but did you know you can also read a photo? Photographs are a great way to see a snapshot of the past, but it cannot tell you everything. How can you look beyond the surface of an image and search for clues to better understand a historic photo?

What is Visual Literacy?

Visual literacy is defined as the ability to interpret, negotiate and make meaning from information presented in the form of an image, like a photograph, illustration, map or political cartoon. **Ultimately, it is a fancy way of saying reading an image, much like people read books.** Practicing this important skill is helpful as the modern world continues to focus and share more images and graphics. The more questions a viewer can ask to break down the image, the easier it will be to understand and interpret.

Snapshot of Time

Remember that photographs only capture a moment in time. Viewers of historical photos don't know what happened before or after a photo was taken and it is important to recognize that viewers only see a segment of time. To more fully understand a historic time period portrayed in photos or artwork, look at newspapers or other research materials and compare historic photos from different sources for the same time period.

State Historical Society of Iowa Online Images

The State Historical Society of Iowa not only cares for thousands of historic objects, but is also the home to many photographs from Iowa's past. The [State Historical Society's Flickr account](#) currently has 30 albums of historic images of a variety of topics from Iowa's past available to view. There also are hundreds of images available to view within the museum's [Primary Source Sets](#).

Questions and Tips to Help You Investigate an Image/Photo

Who do you think is in the photo or image?

If you don't know names, you can state man, woman, dog, etc.

What objects are in the photo or image?

If you don't know exact objects, you can state book, rug, tree, etc.

What is happening in the photo or image?

If you don't know exactly what's going on, you can state generally about what you think is happening.

Where do you think the photo was taken or image made?

If you don't know exactly where, you can guess general places like Iowa, outside, inside, etc.

When do you think this photo was taken or image made?

If you don't know exactly when, you can guess an era or general year.

Why do you think the photo was taken or image made?

If you don't know exactly why, take a guess.

What do you want to know more about after looking at the photo or image?

After working through all these questions, what have you learned from the photo or image?