Caption Writing

As a PAO, some of the most effective communication tools you have at your disposal are still and video imagery. Images can be iconic like the Iwo Jima flag raising, which defined American spirit and resolve during World War II. Video of the Coast Guard rescuing Hurricane Katrina victims helped cement their image in the minds of many Americans as a first responder in times of crisis. These photos and videos can be rendered useless without the proper information attached to each product.

Photos and videos without context can quickly lose their effectiveness. As PAOs, it is imperative we ensure all VI products are accompanied with the correct information so we can meet our communication objectives and the men and women are not risking their lives to produce valuable VI products for no reason.
Elements of Caption Writing

Captions should be complete and satisfy the questions of who, what, when, where, why and how. They should be brief written summaries that explain the content of the image or video.

The captions we are dealing with in this instruction refer to the metadata, which is the information embedded in the photo for archival purposes. This is not the same as the cutline or caption underneath a photo in a newspaper or magazine. That said, the metadata information we are discussing in this lesson can certainly be used to create a cutline for the photo if and when it’s published.

To write an effective caption, follow the tenets of accuracy, brevity and clarity. Ensure every piece of information within the caption is accurate and complete. This also includes ensuring the captions are grammatically and stylistically accurate.

Be certain every word is necessary to tell the story of the image. Many captions must convey a great deal of information in a few short sentences, so they must be written concisely to maximize their effectiveness. Do not use 15 words where five will do.

To be understood by the end user, a caption must be clear in both intent and expression. Audiences for Defense Department imagery can be global. Construct captions that can be understood by a nonmilitary reader.

When gathering information to include in a caption, keep in mind the 5 W's: who, what, when, where and why. All questions must be answered to accurately communicate the story of a still image or video clip.

Who: The best way to identify the subject in your caption is to point out who is performing the action being depicted. Another method of identifying people in a photograph is to look for the obvious contrast in action, gender or dress. Identifying people by their position in a photograph is the least desirable method of identification because it often presents the reader with a long list of names. If no other method is effective and it can be done smoothly, write “from left, and name the people in order.

If the subject of a sentence is a person or persons, provide the rank, first and last name, title and military unit for each person.

List units from smallest to largest, following service designation. For example: U.S. Marines from Kilo Company, 3rd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division ...

When identifying Service members, include the Service to which he or she belongs. This is not necessary when Service members are not individually identified.

● U.S. Airmen prepare for an operational readiness inspection.

People appearing in the background need not be identified unless they are essential to the story of the image.

Do not include the names of minor dependents of military members, and do not include the names of American citizens, to include service members, receiving medical treatment without the express written consent of the patient.

If the subject of the sentence is an object, provide the equipment name and model, name and ship hull number, or name and model of the aircraft or vehicle. Include both the name of the object (e.g., C5 Galaxy) as well as what kind of object it is (e.g., aircraft). For example:

● A C5 Galaxy aircraft taxis down the runway.
● The Nimitz class aircraft carrier USS Dwight D. Eisenhower (CVN 69) gets under way.

Note: Do not include a hyphen between the letters and numbers in the hull number. Refer to Chapter 7, Table 5 of DoD Captioning Style Guide to find the proper way to list a particular vehicle, weapon system or aircraft.

What: When you describe the action taking place in the photo, use active voice, not passive voice. The difference is that when writing in active voice, the subject is doing something. In passive voice, something is being done to the subject. Again, action should be
Elements of Caption Writing (continued)

described in active voice. Do not over-describe the action, though. Let the image speak as well.

**When:** Provide the date and, if pertinent, the time of day when the image was captured within the caption. Do not use datelines, which are headers placed before the start of the caption, often containing the date and location of the image. Do not include "on" before the date. Day of the week is not required.

Follow the Associated Press Stylebook instructions about how to properly write the date. Use the following format, as per the Associated Press Stylebook: Aug. 21, 2013. Spell out months March through July and abbreviate months August through February. When writing just a month and year with no day, do not abbreviate the month: Feb. 27, 2013, but February 2013.

**Where:** Provide the geographic location as well as the name of the base, facility or organization, if applicable. If there is no city, give a region or general area (e.g., near the Syrian border or off the coast of Southern California). If the imagery was captured on a ship, provide the ship name as well as where it is moored or under way. If it is an undisclosed location, state that within the caption. Spell out state names when they stand alone within the caption. Use abbreviations when paired with a city or base/installation. Do not use postal codes. Refer to the DoD Captioning Style Guide, p. 33, for a list of state abbreviations.

**Why:** Explain the purpose of the event, exercise or operation depicted in the image. This gives context to the image and answers the question as to why the image matters. This explanation should be brief, in most cases consisting of no more than one sentence.
Constructing and Editing a Caption

It isn't enough just to provide a clear and accurate description of what is going on in an image. Captions should have a set format to allow the viewer to easily understand the facts about the image. Next, we're going to discuss some basic principles for writing captions.

The first sentence contains the 5 W's and is always written in the present tense using active voice. A caption describes the moment the image is captured, not what came before or after, so the first sentence will be written as if from that moment.

The second sentence gives background information on the image. It explains why the image is significant and places it in a larger context. Include the photographer's credit and the release status of the image at the end of the caption. Use the following format: (U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. James Cooper/Released).

All of the preceding style guidance also applies to the metadata of imagery. Metadata is non-image data embedded in image files. It contains general text information about the file, such as the date the image was created or modified, exposure, image format, keywords, and caption information are examples of metadata. It is important that this information is complete and accurate to ensure that an image is searchable and of the utmost value to the end user.

The Department of Defense Captioning Style Guide is written for all producers, editors and users of its visual information. The guide demonstrates how to address military terms and descriptions of things, places and entities recorded by the military’s camera operators, created by its graphic artists, or written about by its journalists. Based on the tenets of The Associated Press Stylebook, the Department of Defense Captioning Style guide is written specifically for use by Defense Department visual information and public affairs specialists. PA and VI personnel should still refer to AP Stylebook for guidance on items that do not appear within the Department of Defense Captioning Style Guide.

The DoD Captioning Style Guide applies to the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the military departments, the Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Joint Staff, combatant commands, the Office of the Inspector General of the Department of Defense, the defense agencies, DoD field activities and all other organizational entities within the Department of Defense.

When editing captions, take special care to look for common errors, such as grammatical mistakes, including too much irrelevant information, mismatched sentences and generic captions for a series of images. Sending a series of images with the same caption is a missed opportunity to tell the story of the image. It can result in mismatched captions and images making the photo unusable.

One part of the caption that must accompany every photo submitted to DIMOC is the Visual Information Record Identification Number. The VIRIN is used for cataloging and historical archiving of all imagery.

Photo courtesy of articles.elitefts.com
VIRIN and VISION ID

Each photo, digital image and/or separate unit of media submitted to the DIMOC must have a VIRIN to support long-term record requirements.

The VIRIN consists of 15 data elements in the following format YYMMDD-A-AANNN-NNN. The following is a description of the data elements for the four VIRIN fields (with a dash between each field).

Field 1 is the year, month and date, in the YYMMDD format, that the image was generated.

Field 2 is the service affiliation or status of the photographer. The code abbreviations are:

- A, is used for a soldier, civilian employee, or contract employee of the Army
- N, is used for a sailor, civilian employee, or contract employee of the Navy
- F, is used for an airman, civilian employee, or contract employee of the Air Force
- M, is used for a Marine, civilian employee, or contract employee of the Marine Corps
- G, is used for a Coast Guardsman, civilian employee, or contract employee of the Coast Guard
- Z, is used for a National Guard service member or civilian employee of either branch (both Army National Guard and Air National Guard), even when on federal active duty status or deployed overseas.
- D, indicates a civilian or contract employee of the Department of Defense not falling into one of the categories above
- H, is used for the Department of Homeland Security (not including the Coast Guard)
- S, is used for the Department of State
- O, indicates a person not falling into one of the categories above (such as non DOD civilians and members of coalition or allied forces).

Field 3 is the VISION ID, which identifies the photographer, videographer or graphic artist. All photographers, videographers, graphic artists, photojournalists, broadcasters, public affairs, and other personnel involved in the creation of official DoD imagery shall be assigned a Vision ID. Each originator’s VISION ID is established by DIMOC through their website - www.defenseimagery.mil. You can request a VISION ID through this website right now, if you want, under the customer service section.

Field 4 is the sequential number for the production of the image or unit of video in sequential order beginning with 001 for each day. Numbering should follow the approximate order in which each unit of media was acquired or originated by the person identified in Fields 3 and 4 on the day identified in Field 1, starting with 001 and continuing consecutively as necessary up to 999. The intent is that no two units of media are assigned identical VIRINS.

Examples:

- An example of a VIRIN for a still image recorded by Army Sergeant John Smith, with a VISION ID of YG767 and consisting of the tenth image selected on Jan 30, 2012, is: 120130-A-YG767-010.
- An example of a VIRIN for the third videotape recorded by Air Force Sergeant John Reed, with a VISION ID of PK898 that was shot on June 10, 2012 is: 120610-F-PK898-003.
Conclusion

It is not only important to have caption information with each image or video, but to ensure the information is correct. VI products can be delayed without the proper caption information, keeping valuable information from reaching commanders. Time matters. Valuable time can be wasted trying to gather the right information after the fact. Ensure your shop understands how important caption information is so the information gets to the right person at the right time.
References and Additional Resources

AP Stylebook (2013)
DODI 5040.02 (2011)