
Chapter One

Before You Begin

Many of us can speak easily and even fluently about our experiences, but when we are asked to write them down, we suddenly become wordless.

That may be one reason that photo albums are so popular. No need to struggle with writing—the pictures say it all. Or, do they?

Photos, however interesting or well-preserved, cannot convey the meaning of your story over time. Think of the photographs in antique shops. Each unknown face that looks out at you once had a whole story—yet who tells, or knows, it now? Sure, you can see it's a wedding portrait, but were the couple in love? Did they have children? Did they live into old age together or die young? The photo is a mute remnant of a story once fully known. Without words, the story has already been lost.



Every unidentified face is a story lost, a whole life lived—but now forgotten.

Don't worry about your stories getting lost. With the *The Photo Scribe*, you can learn to:

■ **write clear, meaningful, and interesting narratives** that will continue to tell your story for as long as

there is someone to read it.

- **deepen and expand the stories behind the photos in your albums** by adding background information and interpretation.

- **preserve the stories you have no pictures for** though you realize these stories, too, are so necessary for understanding who you are, who your family is.

Writing down the story behind your photographs—your lifestory or your family’s—shouldn’t intimidate you. Photoscribing can be as creative and as fulfilling as designing layouts or taking pictures. If you can learn to do these, you can learn to photoscribe.

Narratives in Your Photo Album

Your photo albums already have a narrative or storyline. Narrative can be told by

- the few or the many photos you’ve collected.
- the words you write.
- a combination of both.

Your albums, even without words, already communicate a story of your life and of your family and

When you know your story, you know who you are.

friends as they appear in the images and scenes of your photos. This image-based narrative, however, is minimal because photos can capture only a small part of any story. There are also many gaps and omissions in the stories your albums tell: the camera wasn’t handy, the film was damaged, or you just forgot to take a picture. Photoscribing allows you to fill these gaps and to elaborate on the image-based narrative.

There are two narrative forms photo scribes use to create lifestory photo albums that tell the whole story.

They are the photo caption* and the cameo narrative.

1. Photo captions are the information labels placed near photos as brief phrases or bulleted lists. Captions provide the basic names and dates and serve as clues to the narrative of your story. You probably find it easy enough to write this sort of caption in your albums:

Mom and her date going to senior prom
at Central High, 1964



“Photographs afford us a
glimpse back in history.”

—Martha Stewart

When you annotate* basic info like this in an album, you assure that the basic **who, what, when,** and **where** of a photo are not lost. *The Photo Scribe* will show you how to do more: how to write an effective photo caption in your own words and how to avoid the *dichés** that seem jazzy now but convey little meaning over time. (See pp. 48-49, 85-86.)

2. Cameo narratives are short narratives (usually 50–150 words long) that are paired with photos or created to fill the story gap where there is no picture. A bare-bones caption adds a bit to the story your photo already tells—but not much. The larger story involves the **why** and **how**, as well as the **who, what, when,** and **where**. Was this a “big date” for Amy and Danny or just a pleasant social evening? Were there hopes and dreams being played out that night? Without a word-based narrative, the viewer—and that could be you in a few years—has to supply her own guesses about “prom night.” She has access to none of the multiple layers of meaning that made up the unique story of Amy and Danny that night in 1964.

“The story is about you.”

—Horace