Interpreting Photographs

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Photographs frequently feature as a visual resource in the geography classroom. Students today are exposed to visual images every day, within and beyond the classroom, so it is important to help them develop a more critical eye to interpret photographs geographically.

Photographs are often taken for specific purposes. Students need to consider how these purposes may affect their interpretation of the issue or aspect that the photographs are trying to portray. In addition, photographs provide a small and selective view. It is important therefore that students can understand the broader context in which the photograph is situated.

Geographers use several types of photographs, including ground-level photographs, oblique and vertical aerial photographs, and satellite images. Whereas vertical aerial photos and satellite images are more similar to maps (they are useful for portraying information about patterns across large areas of space), ground-level and oblique aerial photos require rather different interpretation skills.
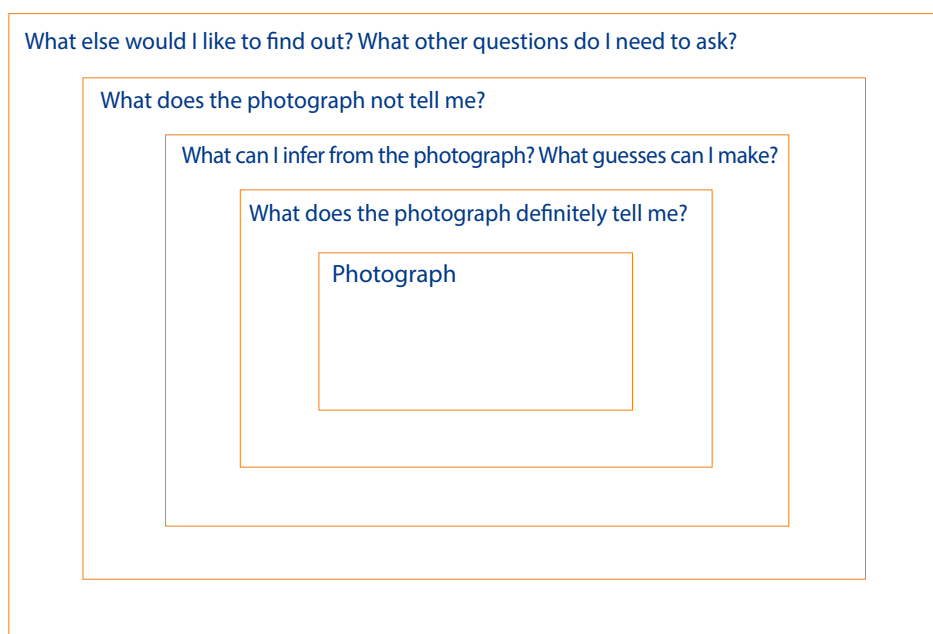
Layers of inference

One strategy to help students interpret photographs critically is the layers of inference framework. This framework encourages students to first identify the literal meanings in photographs, then draw on their prior knowledge to build inferences and predictions.

The purposes of using the layers of inference framework are to encourage students to:

- examine photographs closely to identify specific features
- draw on their prior knowledge to make inferences or informed guesses or predictions
- become aware that the photographs present only partial evidence
- be curious and ask questions
- be critical by considering both what is shown and what is not shown (adapted from Roberts, 2013, p.155).

Teachers can support students to analyse photographs using the layers of inference framework using either a *graphic organiser or as a template*.

What else would I like to find out? What other questions do I need to ask?

What does the photograph not tell me?

What can I infer from the photograph? What guesses can I make?

What does the photograph definitely tell me?

Photograph

Layers of inference framework graphic organiser

The following procedure for using the layers of inference framework involves three sequential steps (adapted from Roberts, 2013). These steps can be used by individual students, but the process is strengthened by peer collaboration. A Year 10 student work sample for Geographies of human wellbeing is provided.

1. Examine the photograph and any available contextual information for the photograph. This is often outlined in a caption.

2. Answer the layers of inference questions starting with the inner questions and proceeding to the outer layers in turn. If possible, students work collaboratively to discuss and write their ideas and questions in the framework.

3. Discuss responses to questions in turn and have students share their ideas and questions.

Source: Text extracted from Literacy Teaching Toolkit: Reading and interpreting visual resources in Geography on May 15th, 2022. https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/english/literacy/Pages/reading-and-interpreting-visual-resources-in-geography.aspx

Photograph
What does the photograph definitely tell me?
What can I infer from the photograph? What guesses can I make?
What does the photograph not tell me?
What else would I like to find out? What other questions do I need to ask?

Layers of inference framework template

Food riots across Africa between 2007-2008

Source: https://www.relocationafrica.com/south-africa-could-face-food-riots-as-drought-pushes-prices-higher/

What does the photograph definitely tell me?
People are protesting against 'high food prices' and 'tariff increase'.

What can I infer from the photograph? What guesses can I make?
They are unhappy about the high costs of living. Food prices may have increased due to droughts (inferred from source link).

What does the photograph not tell me?
Why was there drought? Were there other reasons for the high food prices?

What else would I like to find out? What other questions do I need to ask?
Why were there food riots across Africa? What about the food security situation now?

ACTIVITY 1: Photo Interpretation

A coastal fishing village in Mumbai, India 2016

Photo: L Chaffer

What does the photograph definitely tell me?
What can I infer from the photograph? What guesses can I make?
What does the photograph not tell me?
What else would I like to find out? What other questions do I need to ask?

ACTIVITY 2: Photo interpretation

Impact of flooding – Tuggerah Lakes, Central Coast 2021

Source: Central Coast Aero Club - Andy Smith Photography

What does the photograph definitely tell me?
What can I infer from the photograph? What guesses can I make?
What does the photograph not tell me?
What else would I like to find out? What other questions do I need to ask?