GUIDE FOR WRITING IMAGE CAPTIONS

Describe the objects/information that's most important for understanding the image from a visual perspective in 30 words or less.

DO...

TRY NOT TO...

LOOK CAREFULLY

Start by asking yourself what you notice first. It might be helpful to describe the image from left to right, bottom to top, front to background.

START WITH...

Don't start your caption with 'a photo', 'this image', 'this view' etc. just start describing what you see.

INCLUDE...

In general terms, **any person represented** (e.g., soldier, maid, god/goddess) or **thing/object** (e.g., dress, shoe, brooch, dinosaur, medium), and if it belongs to a **type or has a purpose** (e.g., 'wine' vessel or 'communion' cup).

Any **actions/events** taking place or represented (e.g., a wedding, a funeral, a game, dancing, death).

Any **aesthetic or physical features** that stand out such as size (e.g., miniature, large), texture, patterns (e.g., paisley, tartan), style (e.g., ancient, modern), colours, or shapes (e.g., symmetrical, asymmetrical).

INCLUDE...

Do **not** include specific/detailed info captured by the object description: who (e.g., specific persons, technical or complicated terms for objects, species, materials), where (e.g., country/city), and when (e.g., numerical date ranges). Exclude abstract themes/concepts (e.g, health, spiritualism, colonialism, justice).

IF UNSURE ABOUT TERMS CHECK...

Check our additional tips sheet and suggested thesauri.

REVIEW YOUR CAPTION

Does it complement the keywords and the object description?
Is it succinct?
Does it capture enough info to understand the image?
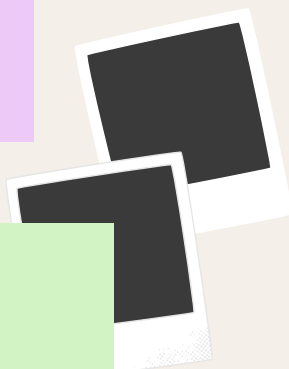Would a seven-year-old understand your caption?

ADITIONAL TIPS FOR WRITING IMAGE CAPTIONS

DESCRIBING PEOPLE

Race/Ethnicity
When necessary for understanding the image, describe skin-tone. Where definite use terms: e.g., Black, Latino, Asian, and when not, use 'light-skinned'/'dark-skinned') (Museum of Contemporary Art (US), n.d.).

Gender
'When necessary for understanding the image, gender may be described, but no assumptions should be made. Default should be "person" except where gender is clearly evident and verifiable' (Museum of Contemporary Art (US), n.d.).

Age
'Use terms that indicate age: baby, toddler, child, youth, teen, young adult, adult, older person' (Museum of Contemporary Art (US), n.d.).

FORMATTING

Text in an image
Transcribe text as it appears in the image/use quotation marks (Museum of Contemporary Art (US), n.d.; The National Gallery (US), 2022).

Sentence structure/grammar
Use complete sentences, not fragmented. Use particles like 'a' or 'the' as needed (The National Gallery (US), 2022).

Orientation/context
'Use the first person when describing orientation: "our left"; "she faces us" (not "the viewer")' (The National Gallery (US), 2022).

'Depending on context, a description of the location/setting and the subject may be needed' (Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum (US), 2019).

Links to Thesauri/Resources:
V&A's LGBTQ+ terminology, the Queer Metadata Collective project (North America focused), the Homosaurus (International LGBTQ+ Linked Data Vocabulary), and Carissa Chew's Inclusive Terminology project.

References:
Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum (US). (2019, April 19). Cooper Hewitt Guidelines for Image Description.
Museum of Contemporary Art (US). (n.d.). MCA Guidelines for Describing. Retrieved 3 May 2023.
The National Gallery (US). (2022, August 28). Collection Image Descriptions: Web Accessibility. National Gallery of Art. https://www.nga.gov/visit/accessibility/collection-image-descriptions.html