

# *Sample Pages*

## *Pictures vs Words*

A Photographer's Guide to  
Titles and Other Useful Text



*Kas Stone*

# Sample Pages

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### Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1 - Background	3
Chapter 2 - The case against words	5
Chapter 3 - The case for words	9
Chapter 4 - How to title a picture	13
Chapter 5 - Longer image-related text: captions, etc.	21
Chapter 6 - Text inside pictures	27
Some final words	33
Author bio & dedication	43

# Sample Pages



Expressive pictures often suggest several choices of interpretation that can be offered to the viewer in the titles. If we want the viewer to treat this image as a study of colour and texture, we might title it **Woodland Tapestry**. Or we could focus attention on the straggly old tree, still upright and beautiful amid the tangled undergrowth, in which case an

anthropomorphic title like **The Veteran** might be suitable. Or we could add another layer of meaning with the title **A Tangled Web**, a literary reference to the famous stanza from Sir Walter Scott's poem about the complications that can follow from a simple lie: "Oh what a tangled web we weave When first we practise to deceive!" (*Marmion*, 1808).

# Sample Pages

## Pictures vs Words

### A Photographer's Guide to Titles and Other Useful Text

We all know that “a picture is worth a thousand words.” Yet somewhere along the way this simple piece of wisdom became, for many photographers, an excuse to reject words altogether and to insist that pictures “speak for themselves.” In adopting such a view, I believe we miss a golden opportunity. Words, when used *well*, can be powerful allies in our quest to make more meaningful pictures.

In this book we will explore the pictures-versus-words debate from both sides. I admit at the outset to favouring a pictures-*and*-words conclusion. However, I am delighted to concede there is a strong case for the opposing point of view – which sets the stage for a lively debate.

#### *How this book is organized*

After a brief history lesson (Chapter 1), we kick off the debate, exploring the cons (Chapter 2) and the pros (Chapter 3) of pairing words with pictures. Having reached our conclusions, we then address the challenge of creating effective titles (Chapter 4) and longer forms of text (Chapter 5) to accompany our images. We finish with a discussion of the expressive power of words *inside* the image space (Chapter 6).

Let's begin by clarifying some terminology about words as they relate to our pictures:

**Word**, a meaningful element of communication formed by a combination of written characters or sounds;

**Text**, used synonymously with “Words”; sometimes referring to a particular system of symbols that makes up the written language, or to a large body of words (e.g. the text of a play);

**Title**, a single word or several words that encapsulate the content or meaning of an image;

**Caption**, a few sentences that contribute a longer commentary about an image;

**Statement**, several paragraphs or pages that introduce a collection of images in a gallery exhibition or photo book.

Titles are this book's primary focus because they are a source of frustration for so many photographers, and often are responsible for triggering the pictures-versus-words debate.

Every picture used in this book for illustration is accompanied by a caption with an explanatory backstory or rationale for the picture's title, or even alternative titles to consider. Most of these pictures are landscape photographs (because that is what I do), but the arguments and conclusions apply equally to other photographic genres – as they do, indeed, to *all* the visual arts.

# Sample Pages



This semi-abstract picture of an old shed door in winter is intended as a study of rectangles, textures and colour. A title isn't necessary, and might diminish a viewer's experience of the picture. Consider how differently you interpret it with each of these titles:

*Winter Shed*  
*Patchwork Portal*  
*The Cows Are Gone*  
*Red, White & Blue*  
*Rectangle Study*

Can you think of any title that might work?

# Sample Pages

## Chapter 2 - The case *against* words

Master landscape photographer Ansel Adams eloquently voiced one side of this debate: “A true photograph need not be explained, nor can it be contained in words.” There may be some question about precisely what he meant by a “true” photograph, but the general tenor of his message is that if a photograph is any good, it can stand on its own and requires no supplementary text in order to be understood or appreciated. What’s more, his statement suggests that an image’s expressive power surpasses that of words, and runs the risk of being constrained by them. Much food for thought in one short sentence! Let’s dig a little deeper.

### *Pictures shouldn’t need words*

First, I think we can all agree that a “bad” photograph cannot be rescued by words, any more than it can by Photoshop®. So we will assume throughout the following discussion that we are talking about “good” photographs – ones that are not only technically and compositionally well executed, but also express the photographer’s emotional, intellectual and/or aesthetic response to a subject, rather than merely documenting the subject.

The kind of photograph that can “speak for itself” is as competently crafted from visual elements as an equivalent piece of writing is from verbal elements. Where the writer speaks to his readers using vocabulary and grammar to select and arrange words on a page, the photographer speaks to her viewers with visual elements that she frames and arranges using composition and camera/computer technique. Their tools are different, but the objective is the same: to convey ideas, evoke emotions, create moods, tell stories, elicit aesthetic pleasure, and so on. That is, they both aim to *communicate effectively*. So, it can be argued, if a photograph communicates effectively, it has no need for words. And a photographer can rightly claim that her skill as a visual artist absolves her from any need for wordsmithing.

### *Differences of interpretation*

The success of this communication depends as much on the visual literacy of the viewer as it does on the craftsmanship of the photographer. The viewer must be able to interpret the visual content of a picture and construct *meaning* from it. To do this, he must abstract from the specific physical elements in the picture (what the picture is *of*) to the more universal concepts they represent (what the picture is *about*) – from a single tree standing in a snowy field, for instance, to the concept of solitude, or loneliness, or strength. The picture becomes metaphorical: the World represented by the snowy field, and the Tree personifying whoever or whatever the photographer or viewer wishes it to.

Of course it is quite possible that the viewer’s interpretation may not be the one intended by the photographer; their interpretations may differ as a result of individual experiences, personalities and cultures. But does this matter? Some would argue that once a picture is out there in the world, the maker’s intent is irrelevant and the viewer should be permitted to interpret the picture and ascribe to it whatever meaning he chooses. If so, a title or explanatory text can be seen as distracting, restrictive, or even misleading. Hence the decision of some visual artists to use *Untitled* in an attempt to liberate their artwork – and their viewers – from the shackles and potential pitfalls of words.

### *Pictures are universal*

Words face another significant handicap not shared by pictures: they are dependent on the language in which they are written. A non-English speaker, like the illiterate peasant, cannot grasp the subtleties of irony or grandeur in an English text, but will be at no such disadvantage when viewing Elliott Erwitt’s candid street photos or Ansel Adams’ grand landscapes. In short, the language of pictures is universal, at least within a broad cultural context, whereas the language of words is confined to speakers of that language.

# Sample Pages



## ***The Road Not Taken***

This title pairs my image with Robert Frost's famous 1916 poem – a wistful narrative about choices and regrets in life. The image was made one December day in New Brunswick's Sackville Waterfowl Park, the cold, drizzly weather entirely suited to the reflective nature of the poem. This park is across the road from Mount Allison University, where the latest

generation of young people is making similar life choices more than a hundred years later. The title's poetic allusion resonates strongly with the general public (if print sales are any indication), especially with people who recognize the location.



# Sample Pages



## **Sea Change**

Let's walk through the titling process for this simple seascape. First, I identify the What-When-Where elements in the picture: stormy weather, big waves, salty spray, noisy wind, dark sky, a gull, October, afternoon, White Point Beach, Nova Scotia. Then I consider my personal response to the scene: excited by the tumultuous wind and waves; awed by the power of the sea; happy to have this popular beach all to myself; happy to be here rather than in my studio that day; entertained by the gull fishing (or playing?) in the surf. Then, abstracting from the specifics of this

particular scene, I write down words relating to stormy seas in general, check my thesaurus for similar words, do a web search for expressions and idioms, and read more about the terminology used for storm classification (e.g. the Beaufort scale). This process leads to several possible titles: **Angry Sea, Atlantic Mood, Storm Force, Wind Play** (all titles I have used before). In the end I choose **Sea Change** because it is a metaphor for a profound change in life (usually for the better). I hope in this way to draw viewers personally into the image.

# Sample Pages

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## ***Winter Walk***

This book is dedicated to my mother, Patricia Stone, a lifelong book-lover who taught me to love words too.