

## The Power of Photographs to Inspire Writing

### About the Author

A veteran of the Korean War, Hank Kellner is a retired Associate Professor of English currently based in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. He is the author of *125 Photos for English Composition Classes* (J. Weston Walch, 1978); *How to Be a Better Photographer* (J. Weston Walch, 1980); *Write What You See: 99 Photos to Inspire Writing* (Prufrock Press, 2009); and, with Elizabeth Guy, the co-author of *Reflect and Write: 300 Poems and Photographs to Inspire Writing* (Prufrock Press, 2013) His other writings and photographs have appeared in hundreds of publications nationwide.

## The Power of Photographs to Inspire Writing

*“Words and pictures can work together to communicate more powerfully than either alone.”*

William Albert Allard  
American Photographer

Show a photograph to a child, and the youngster will point to it, trace its image, and respond with a variety of emotions. Show another to an adult, and you get a frown, a smile, or a gesture—rarely will you draw a blank. Then show a photo, or a series of photos, to people at any level, and you’ll have more responses than you can handle. Soon your students will be scribbling poems and essays that will make you wonder why you hadn’t used this simple and obvious technique years earlier for stimulating the creative process.

Why do students respond so enthusiastically to graphic images? Here’s one theory. Early humans drew pictures on the walls of caves. That’s visual orientation, the kind of communication that doesn’t depend on the written word. Then along came paper and ink, and with them, word orientation. Meticulously copying texts, monks labored for centuries with this kind of mindset. True, they also embellished these works with colorful designs and images—the illuminated manuscript— but the text prevailed and the visual orientation of the cave was slowly being edged out by attention to the written word.

Then came the printing press followed by machines that could set type and reproduce images that would have astounded the medieval monks who labored in their cells. Later, during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, innovators discovered how to capture images on film, and still photographs and motion pictures were born. During the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, children in schools found themselves in groups called “Bluebirds” and “Robins,” where

they were encouraged to master the printed word, whatever the cost. Frozen in time, little Johnny and Betty roamed the pages of primary readers or scratched out weekly compositions on topics like “My Vacation” or “My Favorite Pet.”

Today the pendulum of history is swinging back toward an emphasis on visual images. The explosion that began with the invention of photography recalled our early attempts to communicate by drawing on the walls of caves. From still photography came motion pictures. Then came television, and what was a trickle burst into a torrent. It was, in a sense, a return to the cave. Finally, the digital revolution has converted the torrent of images into a tsunami that floods the senses and is virtually impossible to ignore.

Often maligned but never out of sight, these visual images captivate us. Show students a simple photograph of waves beating against the shore and you’ll be amazed by their responses. Some will recall memories of seaside childhoods; others will visualize sea stories, shipwrecks, mysteries of the deep, and more. Still others will venture into the abstract—the world of simile, metaphor, and personification—perhaps transcribing a bit of themselves into their writing.

For teachers who recognize the power of photographic images to inspire writing, the rewards are great. No longer will students complain, “I don’t know what to write about.” Why is this so? Perhaps it is because there is something magical about photographs; something that causes students to respond spontaneously and creatively; something that reaches into the subconscious and triggers responses.

One of the many good things about using photos to inspire writing in the classroom is that you do not have to look very far to discover suitable images. Consider,

for example, a simple photo of a light bulb and the ideas it triggered in the mind of Becky Brown, a student at Peak To Peak Charter School, Lafayette, Colorado.

**Inspiration**



So cheerful

Yet so grim

The inspiration hits

And the pencil caresses the paper

Turning dreams into realities

The words flow freely

Unhindered by the conscious mind,

Simply written as thought,

As fragments pierced together

From disorganization to art

The pencil writes still

As if it has a mind of its own

The words just keep coming

And you sit, helpless to stem the flow

Like the mouse versus the mountain

You keep your head down

Oblivious to the world

Until the poem is done

And the inspiration trickles away

Like the stream in the desert

It could be that digging into students for personal responses, abstract notions, creative concepts, and subconscious ideas is the real value of using photographs to inspire writing. But that is not the end. Photographs can also be used to teach such writing skills as sense impressions, cause and effect, and analysis.

No photograph is too simple or mundane to stimulate writing. Take, for example, a picture of the exterior of a deserted house. Gloomy and low-keyed, it lends itself to many interpretations. But it also makes possible the teaching of many skills. “What’s the difference,” you might ask, “between the appearance of the structure shown in the photo and the way it must have been when it was new? What do you think happened to the people who once lived in this house?” Responses will vary, of course, but quite often a student will come up with a gem like the following by Eve Milrod, a student at Baldwin Senior High School, Baldwin, New York.

**Scarred and Pitted**





The old house is scarred  
And pitted. It once  
was smooth and shiny.

Its windows are two eyes  
Gazing out at nowhere  
Devoid of glass.

Shadows lurk inside  
Reminders, it would seem  
Of long forgotten occupants.

Even a simple photo of a dog painted on a doorway can serve as inspiration for writing. A student of psychology, astronomy, and philosophy at Massbay College in Wellesley, Massachusetts, Rose Scherlis responded to this image with the following poem.

“The Dog With No Name.”

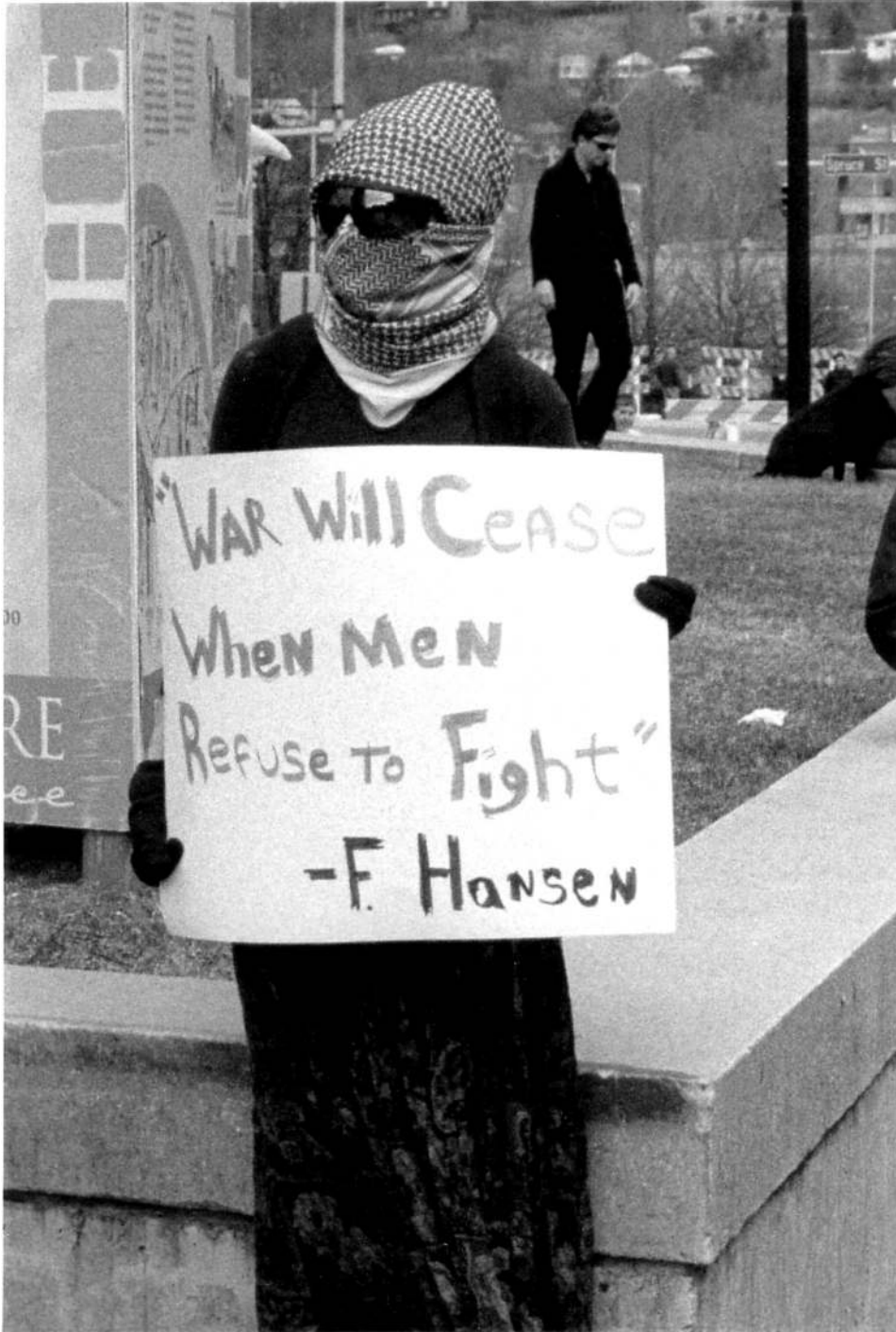


Your furry head peeked out from under the table  
So I dropped some fried plantain for you to enjoy  
You lived on a banana field in Costa Rica,  
And it was beautiful, but the pesticides  
For years underneath your delicate paws  
Had twisted them until they grew like poison ivy  
Bent in the wrong directions.  
Your ear was tattered, a page in a book  
With the corner folded down,  
Signs of an ongoing war

With a world so menacing  
When seen from way down there.  
But still your tail wagged  
Like a stick in the hand of a drummer,  
And your fur shone  
Mottled with brown splotches,  
Just puddles of mud  
Surrounding your two copper eyes.

Paired with such keywords as *dogs*, *loyalty*, *friend*, and *dedication*, this photo—or one that is similar—will trigger ideas leading to student writing, either poetry or prose. What’s more you can always add a quotation like this one by Gilda Radner to encourage even more creative thinking: *“I think dogs are the most amazing creatures; they give unconditional love. For me they are the role models for being alive.”*

And how about an exercise in point of view? Using the photo of the protester shown below, divide the class into groups of twos, and ask the members of each group to respond in writing from the point of view of either the woman holding the sign or an observer who disagrees with the sign’s message. Some students may choose to do this in the form of a dialogue. If you really like to organize things, arrange other appropriate photographs into such opposing themes as children and senior citizens, urban and rural, handcrafting and mass production, leisure and industry—whatever will elicit responses from student writers.



Perhaps by now you are thinking of other ways in which you can inspire writing by using photographs as stimuli. Here are just a few. (1) Use family photos to encourage writing about parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, (2) Use photographs to trigger the writing of haiku, (3) Create an anthology containing student photos and the written

works the photos inspired, (4) Use photographs to encourage students to act out what they see in the photos before they write about them, (5) Simply project several photographs on a screen without comment and let the students take it from there.

In the long run, what approach you take really doesn't matter. When you use photographs to inspire writing, the images speak for themselves. What's more, the poetry or prose your students will create will be more honest and meaningful than most other student writing you have read.