

Becoming a Researcher

Reading Objects Teaching Pack 3: Photographs

Guidance

The purpose of this pack is to offer activities and resources to aid a teaching workshop to undergraduate or postgraduate researchers new to Special Collections. Activities begin with a detailed reading of specific photographs held in Special Collections and are designed to engage students in the content, context, structure and materiality of items. The aim of the session is to provide students with the questions and tools to rigorously read other photographs they may encounter during their research, and to critically distinguish these from other types of material.

In line with the Research Skill Development Framework used by the University of Leeds, the aim for this teaching session is to encourage an increased level of student confidence and autonomy when approaching primary materials, and to facilitate independent research.

At the end of the pack you will find links to related resources in Special Collections, a key questions sheet, and an activity handout that can be used during the session.

Session overview

Students work in small groups (of no more than 5), each group focusing on one photograph. Progressing through 2 short activities, students gain experience of the skills needed to interpret photographs in an archival research context.

Learning Objectives:

At the end of the teaching session students should be able to:

- Critically examine a photograph taking into account its content, context, structure and physical properties.
- Interrogate the purpose for which the photograph has been taken and ask broader questions about photography, including the extent to which photographers construct or record the scene.
- Consider how the published context of the photograph (for example on a newspaper page) affects how it is received.
- Take into account the physical properties of a photograph and their effects.

Planning a Session:

Teaching sessions using Special Collections material are generally held in the Brotherton Room. This can comfortably accommodate up to 20 students looking at material.

Information on booking the Brotherton Room is available on the [Library Website](#).



Selecting material:

Special Collections holds a large number of photographs within its diverse collections. Collections with a significant number of photographs include the [Godfrey Bingley photographic archive](#), which contains around 10,000 images taken between 1884 and 1913, the [Liddle Collection](#), and the [West Yorkshire Playhouse archive](#). There are also materials relating to photographic controversies including the [Cottingley Fairies Collection](#). Images from some other collections have also been digitised. To find only these do an advanced search and click on 'including digital images' in the digital media tab.

A list of photographs in Special Collections which have been successfully used in similar activities is also available.

External Links

- The National Media Museum website includes digitised photographs, information of the museum's photography collections and information on the history of photography:
<http://www.nationalmediamuseum.org.uk/collection>
- V&A Photography Collection <https://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/photographs>

Suggested secondary reading

- Students can read [Special Collections Research Skills resources](#) in advance of their visit to Special Collections.
- Roland Barthes, '[The Photographic Message](#)' (1961), in *Image, Music, Text*. [Library catalogue record: <http://lib.leeds.ac.uk/record=b1043685>]. This essay examines ways of reading press photographs.
- Richard Salkeld, *Reading Photographs: An Introduction to the Theory and Meaning of Images* [Library catalogue record: <http://lib.leeds.ac.uk/record=b3344606>].

Lesson Plan:

| | | |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|------------|
| Introduction | Talking to group | 5 minutes |
| Activity 1: Content | Small Group Discussion | 15 minutes |
| Activity 2: Context | Small Group Discussion | 15 minutes |
| Groups discuss findings | Presentation to whole group | 10 minutes |
| Round up | Whole Group Discussion | 5 minutes |

Introductions:

Powerpoint introductions to Special Collections for use in teaching sessions are available [here](#).



Case Studies: Examining Photographs in detail

ACTIVITY 1: Content

Groups look in at photographs right side up. Use the following questions as starting points for discussion:

1. What do you think is going on in these pictures? Why do you think this?
2. Are there any clues as to where the pictures were taken?
3. Can you guess which year the pictures were taken in? What makes you think this?
4. What kind of photographs are these? Do you have any thoughts on what kind of photographer might have taken them and why they might have photographed this particular scene?
5. To what extent does a photographer construct as much as record the scene in any photograph? Think about decisions including: the choice of angle, the distance or proximity of the shot to the subject, how much background is included, whether all aspects of the photograph are equally in focus.
6. Can you see any evidence of editing on the photographs? Why do you think this might have been done? What would be the effect of taking one element out of a picture and isolating it?

ACTIVITY 2: Context

1. Read any contextual information about the photographs and revisit the questions above. Does this information change any of your answers?
2. Look carefully at the reverse side of the photographs.
 - a) What, if any, information is recorded here?
 - b) What does this information suggest about why these photographs were taken and how they were used?
 - c) Does the purpose for which the photograph was taken change your opinion of the content of the photograph in any way?
 - d) How might the purpose of the photograph affect how it was taken and/or edited?



Becoming a Researcher: Photographs

Handout 1: Activities and Questions

ACTIVITY 1: Content

Look in detail at these photographs and think about the following questions

1. What do you think is going on in this picture? Why do you think this?
2. Are there any clues as to where the picture was taken?
3. Can you guess which year the picture was taken in? What makes you think this?
4. What kind of photograph is this? Do you have any thoughts on what kind of photographer might have taken this and why they might have taken a picture of this particular scene?
5. To what extent does the photographer construct as much as record the scene in the photograph? Think about decisions including: the choice of angle, the distance or proximity of the shot to the subject, how much background is included, whether all aspects of the photograph are equally in focus.
6. Can you see any evidence of editing on the photograph itself? Why do you think this might have been done? What would be the effect of taking one element out of the picture and isolating it?

ACTIVITY 2: Context

1. Read the contextual information about the photographs and revisit the questions above. Does this information change any of your answers?
2. Look carefully at the reverse side of the two photographs.
 - e) What does this information suggest about why these photographs were taken and how they were used?
 - f) Does the purpose for which the photograph was taken change your opinion of the content of the photograph in any way?
 - g) How might the purpose of the photograph affect how it was taken and/or edited?



Becoming a Researcher: Photographs

Handout 2: Key Questions to Ask

Content

- What does the photograph show?
- What does the photograph not show? Has the frame of the photograph isolated the subject from its context?
- How is the subject approached – is it a close-up for example or do we see some of the background to the subject? Think about the angle chosen by the photographer and whether all of the elements of the picture are equally in focus.
- Is the photograph on its own, or is it positioned as part of an article? Is there any written text that describes the scene?

Context

- Who took the photograph?
- When was the photograph taken? Where was the photograph taken?
- Why did they take the photograph? Was it commissioned? Was it for personal use? For a newspaper? For an advertisement?
- Who donated the photograph to the archive, or (if it's not an archived photograph) who owns the photograph now?
- Are there any marks or stamps on the photograph which give clues as to its context?

Structure and Materials

- How would you describe the colour, texture, or quality of the photograph? Does this tell us anything about the photographer or the purpose of the photograph?
- What effects, if any, has the photographer used? Have they chosen to photograph in colour or in black and white? Has this been made as an aesthetic or a practical decision?
- Can you tell how the photograph has been used by its condition? Has it been hanging on a wall and damaged by sunlight? Do pin marks suggest that it has been displayed on a wall or noticeboard? Has it been cut to fit into someone's purse or wallet and carried around with them? Has it been used as a form of identification?

