

Writing Prompt 2: Every Picture Tells a Story

Marion Winik and the Richard Rodriguez and Jamaica Kincaid all use photographs as a way of entering memories and scenes with beloved characters. They take the two-dimensional object of a photo and imbue it with texture and meaning, story and color.

For this prompt you will find an old picture of yourself and proceed to reconstruct the time in which the picture was taken. Choosing the right photo is crucial. Perhaps it was taken at a turning point—just before you moved to another city, or just before your parents were divorced and you were on vacation with the family. This moment should be meaningful and the photo should evoke a specific time and rich memories. Travel back to that time, recalling, with rich sensory language, the sights and smells, the important thing that had just happened, and who you were then. Who took this picture? What was the occasion? When you look at this photo now, as a more mature person, what do you think about that time in your life?

These are some of the questions your mini-essay should answer. Feel free to directly describe the photo and tell us the story of how it was taken. This prompt should trigger a short essay with a beginning, middle, and an end.

(With thanks to B. Minh Nguyen and Porter Shreve, who helped inspire this prompt)

Option B, to lead to Essay 1, the Portrait:

Another option is to write a segmented essay that includes many photos. These can be actual photos, or imaginary ones: what the camera would have seen if you'd been caught on film in this particular moment. This will be a fragmented essay with short, distilled, compact paragraphs that pack a punch. Try not to devote more than a paragraph to each memory. This about the art of concision—of saying the most in the least amount of space. See Marion Winik's "Sixteen Pictures of my Father."

Either Option A or Option B might easily develop into Essay 1, so pick material you find compelling that you are likely to want to stick with.