

What's in a Name?

Stan Johnston, 12/04

In our Club competitions and exhibitions, you are asked to provide a short title for each of your photographs. Some purists think that an image should stand on its own without any verbiage, but a good title often helps the viewer appreciate the photo.

Many titles simply state the subject, like "Waterfall" or "Bald Eagle." Sometimes they provide a little more detail about the person, place, or thing in the photograph than might be obvious to a casual observer, like "Mt. Shuksan," or "Lunar New Year in Hong Kong." Some photographers defiantly refuse to provide much information, insisting that the viewer accept the visual image on its own terms, with titles like "Flower #3," or even "Untitled #5."

Some images are so abstract that they cry out for an explanation in the title, like "Frost on a Windowpane," or "Close-up of Weathered Wood." Some of us can better appreciate the beauty of the color and texture once we get past wondering "what the heck am I looking at?"

A title can suggest a mood or interpretation for a subject, like "Early Morning Stillness" or "Fun in the Sun." A title can be a literary or cultural allusion that evokes a whole series of connections, like "There Is No Joy In Mudville," or "Who Was That Masked Man?"

A title can help create humor in a photograph. One way is for the title to be a caption indicating what the person (or animal, etc.) in the photo might be saying or thinking, with titles like "How Did We Get Into This Mess?," or "You Can't Have It, It's Mine!"

The right title can add to the the viewer's pleasure in an image. What kind of titles do you favor? Do you ever write the title first and then go out to capture an image to go with it?