



## The Stranger Teaching My Class

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By itself, teaching young journalists and photojournalists basic caption writing is a challenge. Teaching students to establish a relationship with a subject, one that leads to meaty captions with substantial quotes, is a much, much bigger challenge. By helping students harvest the lessons from the wildly popular photo blogger Brandon Stanton (*Humans of New York*), students learn to adapt his interview techniques to beef up their photo captions and stories. As a result, captions improve and I have a project my students love.

In my second news photography class at Eastern Illinois University (Photojournalism – JOU 3001) I make extensive use of guest speakers. However, my most impactful speaker is an award-winning photographer whom my students will most likely never meet.

My “guest speaker” has no journalistic training and only a self-described rudimentary understanding of photography. He was also let go from his previous job as a bond salesman. Despite this he is said to be today’s most-viewed living photographer. He is also great at teaching some of the skills all young students struggle with.

### The WHO:

Brandon Stanton is a successful and talented photographer whose work is easily accessible on the wildly popular photo blog *Humans of New York* [<http://www.humansofnewyork.com/>] or on Facebook at [<https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/>].

Collections of his books have cracked the *New York Times*’ best seller list more than once). His photographs are shared, retweeted and reposted thousands, sometimes tens of thousands, of times.

### WHY him:

Stanton has a lot to teach aspiring journalists about how to approach, interview and establish a relationship with his subjects. This is the secret of his work.

Establishing a relationship with a subject, whether photojournalism or a text-driven feature story, requires much of the same thing – trust. As a photographer, it hard to fake reality in terms of what you can coax from your subject – even with Photoshop it is hard to fake rapport with your subject. If your subject is uptight and uncomfortable, your photos will show it. As a writer, you want insightful information and quotes that propel the story. Without trust and comfort, a story/photo will be bland and uninspiring. For photographs, captions should be thought of as mini-stories. They need to be as compelling as the photos themselves. This is where Stanton excels. His ability to disarm and draw from people their “best stuff” is something that young journalists struggle with.

Consider this Stanton photo example from his Facebook page [<https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/1406879962719433/?type=3&theater>]:

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### Humans of New York Example



*"I don't communicate my feelings. My entire family was like that. We've always sort of just swept things under the rug. I think that's what makes me a good ER nurse. I don't take things home with me. I can separate myself emotionally and just focus on what needs to be done. But it also makes me pretty bad at relationships. I met Gavin while traveling in Europe last year. We traveled together for two weeks, then he came home and met my family, and then we went to Mexico for a week. After that we talked every day. Gavin was the opposite of me. He was warm and happy and touchy. He'd even tell random strangers that they looked nice. But I pulled back the moment we got too close. Because I don't like the feeling of being dependent on someone. Gavin was killed in a car crash at the end of January. He was alone in England and I didn't even find out until days after it happened. I've tried to handle it like I always do. I try not to think about it or talk about it. But it's not working so well this time. I'm taking things more personally at work. If a patient comes in the ER with similar injuries, I always ask myself: 'What if this was Gavin?'"*

#### The WHAT:

Make your subjects comfortable so they relax and tell you about their world.

It took me two semesters to perfect a way to best use Stanton's work to make my students better in approaching strangers and making a strong photo while also getting the great quote and information that is the hallmark of *Humans of New York*. The marriage of strong photography and in-depth captions makes the sum stronger than the whole of the parts.

### Portrait EIU (Eastern Illinois University).

[<https://www.facebook.com/PortraitEIU/>]

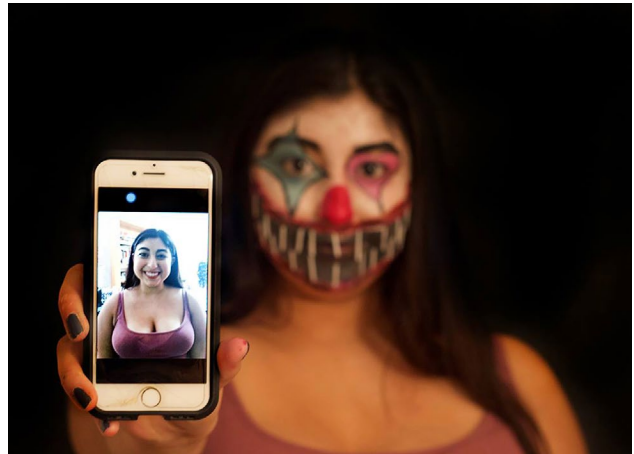


09.13.2017

*"I have about a 7-10 minute drive to campus each morning. During that time, I say a short prayer for the safety of my fellow police officers and the public we serve. Then I turn up the radio and hope someone has already gotten the coffee pot going."*

— Kent Martin

Martin is the chief of university police.  
(photo by Analicia Haynes)



10.19.17

*"I did not have any experience, like none, so I was slapping makeup on. I had ideas in my mind and I did my own makeup and everyone was like, 'Wow that looks really cool.'"*

— Eli Garza

Eli Garza describing her latest Halloween makeup – a hobby that started in high school and is now her passion.

(photo by Melissa Jabek)



10.04.2016

*"No matter how much or how little you wear, rape is never OK. I have friends who went through sexual assault, and it's important to be an ally and stand up for what's right."*  
— Abbey Schneid

(photo by Molly Dotson)

### The HOW:

**Step 1.** On the first day of class, I familiarize students with Stanton and his work by showing a six-minute video. [<http://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/video/humans-york-photog-viral-20550669>] Students then go to his website, select three of his photographs and write, for the next class, 100-plus words explaining why these photographs are successful.

**Step 2.** At the next class meeting, each student shows a favorite photo, critiques it and explains why the photo is a success. We talk about technique: lens choices, depth of field, clean backgrounds, etc. Then we talk about the photos and amazing captions. It is often at this point, a student will say something like, "I don't understand how he gets complete strangers to open up – to share such personal stuff."

**Step 3.** This is where the real learning begins. Stanton shares his secrets during a presentation he made at University College Dublin. In the 15-minute video, he makes several great points and observations. [[www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPxzIGPrM3A](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPxzIGPrM3A)]

I increasingly find that young journalists are shy and awkward at approaching and interviewing strangers. Blame whatever you want: No Child Left Behind, cell phones, climate change? Whatever the reason, over the last few years these social media natives have become very bad at being social in person.

The first point Stanton makes in his video is that he used to "suck" at approaching people. But, perse-

vering through sheer failure and rejection, he figured a few things out. "It's the atmosphere of taking kind of fear and strangeness and uncomfortableness and turning that into an atmosphere of intimacy where people feel comfortable disclosing in a short amount of time," he says. He explains how he establishes trust and comfort in a short amount of time.

He then discusses how he constructs his interviews. Open-ended questions are one example of his technique; "What's your greatest struggle?" "Give one piece of advice." "What did you learn from that experience?" From those broad questions, he gets in-depth developed answers. He notes this technique allows him to find out things that no one else knows about the person. His lecture shows students how to construct a conversation that leads to great understanding, rather than an interrogation that doesn't allow the subject to be at ease.

**Step 4.** We discuss what each student got from the video. I ask one student to be the stenographer. Class observations are archived on a closed website used for the class.

**Step 5.** We also think about the presentation of the information in our quotes.

Collectively, the students decide that strict AP style for captions will not be effective for this project. They decide that the quote should come first, then the name of the person in the photo, then the photographer's name. Sometimes, the caption will call for a sentence that provides context necessary to understand the quote.

**Step 6.** The assignment.

Over the next 10 weeks (approximately every two weeks), students are assigned to make five photos for Portrait EIU, our website version of the Humans of New York. This is in addition to the many other things we are doing in class. Every subject photographed has to have a relationship with our university. Students are allowed to photograph one person they already know, which really helps them get in the swing of things for the first photo. The rest of their subjects have to be relative strangers. Students are required to photograph at least one student and one faculty/staff member. The remaining EIU strangers are to be defined by their interest and research.

Assignments are done outside of class time, meaning it does not use up valuable lab time in class. In the weeks that follow we spend maybe a half-hour every two weeks discussing the project. However, I often notice the students discussing the assignment



before and after class.

We use Facebook’s publishing tools to schedule and publish approximately every two days. Using the analytical tools (“insights” tab) provided by Facebook, students enjoy looking at each other’s work and enjoy trying to predict which photos will be most popular. Sometimes they nail the predictions, and sometimes they’re way off. Trying to understand what the audience will react to is an important part of this assignment.

	11.07.2017 "It really is my favorite part of my day. It's beyond peaceful, I love..."	1.5K	122	Sep Bria
	08.29.17 "It's pretty much a way out, without hurting yourself. But I mean y..."	1.3K	31	Sep Bria
	09.6.17 "I started working at the DEN (Daily Eastern News) this summer as a..."	1.2K	8	Sep Bria
	09.05.2017 "As a freshman you'll meet friends that you'll think will be your be..."	1.2K	82	Sep Bria
	08.31.2017 "I came to EIU because it was far away from home. I've been..."	1.9K	150	Sep Bria

(Facebook Stats: views/likes/shares)

### The take away

Where once they were cautious about engaging strangers after the assignment, I find students excited. I even have students asking if they can contribute to the website after the semester has closed. JOU 3001 (Photojournalism) is the second photo class of three offered in our department.

(Students can also take an independent study class in this area). The majority of the students in this course do not intend to become photojournalists. But through this assignment I have found, almost univer-

sally, they become better photographers and journalists. They adopt the techniques used so successfully by Brandon Stanton into their own arsenal. Stanton’s ability to walk up to complete strangers, establish a level of comfort and trust and ask questions that extract great insights and information becomes part of their approach. This is a hard thing to teach. But, exercise accelerates the development of this skill. As their skill develops, students’ confidence grows. Because of this and because students are excited and enthusiastic about this project, I consider it one of my most useful and successful assignments.

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