

## **TC Quick Tip: If These Photos Could Talk...Using Photo Art to Stimulate Writing and Speaking**

*By Alexandra Dylan Lowe*

*Audience: Low-intermediate to advanced students*

In our image-saturated culture, photos are a surefire way to maximize student talk and stimulate creative writing. This activity allows students to practice the narrative and interrogative forms of present, past, and future tenses, and gets them up and out of their seats. You'll need at least 20 portrait photographs, with a mix of individual portraits and photos featuring two or more people.

### **Preparation**

Before class begins, prepare a photography gallery by taping 20 or more portrait photographs to the walls, whiteboard, and/or doors of the classroom. I use photos that I cut out from Edward Steichen's *The Family of Man* and the *New York Times*, but there are a number of places online you can access great portraits that are free for classroom use. The Smithsonian Libraries' [Galaxy of Images](#) is a great resource. You can [browse by category](#) (they have a "portraits" category), and it will return hundreds of high-res images for download and reproduction. Another good option is the National Portrait Gallery's [Permanent Collection Flickr Stream](#), which includes hundreds of portraits, also acceptable for educational use.

### **Warm-Up**

Ask students whether they like to take photos and whether they have ever seen a memorable photo in the newspaper or on the Internet. Invite them to discuss their experience in small groups.

### **Activity**

1. Invite students to imagine that they are in a photography gallery. Ask students to stand up and walk around the "gallery" with a classmate, looking at all the photos and discussing them with their friends. Encourage them to think about which photos they prefer and why (10–15 minutes).
2. Invite students to select a photo that "speaks to them" to take back to their seat.
3. Tell the students you'd like them to imagine the lives of the person or people in the photo and to write about that life (30 minutes). If necessary, offer some prompts:
  - A. *Who are these people? What were their lives like before the photo was taken? What has happened to them up to this point in their lives?*
  - B. *What are they doing in the photo? Why are they doing it? If there are several people, what is the relationship among them?*
  - C. *What do you think is going to happen to them next month?*
4. Ask students to put their photos back on the wall. Invite all the students to stand up again. Ask three students to stand next to their chosen photo and retell the story they have invented about the lives of the people in their photo. Invite the other students to circulate and ask questions about the people in the three "featured" photos. Repeat with another group of three students and their chosen photos (10–15 minutes).

5. Invite students to sit in groups of four and to pass their written “story” to the student on their left. Ask students to read and discuss their classmates’ stories.
6. Ask for a volunteer to retell the story of their photo to the whole class. Project their photo onto a screen for all to see. Invite students to pose questions about the story their classmate has invented.

### **Expansion activity**

Ask six students to sit in chairs in a row at the front of the classroom, facing their classmates, and tell them that they collectively represent one of the characters in a chosen photo.<sup>1</sup> Ask students in the audience to pose a question to that character. The students on the panel at the front have to answer the question, but each student can supply only one word of the answer. The student on the left end of the row supplies the first word, then the student next to him or her the next word, and so on. This activity helps students focus on the word order in English sentences and to think carefully about subject-verb agreement in various tenses.

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<sup>1</sup> Special thanks to Jeremy Harmer for suggesting this line-up technique in his TESOL webinar, “[The Fluency Paradox](#)” (2011), freely accessible to TESOL International Association members.