3

Learning to Trust the Twelfth Picture on the Roll

Bruce Ballenger

In the summer of 1930, Edward Weston spent his days photographing vegetables. But it was the green pepper that most inspired the great American photographer, and in his daybook Weston wrote with enthusiasm about the peppers his wife, Sonya, brought home. ". . . [P]eppers never repeat themselves," he wrote. "Shells, bananas, melons, so many forms are not inclined to experiment—not so the pepper, always excitingly individual" (33). For a month, Weston experimented photographically with his peppers, working toward the "completely satisfying" image, not quite happy with his many first attempts.

On August 1, Weston took eight shots of a pepper, all from the same angle but varying the exposure time. In the waning light of evening, he put the pepper on the porch rail, but as he was taking the photograph a fire truck barreled by, "followed by every car in town." The porch rail shook, the pepper "shimmied," and the image was ruined. But apparently he wasn't discouraged, writing that "the pepper is well worth all the time, money, effort. . . . I must get this one today; it is beginning to show signs of strain and tonight should grace a salad" (33).

A day later Sonya provided Weston with two new peppers, and he tried placing one in a small tin funnel. The funnel diffused the light in appealing ways, giving the pepper's skin a sensuous sheen. After several shots, Weston suddenly recognized the "perfect light" and angle, and with his Zeiss camera took a six-minute exposure. He immediately sensed he had made "a great negative." Though Weston noted that he prepared the shot quickly, he added that the "real preliminary" work for his pepper study was done "in hours passed," in the many experiments with light, and backgrounds, and individual peppers (34).

It was finally "Pepper No. 30, 1930" that was Weston's favorite, the photograph he called a "classic, completely satisfying." He wrote exuberantly that

this pepper was "more than a pepper: abstract, in that it is completely outside subject matter" (34). The photograph became a famous Weston image, one that I've shown my writing students for many years. At first glance, it's not even a pepper but an arching back, or a tangle of naked forms, or perhaps, my students say, two dinosaurs kissing. In a minute or two, there is the shock of recognition—this is just a pepper!—but this only adds to the picture's power and its mystery.

For many years, I required that my first-year writing students find a camera and purchase three rolls of slide film. There were three assignments. The first was to take an entire roll of anything they wanted. I didn't suggest photographic subjects, or provide much guidance at all, even though we were all novice photographers. "Just get out and take interesting pictures," I said, "and write about what it was like." The power of photography as a metaphor for the writing process readily became apparent. When faced with the initial assignment, many of my students froze. A camera of unexposed slide film had an uncanny resemblance to the blank page. Where to begin? When students returned with their photographs the next week, several things became obvious: No one ever took more than one picture of any subject, and many of the photographs captured their subjects from the most obvious angle and in the most familiar way. In other words, the green pepper was still just a green pepper.

When I ask reference librarians about the most common problem they confront when working with students writing research papers, they often say that the papers aren't sufficiently focused. "I'll have a student come to me and say, 'I'm writing a paper on drug abuse,'" one librarian told me, "and I'll ask, 'What about drug abuse?,' and the student will say, 'well, how big a problem it is.' Now, I could send him or her to any one of a hundred indexes which will generate thousands of citations on drug abuse. It might take the student hours to sort through them and still not come up with anything useful."

Researchers who never manage to narrow their subjects produce drafts that are a lot like blurry landscape shots. While they manage to cover a lot of territory, the reader never gets a very good look at anything. The picture lacks detail, and often provides an ambiguous or vague sense of emphasis. It includes so much information, it's hard to figure out what's most important. When you focus your paper, you have to decide between different topics: If your subject is drug abuse, will you narrow it down to marijuana use among twelve-year-olds, or heroin addiction by infants in utero, or the ceremonial use of peyote, or some other topic?

On the other hand, sometimes it's necessary to begin with a landscape shot to discover what part of the landscape is worth looking at more closely.

I don't think I'm a particularly good photographer. But that no longer matters. I've got three rolls of film, an initial idea for a photographic subject, and a

playful openness to what might happen in the next three hours. One of the attitudes I've tried to cultivate in recent years is a willingness to suspend judgment, and this has helped me as a photographer, a writer, and a scholar. Reading published academic research, I think it's easy to assume that inquiry is driven by answers, not questions, and that researchers operate in a world of certainty rather than doubt. Academic inquiry appears to be a steady march toward a conclusion. Working from this assumption, student investigators often begin research projects by inventing a thesis or taking a side. While this isn't always unwise, beginning with an answer makes it much less likely that the process of inquiry will lead to new discoveries or even new, more compelling subjects or questions.

I begin the day with a tentative idea: I've chosen to photograph the old Idaho State Penitentiary, a structure first built in 1870 and used to house prisoners until the early 1970s. The prison is now open for tours. I'm too early for the tour, but I'm not sure I need to go inside anyway, since I'm initially interested in taking pictures of the massive stone walls, all quarried by prisoners at a site just over a nearby ridge. I begin taking photographs of the prison from the ridge (Figure 3–1), and as I slowly approach the penitentiary below—clicking away—I notice the smaller women's prison, a tiny stone house surrounded by a high wall (Figure 3–2).

Figure 3–1
This is the first picture I shot, taken from the ridge above the prison. In landscape photographs, like unfocused essays, it is difficult to tell what the most important subject is.

There's something about the scale of the women's prison that intrigues me. The stone building, built in 1920, is dwarfed by the imposing walls, and relative to the larger men's prison next door, the structure seems symbolic of the magnitude of women's—or perhaps men's—crimes. I hadn't planned to shoot any pictures of the women's ward, but now I think I will (Figure 3–3).

As I approach the building, I start snapping pictures (Figure 3–4). Several of the images seem promising, but I'm most drawn to the tiny barred windows and the arching iron gate (Figures 3–5 and 3–6). These are obviously not things I would have noticed from the high ridge above the prison where I first started taking photographs. I had to get closer to my subject to begin to see what I didn't expect to see.

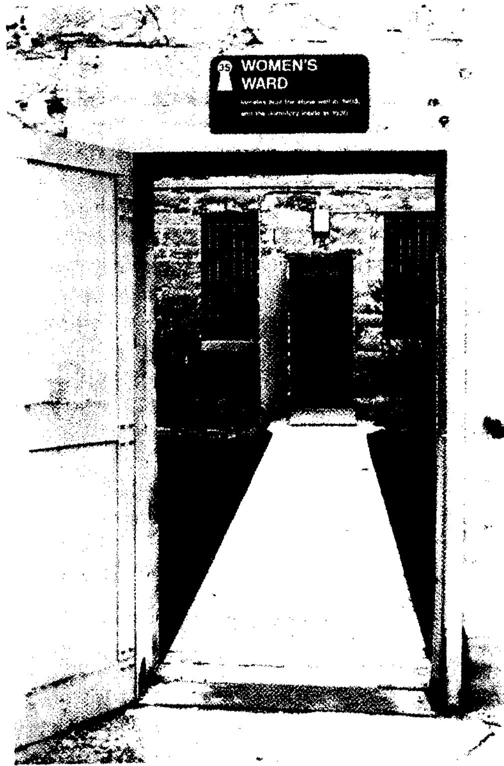
The poet Richard Hugo (1979) said that a poem often has two subjects: the "triggering subject" and the "real" or "generated subject," an interest that "is generated or discovered in the poem during the writing" (4). It is often the generated subject that interests me most as a photographer, a writer, and a researcher, and I am unlikely to discover the real subject I want to explore if I scrupulously avoid the unexpected.

The second photography assignment in my writing class is to choose two subjects from the first roll, and shoot at least twelve consecutive pictures of each,

Figure 3–2
It hadn't occurred to me to investigate the small women's prison as a photographic subject, but it caught my attention as I descended from the ridge. I don't mind changing my mind; in fact, I welcome the unexpected as a part of the process.

Figure 3–3

This is my first "draft" of the women's ward. First drafts often capture a subject from the most obvious angle and in the most familiar way.

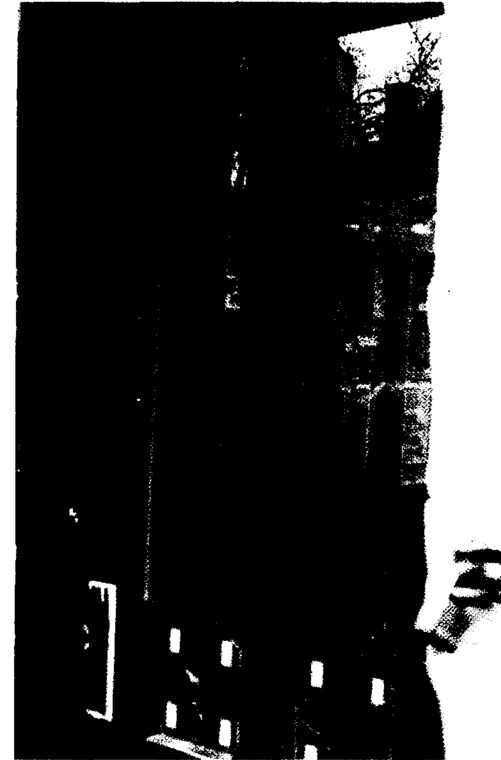


varying time of day, distance, and angle. This exercise—the challenge of producing multiple "drafts" of their subjects—led my students, time and again, to see what is extraordinary in the ordinary. One student who initially chose to take a photograph of Thompson Hall, an old campus building, discovered an iron fire escape on the west wall, and spent an hour taking pictures of the patterns of metal in the thick light of a late April evening. In some of his photographs, the fire escape seems to cling to the building's brick like some outlandish bug, a black tangle of legs against a blue sky. These he shot while lying on his back.

"When taking pictures of one subject from different angles, I learned that there are many ways to circle a subject and different ways of looking at one

Figure 3–4

This is the second or third shot of the women's prison. The images are getting more interesting as I continue to "revise." I like the multiple visual planes here.



particular thing," wrote Brenda, reflecting on her experience with the second assignment. "Writing, like a picture, can be out of focus and oftentimes difficult to make out (the meaning). A good writer must be able to look at his subject from different angles, or points of view, and determine one that is best (in order to convey his meaning)." Heather, in her reflective essay, added that "photography and writing are processes of searching and discovering. And with discovery, many different paths and trails must be explored; there is not always that one set route. Many angles must be looked at, then set aside. Later, they can be picked up again as a whole with a new set of questions and answers."

Figure 3–5
I was struck by the small size of the barred windows set in a sea of stone.

Figure 3–6
This last shot of the arching gate at the women's prison seemed promising.

These students brought an openness to their photographic investigations, a willingness to literally circle their subjects rather than fixing their gaze, which is exactly the habit of mind I hope to encourage in their writing. This is not an easy thing to do, particularly when the assignment is the research paper, a genre of school writing that has historically emphasized the need *to prove* a point rather than to *find out* about a subject. For example, who would have guessed beforehand that lying on one's back shooting up through a tangle of iron in the fading light would produce such a picture?

About forty minutes and a roll and a half into my photographic investigation of the prison, I discover an unexpected subject. Stacked on the south side of an old stone horse barn, built by inmates in 1907, are four-foot steel letters, massive metal O's and L's and T's, their paint peeling in large, curling flakes (Figure 3–7).

As I begin taking pictures of this jumbled alphabet, I start to think about what an odd juxtaposition this was—the vacant stone prison and the rusting steel letters, each straining to speak. But it is not an idea that I am able to convey photographically, at least not today, so I spend the next twenty minutes playing with angle and distance, first concentrating on flakes of paint and then pulling back until the letters become visible. As I do this, I forget about my original intention to focus on the prison. The abandoned sign is a subject I want to return to another day when the light is different. When I do return, I know at least some of the photographic questions I want to explore. For

Figure 3–7
Another unexpected subject—an abandoned sign—inspires fourteen shots.

example, is it possible to find a way to juxtapose the silent prison and the wordless letters, some angle I missed? Am I most interested in the colors and texture of the paint and the aging steel the peeling paint unmasks? Or what about the photograph of the steel letters that spell "LO" (Figure 3–8)? I like the image, and it's the only one that begins to speak, however awkwardly. Might there be something there to work with?

Such questions often arise only after I've collected enough information about my photographic subject to begin to know what I want to understand about it. My opening question—might the prison's stone walls be an interesting subject?—was good enough to get me started, but quite often the initial question merely leads me to Hugo's "generated" subject, the visual material I really want to work with. As a photographer, writer, and researcher, I've learned not only to suspend judgment until I discover that subject, but to remember and to use the questions that grow out of my contact with the subject. In photography, these questions, these possible visual interests, often arise from the *revision* process, from taking multiple shots, varying the light, distance, and angle. In writing, good questions do much the same thing: They alter the distance from the topic, controlling how much information the writer will try to contain in the limited frame of the essay; they suggest a particular emphasis on certain material or ideas; and they establish a particular point of view among the many possible ways of looking at the topic.

Figure 3–8

Another angle on the sign, and another way of seeing. This image begins to speak.

The photographic metaphor provides another way of evaluating the questions that drive the process of inquiry. Isn't it possible, for instance, to *see* that a research project whose initial focusing question is, "What are the causes of the Vietnam War?" will pose problems for the writer? How is it possible for a seven-to-ten-page paper to contain all of the information such a question will generate, and will readers ever really get a good look at anything? However, if the process helps you to refine the question, the project not only becomes more manageable but potentially more interesting. Consider this question: "Did the interests of American oil companies help prompt U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War?" Suddenly the topical landscape is transformed. You are looking more closely at a smaller part of the picture, and there you are more likely to see what you don't expect to see. Suddenly certain information becomes relevant, and much, much more becomes less so. You're no longer looking at the prison from a high ridge, but wondering about the aesthetics of aging steel and flaking paint on an abandoned sign stacked on the south side of a horse barn.

The final photography assignment was to work with a theme, and to try to develop photographs that express it in some way. Often these themes emerge from the first two assignments and the first two rolls of film. One student who captured a few pictures of other students drinking experimented with a series

Figure 3–9

A close shot can be richly detailed. Narrowing your focus in writing has the same effect—you begin to notice what most people miss.

of images in her final roll that captured jumbled stacks of beer cans, and half empty whisky bottles. One particularly arresting photograph showed a student sitting in a chair with his head on a table nestled in a tangle of arms, asleep. Next to him was an empty bottle of Southern Comfort. The scene seemed deceptively peaceful if it weren't for that empty bottle.

Once I chose *writer's block* as a theme, and took close shots of crumpled paper next to an Olivetti portable, my father's old manual typewriter. (He was a journalist who in middle age never seemed to overcome serious writer's block.) Later, I suspended the typewriter from a fine wire, and against a brooding gray sky—minutes before a thunderstorm—I set the typewriter spinning in slow circles. The images this produced were interesting—the typewriter was a blur, but recognizable—and though I wasn't particularly happy with the results, I wasn't discouraged. It is this process of revision—of *re-seeing*—that I've learned to enjoy as a photographer and a writer because there is always the promise the process will pay off, as it did for Weston and his peppers. However, when this revision process is dramatically contracted, as it often is for writers of the research paper who madly compose their first drafts in the glow of a computer monitor the night before the paper is due, it is much less likely that the material will surrender its surprises, or if it does, there is too little time to do much with them.

The language of light is the specialized discourse of the black-and-white photograph.* I am merely an apprentice, learning how the long light of late afternoon can sometimes soften the grainy texture of 100-million-year-old granite when seen up close, or harden the edges of the Sawtooth Mountains when seen from a distance. Each photograph I take teaches me a little more about this, so that now I can look at the words of Edward Weston or Ansel Adams or Dorthea Lange with more appreciation of how they used light to bring out certain features in their photographic subjects. Light is a deceptively difficult language to learn.

I think of this when I hear students complain about the difficulty of reading or understanding academic writing. "Why does it have to be so boring?" they complain. "Why would anyone write like this on purpose!" I'm sympathetic because I'm partly to blame for their frustration. Our work together in class with the informal essay for much of the semester has alerted many of my students to the richness of voice and sensory detail. They seize the opportunity to explore their own subjectivities, and the chance to try to make sense of them. The essay, of course, has its own language, its own discourse, one that is frequently intimate and conversational. It derives its authority partly from this intimacy, and the sense that the writer can be trusted to tell the truth, no matter how temporary that truth might be. The conventions of academic writing seem, at first, to be contrary to those of the essay; scholarly writing seems to introduce distance rather than intimacy, to be objective rather than openly subjective, and to obscure rather than clarify.

*The word *photography* has Greek origins, and means "light writing."

When you are assigned research papers in a class that emphasizes essay writing, you can't help but confront the contrast in conventions between the two kinds of writing; you might even conclude that academic writing is lifeless and boring, designed to make you feel stupid. At the same time, you may grant that the authors of journal articles and books are experts who probably shouldn't be ignored as sources in student research papers or as models of research writing that you should emulate. Caught in this dilemma, you might choose to resort to writing the kind of research papers you've written before: an author-evacuated and spiritless march toward an obvious conclusion along a trail littered with facts that fail to illuminate much of anything except that research was done. The lessons of the essay do not seem to apply.

But they do. And photography can help explain why.

The chilly March morning I spent taking pictures at the Idaho State Penitentiary was overcast, the light flat and even. I could have waited for another, sunnier day, but I recently read an essay by a photographer who recommended that novices learn to shoot in this light first because it will prepare them better to see the subtleties and contrasts of other, more dramatic light conditions. It was good to know this, because I might have wondered as I shot the pictures of the steel letters or the iron bars that day whether I was being robbed somehow of the ability to say more and do more with my photographs. There is apparently much I can learn about light, even on a cloudy day.

You can learn much the same thing as you write your research essays. The specialized discourse of academic writing is like the light in the photographs of Weston—a language one comes to learn, not by mindlessly imitating it, but by coming to understand how it helps you to see. As mind-numbing as some scholarly writing can seem, it's more than merely big words but a method for perceiving some aspect of the world, some small part of a larger landscape.

Nature photographer Paul Caponigro (1980) wrote that "the business of structure and visual language" played a small part in his work at first. Later, Caponigro came to understand that "the medium of photography" had been tutoring him just as nature had. "Photography became another landscape in itself," he wrote, "a separate world to explore through the process of transforming nature into a black and white print. By looking at nature, through the photographic process, I'd discovered forms and dimensions in the landscape I'd only vaguely sensed before" (60). The methods and apparatus of inquiry in any field, no matter how alien they might seem at first, all attempt to alter our perception of the world. I think this is what draws my writing students to photography, though very few of them are initially familiar with its conventions, and what will draw them ultimately to the tools of the scientist, or engineer, or philosopher.

To know and use these specialized languages and methods is something that comes later. Instead, I encourage you to begin writing research papers that shine with the language and methods of the essay, a mode of inquiry you may

have already begun to learn and master. It will prepare you well for research in any field because essay writing creates the conditions that make genuine inquiry possible: an invitation to experiment and suspend judgment, as well as a focus on the *process* of coming to know.

My students' experiments with photography teach them this, too, most often as they struggle to take the twelfth shot of Thompson Hall or the old wagon on the hill. These later photographs students take of their subjects are often the pictures they come to love the most, the ones that produce the most unexpected images. It is that experience that might best teach novice writers to trust the process of looking and looking again, and then looking closely to see what others miss. Film used this way is never wasted. This is what Edward Weston knew that August in 1930, and what I remembered that overcast morning at the old penitentiary. I will return there next week, perhaps on another cloudy day, and continue my research and my apprenticeship in writing with light.

Figure 3–10

After shooting three rolls of film, I feel like I've got enough information to decide my real subject. Novice photographers and research writers often make the mistake of working from scarcity rather than abundance, ultimately limiting their choices. Always collect more information than you can use.

Works Cited

Caponigro, Paul. 1980. "Freedom and Discovery Nourish My Work," pp. 59–64 in *Landscape: Theory*. Edited by John Flattau, Ralph Gibson, and Arne Lewis. New York: Lustrum P.

Hugo, Richard. 1979. *The Triggering Town*. New York: Norton.

Weston, Edward. 1971. *The Flame of Recognition*. Edited by Nancy Newhall. New York: Aperture.

Sharing Ideas

1. Ask yourself some of the questions Nelson asked her students and those she studied. In a journal entry (or class discussion) share your hopes for your research paper, from the mundane to the sublime. Do the same with your goals. Set aside your past experiences to the degree that you are able, and make a list of what you really could learn from a research project in any of your current classes.
2. Be honest—how do *you* really write a research paper? Be specific: How much was "hollow imitation" of procedures and practices you didn't believe in and how much represented involvement and learning on your part? Explain the reasons behind your response. How could you have been more involved in the learning process?
3. Using the four approaches outlined by Jennie Nelson in Chapter 1 ("Compile Information"; Premature Thesis; Linear Research or "Scrabble Game"; Recursive) write a journal entry in which you identify yourself as most often using one of these approaches. In a group, share these entries. Given Nelson's research results, it's likely that you usually use one of the first three approaches; what would you have to do to become more recursive in your approach? As a class, interview those who feel they are recursive and examine their self-described research processes together.
4. Put Richard Fulkerson's Chapter 2 and Jennie Nelson's Chapter 1 in dialogue. That is, Nelson looks at what actually happens during the research writing process, and Fulkerson gives you detailed advice about how to get your research writing project done. Do these authors contradict each other? Does one lend you insight into the points made by the other? Do the same with Richard Fulkerson's Chapter 2 and Melissa Goldthwaite's Chapter 15. Fulkerson argues that no one *chooses* to do research; Goldthwaite that *all* writers research. Can you reconcile their positions?
5. Write about your relationship to argument and argumentative writing. Are you using these terms in the same way Richard Fulkerson uses them in Chapter 2? Does your history with spoken argument affect your attitude

toward argument in writing? Do you agree that research is a form of argument? Why or why not? You might want to connect the ideas in Chapter 2 to those in Freddy Thomas' Chapter 4 and Stuart Greene's Chapter 12.

6. Use Richard Fulkerson's discussion of the five ways research-based argumentative papers go wrong to discuss which of these most commonly represents your writing weakness. Share specific stories (and possible future solutions) with group members.
7. Write a letter responding to two or more of the authors in this section; where are they on the mark and where do they seem inaccurate in their assumptions or conclusions? Quote specific statements and respond to these.
8. As a group, take a topic through the process described by Bruce Ballenger in Chapter 3. Together, list twelve subjects. Then, choose two of those subjects and discuss them in some detail. How could each be developed into a solid paper topic and paper? Next, look in more detail at one of these topics: approach it from new and novel angles; be silly and serious; brainstorm approaches and directions; focus and refocus. Finally, choose a theme from your discussion and develop a real writer's working plan: How could someone in your group actually undertake and succeed at this research?
9. Make a list of your triggering subjects as a writer. What have you written about (or wanted to write about) in the past? Now, what subjects could those topics generate for you? Where—if you had sufficient time—might such research take you? Where could it take you if you wrote about one of these topics tomorrow? Make some leaps from teacher-assigned to self-assigned subjects: what would and could these be?

Part II

Research as Art and Action: Generating and Developing Ideas, Data Collection, Revision, and Editing

inquire *vi* 1. to seek information; ask a question or questions. 2. to carry out an examination or investigation.

—*Webster's 2nd College Edition*