

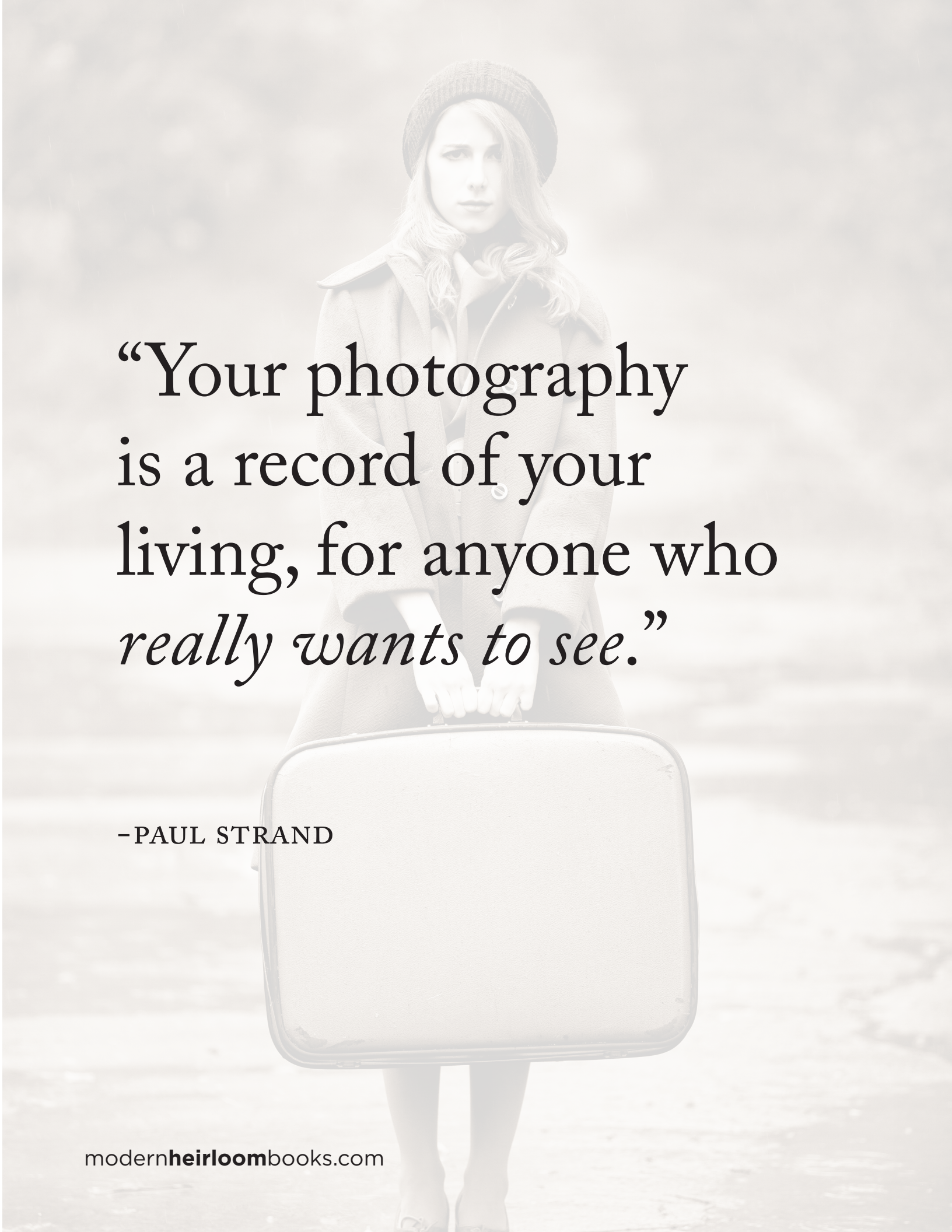
# How To Use Photographs as Prompts for Writing Life Stories



a free resource from

MODERN / HEIRLOOM / BOOKS  
*by Dawn Rood*



A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a dark beret and a light-colored coat, stands on a sandy beach. She is holding a large, light-colored suitcase in front of her. The background is a soft, out-of-focus view of the ocean and sky.

“Your photography  
is a record of your  
living, for anyone who  
*really wants to see.*”

–PAUL STRAND

My generation knows the pleasure, both tactile and emotional, of exploring a box of dusty old photographs: the sense of discovery, of time travel, the good fortune of glimpsing our parents as carefree teenagers, of seeing ourselves as Garanimals-clad kids.

But this is becoming a thing of the past. Do you even *have* a box of photos in your home?

It saddens me to think of our children inheriting a box of old devices (your iPhone will be extinct one day, you know!) and wondering how they can access the digital trove of photos they know must be stored within. And they likely won't be able to retrieve those images, as the technology will have changed by then.

Just as I wish my mother and grandmother had jotted names and dates on the back of their old photos, **our kids will one day be wishing we left some clues about our own pictures.**

I urge you to go a few steps further, to not only record the details of important photographs, but to elucidate the stories associated with them. To **leave a visual & narrative history to your children, a gift from the past for the future.**





Shorter is often better, especially when it comes to autobiographical writing.

That's why using photos as jumping-off points for your stories can be such an effective storytelling method.

Don't worry about length when you sit down to write.

Just **choose a photo**, and begin sharing.

1

Talk,  
don't write.

Pick up a digital recorder (or use the function on your smart phone) and talk into it. Often spoken language is more direct. You won't get hung up on sentence structure or finding the perfect words. Rather, your language will flow and have a natural rhythm. Your words will be honest and forthright. You can transcribe your recording later.

2

Find a  
partner.

Having someone to listen to your story can be a powerful aid. Even if that person doesn't engage you or ask questions, the very act of listening—an occasional nod, an understanding expression—let's the speaker know that what they are saying matters. The more you converse with someone about your life stories, the easier it becomes to share them, shape them, and delve even deeper.

3

Be specific.

Small details. Moments. A focus on life as it is truly lived. Did your mother enjoy a cup of room-temperature tea every night before bed? What did the hand-me-down pajamas you're wearing in the Christmas-morning picture feel like? It wasn't just a red car, it was a 1955 crimson Cadillac convertible that your dad referred to as "My Dorado." This is *not* to say get lost in the details: Do not go overboard describing every object and movement in your story with multiple modifiers. This *is* to say that the specificity of the right details brings an era or a person to life in a most vibrant and revealing way. Choose wisely.

4

Interview  
*you*.

If you had no knowledge of this picture, what would you want to know? Make believe you're interviewing yourself. This is a helpful exercise in making sure the most essential elements (often obvious to you, but not others) do not get left out of your story. And then, edit, edit, edit: whittle your interview down to the bone, keeping in those details that surprise, delight, enlighten. I suggest waiting at least a day, longer if you have the luxury of time, to do the editing; it's amazing how such distance enables us to better self-edit.

beyond the caption



## Look at your chosen photo.

Study it; ignore it.

Eat some lunch & let the memories the picture elicits percolate.

Now sit down at your computer to free write: Don't worry about story structure or creating something for an audience, just write from your heart.

If you are more comfortable with pen and paper, you might forego sentences altogether and jot down phrases, recollections, adjectives.

The key to both approaches, whether stream-of-consciousness writing or brainstorming, is to go fast and to not worry about anything. *Just do it.*



thumbs up?

You may find that this one photo has stirred a wealth of memories for you to mine. Perhaps it recalls one vibrant scene from your childhood. Consider yourself lucky if either of these is the case! You've got the makings of a life story vignette at your fingertips.



thumbs down?

And if the photo you've chosen reveals nothing more than a string of boring observations, don't fret.

First, **go through this list** to see if you get anywhere:

- What is your personal connection to the photo?
- What would you caption the photo (include as much basic factual information as possible, answering *Who, What, Why, When?*)
- Write a question the photo brings to mind.
- Write a detailed observation about the photo.

### ...*still* boring?

Turn the page for more helpful exercises to get the story behind your photo!

words on paper

1

## going beyond the frame

Try this exercise from award-winning memoirist Beth Kephart, an early assignment she would give to her creative nonfiction students at the University of Pennsylvania, as detailed in her book *Handling the Truth*:

“Study the background of any chosen photograph. Not the foreground, the background. What’s in the picture that you didn’t see when you were snapping?

What lies beyond the chosen subject—just to the right or the left? ... What does the startle of the once-unnoticed detail suggest to you? What would happen if this small thing—and not the obvious thing, the central thing, the thing easily seized and snatched—was the start of your story?”



when stories don't flow

2

## enlisting help

Still nothing of interest?

If you are convinced there is a worthy story attached to the photo, show it to a sibling or other relative to see what memories they may have.

If you have other pictures from the same period, look at those for clues.

Maybe it means something to you not for the story it tells, but for the one it does not tell: Who is the subject gazing at? What happened right before the camera was snapped? Who was left out of the moment—was it you? Or was the picture in a frame at your grandparents' home, and your memory of *that* is what's important?

## moving on

3

If nothing more reveals itself and yet you are still compelled to include the photograph in your life story, ask yourself, *why*?

Draft a caption that at least puts the image in context, reveals a mystery, or taps an emotion. Then leave it at that, and turn to your next photo.

It is likely that after taking this approach with more of your family snapshots, this one will eventually find its way into your narrative or, rightfully, be edited out in favor of others that weave a more textured and colorful tapestry.



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## Make memories!



**Thank you for embarking on a journey  
of life story writing &  
memory preservation with us!**

next steps

MODERN / HEIRLOOM / BOOKS  
*by Dawn Rood*

# Our Story

Modern Heirloom Books, founded by magazine publishing veteran Dawn M. Roode (*Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Parenting*), is the best resource for helping you preserve and share your stories exquisitely.

We expertly curate your “stuff”—old photos from boxes, digital family photos from phones and hard drives; hone your memories; elicit stories that surprise and delight; and design a coffee table book that is graphically and narratively evocative.

Dawn's compassionate and interested interviewing style makes subjects not only feel comfortable, but excited about sharing their stories.

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