

"Reading a Photo for Science" is more than just looking at an image; it's a systematic process of observation, critical questioning, and logical inference to extract meaningful scientific data and insights. This guide provides a universal framework for "reading" a photograph through a scientific lens. It is designed to move students from casual observers to critical thinkers by utilizing the Science and Engineering Practices (SEP) and Crosscutting Concepts (CCC) found in the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS).

How to "Read" a Photograph: A Teacher's Guide

Phase 1: Objective Observation (The "What")

The goal of this phase is to collect data without making assumptions. This builds the skill of **Obtaining and Evaluating Information**.

- **Instructional Strategy:** Use a "Viewfinder" (a simple paper frame) to help students focus on specific quadrants of the image.
- **Prompting Questions:**
 - What colors, shapes, and textures do you see?
 - What are the objects made of (metal, wood, liquid, gas)?
 - What is in the foreground versus the background?
- **Teacher Tip:** Correct students if they use "feeling" words or "action" words that aren't visible. (e.g., If they say "The car is going fast," ask "What evidence shows it is moving?")

Phase 2: Scientific Inferencing (The "How and Why")

In this phase, students apply **Crosscutting Concepts** to explain the "invisible" science happening in the still frame.

- **Structure and Function:** How does the shape or material of an object help it do its job?
- **Cause and Effect:** What happened right before this photo was taken? What will happen a second later?
- **Systems and System Models:** What parts are working together in this image? If you removed one part, would the system still work?
- **Scale and Proportion:** How big is this object compared to a human? Is this a "Zoom In" (microscopic) or "Zoom Out" (landscape) perspective?

Phase 3: Identifying the Phenomenon (The "Big Idea")

Every science photo represents an **Anchoring Phenomenon**—a real-world event that can be explained using science.

- **Categorization:** Does this photo show:
 - **Matter:** Solids, liquids, gases, or phase changes?
 - **Forces:** Pushes, pulls, friction, or gravity?

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- **Energy:** Heat, light, sound, or electricity?
- **Life:** Growth, adaptation, or ecosystems?
- **Earth:** Weather, erosion, or natural resources?

The "See-Think-Wonder" Routine

Use this 3-step routine to facilitate a whole-class discussion or a science journal entry.

Step	Student Action	NGSS Skill Connection
I SEE...	"I see a jagged rock with green moss."	Developing Observations
I THINK...	"I think the moss grows there because it's damp."	Constructing Explanations
I WONDER...	"I wonder if the moss breaks the rock down?"	Asking Scientific Questions

Practical Tips for Implementation

- **The "Evidence" Rule:** Whenever a student makes a claim, ask: **"What do you see in the photo that makes you say that?"** This reinforces the practice of using evidence.
- **Annotating the Photo:** If using a digital board, allow students to draw arrows or circles directly on the image to label forces, energy flows, or parts of a system.
- **Vocabulary Integration:** Introduce 2-3 "Tier 3" science words (e.g., *Inertia*, *Friction*, *Condensation*) only *after* the students have described the concept in their own words.

Differentiation Strategies

- **Visual Aids:** Provide a "Word Bank" with icons (e.g., an arrow for 'Force', a flame for 'Heat') for students to match to the photo.
- **Oral Processing:** For students who struggle with writing, allow them to record a "Science Report" audio clip explaining the photo.
- **Scaffolded Inquiry:** Provide a "Cloze" paragraph (fill-in-the-blank) for students to complete their scientific description of the image.