Vocabulary Cheat-Sheet

The following words are the basic vocabulary used in describing photographs. When responding to your classmates' work, make sure to think about these terms and concepts. Print this out and keep it handy while shooting, and when commenting on your classmates' work in Digication.com.

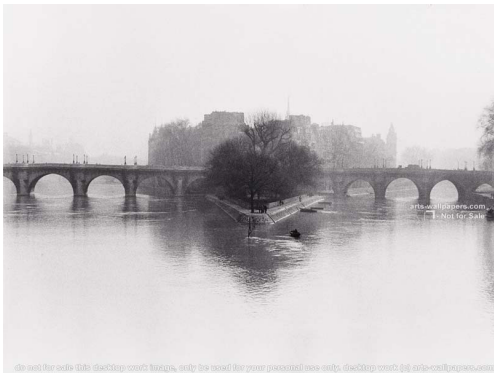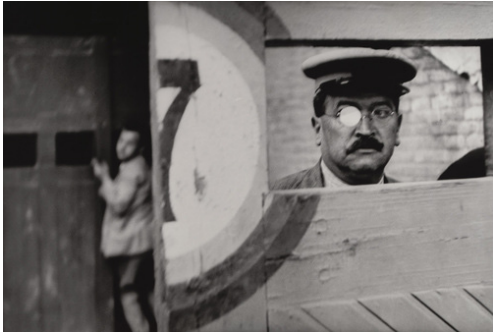I have provided examples of how each of these terms is used in a photographs. All of these photographs were taken by Master photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson (August 22, 1908 – August 3, 2004). He was a French photographer and considered to be the father of modern photojournalism. He helped develop the "street photography" style that has influenced generations of photographers who followed.
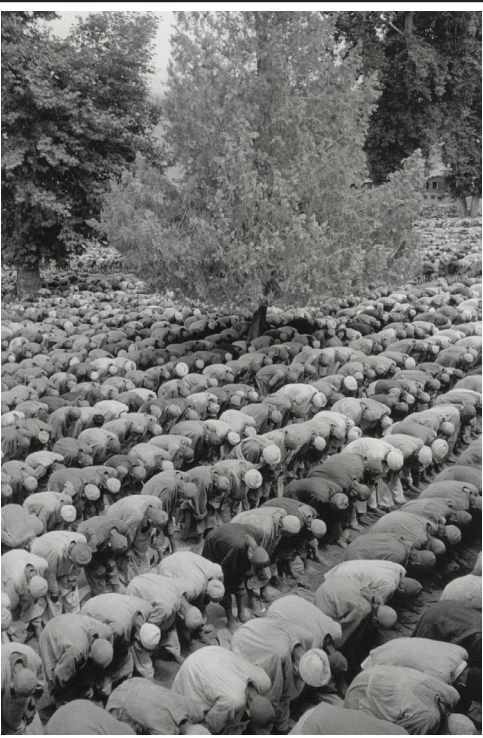
General Elements

	Abstract	An image that emphasizes formal elements (line, shape, etc) rather than specific, recognizable objects. This image is more about the pattern and shape. Objects are nearly unidentifiable.
	Content	The subject, topic or information captured in a photograph. In this image, the content is the group of people eating food by their boat.
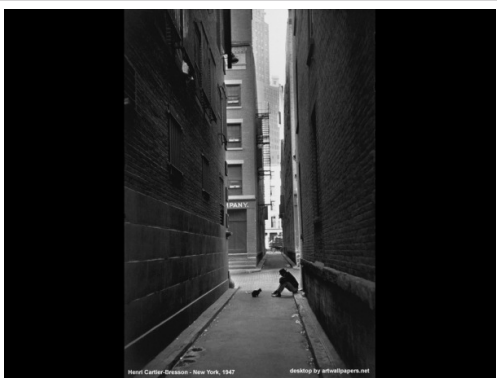
	Expressive	Concerned with communicating emotion. We can see the serious emotions of war time in the soldiers faces.
	Geometric	Rectilinear or curvilinear shapes found in geometry, such as circles, squares, triangles, etc.
	Intention	Reason(s) why the artist made a work of art. Henri Cartier-Bresson loved photography because of its innate ability to stop an instant of time forever. He said, "I prowled the streets all day, feeling very strung-up and ready to pounce, ready to 'trap' life. This image freezes a moment in time, just before the subject is about to break the surface of the water.

	Landscape	An image that portrays the natural environment.
	Organic Shapes	Shapes based on natural objects such as trees branches, rock patterns, leaves, etc. This shape in this photograph mimics a shell.
	Representational	An image which shows recognizable objects. In this photo, we see the artist Matisse, with his birds.

	Subject	The main object or person(s) in a photograph. The subject of this image is the group of three people.
	Theme	A unifying or dominant idea in one work of art or in a collection of works. Although he covers many themes, one of this photographer's themes focused on people on the streets of London.
Visual Elements		
	Focus	What areas appear clearest or sharpest in the photograph? What do not? Whatever is in focus is usually the subject of the photograph.
	Light	What areas of the photograph are most highlighted? Are there any shadows? Does the photograph allow you to guess the time of day? Is the light natural or artificial? Harsh or soft? Reflected or direct?

	Line	are there objects in the photograph that act as lines? Are they straight, curvy, thin, thick? Do the lines create direction in the photograph? Do they outline? Do the lines show movement or energy?
	Repetition	Are there any objects, shapes or lines which repeat and create a pattern?
	Shape	Do you see geometric or organic shapes? What are they?

	Space	Is there depth to the photograph or does it seem shallow? What creates this appearance? Are there important negative spaces in addition to positive spaces? Is there depth created by spatial illusions? In this case, the wall on the left leads us into the picture, creating depth.
	Texture	If you could touch the surface of the photograph how would it feel? How do the objects in the picture look like they would feel?
	Value	Is there a range of tones from dark to light? Where is the darkest value? Where is the lightest? Here, the lightest tones are on bed, leading up to the woman's chest and face. The darkest tones are in her dress and hair, accentuating and framing her face and torso.
	Angle	The vantage point from which the photograph was taken; generally used when discussing a photograph taken from an unusual or exaggerated vantage point. This image is taken from above, and exaggerates the shape of these two figures in the water.

	Background	The part of a scene or picture that is or seems to be toward the back. The background in this image is the city skyline.
	Balance	The distribution of visual elements in a photograph. Symmetrical balance distributes visual elements evenly in an image. Asymmetrical balance is found when visual elements are not evenly distributed in an image. This image is symmetrically balanced.
	Composition	The arrangement or structure of the formal elements that make up an image. In this photograph, the figures are located in the bottom third. The white wall behind them occupies the remainder of the space and is spattered with black square windows.
	Contour	The outline of an object or shape. We can see the contour of the photographer through his shadow.

	Contrast	Strong visual differences between light and dark, varying textures, sizes, etc. Here, there is a strong contrast between the light tones of the nude figure and the darkness of the water.
	Framing	When the photographer uses elements in the scene to frame the subject. In this image, the subject is the boys, and they are being framed by a large hole in the cement wall.
	Setting	Actual physical surroundings or scenery. The setting of this photograph is a beach.

	Vantage Point	The place from which a photographer takes a photograph. The vantage point of this photograph is from up high, looking down on the scene.