FIELD NOTES / EVIDENCE DESK

First Flight: The Caption Desk

Edit a museum caption for the events of December 17, 1903.

STUDENT SHEET / 8-10 MINUTES

A draft caption landed on your desk. Compare the records below, then replace the draft with a sentence the sources actually support.

DRAFT CAPTION / DELIBERATELY UNRELIABLE

“This photograph proves the first flight lasted 57 seconds.”

YOUR SOURCE FILE

A **Photograph**

One frame shows the Flyer lifting off. A still image does not record elapsed time.

B **Telegram**

Orville told his father there had been four flights. The message as received reports 57 seconds for the longest one.

C **Archive account**

The Library of Congress identifies the first flight as 12 seconds and the fourth, longest flight as 59 seconds.

01 Mark the mix-up.

Which flight does 57 refer to in the telegram? Which source supplies the first flight’s duration?

02 Rewrite the caption.

Write one or two sentences. Distinguish what the image shows from how you know the timing.

03 Add an editor’s note.

Briefly reconcile 57 and 59 without assuming who caused the difference.

What the record supports

A source can be valuable and still contain an error.

FACILITATOR KEY / SHARE AFTER THE EDIT

MODEL CAPTION

The photograph shows the Flyer lifting off on December 17, 1903. The Library of Congress identifies this as Orville Wright's first flight, which lasted 12 seconds; the still image alone cannot tell us its duration.

READ THE THREE ANSWERS

01 First vs. longest

The telegram reports 57 seconds for the longest of four flights. It does not assign that number to the first flight. The archive account gives 12 seconds for the first flight.

02 Image vs. elapsed time

Give credit for naming the visible event and attributing its duration to the archival account. A photo by itself cannot tell you how long the flight continued.

03 Disagreement vs. blame

The Smithsonian and the Library of Congress give 59 seconds for the longest flight. Cite the telegram for what its recipient read: 57. These texts do not identify who caused the discrepancy.

DISCUSSION PROMPT

If the telegram is wrong about two seconds, what is it still evidence of? A defensible answer: what was communicated to the family that day.

VERIFY OR TEACH IT ONLINE

1. Flight photograph
2. Original telegram
3. Archive essay
4. Smithsonian: telegraph key
5. LOC: flight durations

Open both scans and try the free browser lesson

Optional: PastRush for iPhone or iPad

The Wright exercise stands alone; it is not advertised as a case in the app.