Visual and Spatial Rhetoric: Analyzing Images

Table of Contents

Visual Rhetoric Defined
Audience, Context, Subject, and Purpose
What to Look for in a Visual Text
Visual Rhetoric and Color Theory
Analyzing Pictures
Visual Rhetoric: Images and Text

Visual Rhetoric Defined

Most texts are more than words on a page. Photographs, works of art, graphic novels, political cartoons, computer or video game screens, television or magazine advertisements, webpages, billboards, and more are all texts composed and designed to communicate ideas.

The texts you encounter in college also have visual or spatial components—an author’s profile picture on a publisher’s website, a reporter’s blog with hyperlinks to recommended websites, embedded videos and podcasts, a scientist’s precise figures and tables within a cutting-edge scientific journal, a business person’s PowerPoint presentation to prospective investors, or the photographic forensic evidence a police detective collects during a routine crime scene investigation.

Whatever discipline you study, chances are you’ll come into contact with images, illustrations, and designs that require a sophisticated and close reading, so you may draw conclusions about the text’s rhetorical significance—it’s argument—that which the text makes the reader understand or believe.

Audience, Context, Subject, and Purpose

Analyzing a text’s rhetorical significance begins with determining the rhetorical situation—how the communication format be it visual, written, aural, or any other multimodal form situates itself on four main concepts: the audience, context, subject, and purpose:

Audience: Who is the intended audience for the text, and how do you know?

Context: What historical, sociological, cultural, political, ideological, or genre situations influence the text? What was happening during the time this text was being created?

Subject and Purpose: What is the author expressing? Why do you think her or she is communicating about this particular idea, issue, or concept?
Visual and Spatial Rhetoric

Visual and spatial rhetoric uses images to communicate ideas.

Subject: What the author wants the audience to explore.
Example: Homemade cake batter with fresh eggs.

Purpose: Why is the author creating this text?
Example: Perhaps the creator of this photograph wanted to document kitchen adventures or she or he may love to bake.

Audience: Who is the author trying to reach?
Example: Possibly food lovers who like to see how ingredients morph into baked goods.

Context: What historical or value-based situation surrounds this text?
Example: A personal food blog? Perhaps a cooking website? Something fairly contemporary and American given the style of cooking instruments being used (plastic bowl, spatula, and measuring cups (in cups rather than pints or liters used outside the US)

What to Look for in a Visual Text

Next, you’ll want to look at the grounding, color scheme, medium, and typography of the text:

Grounding or the placement of images within a text: What is the most and least prominent element? The first place the eye focuses may seem the most important, but the background may be influencing your understanding of the text as well.

Color scheme, the colors the artist chooses: Blues and greys are associated with water and stone, so they suggest a cooling and calming mood; greens remind people of living plants as well as money, so they can suggest both health and wealth; yellows are commonly used on hospital walls to evoke a softness (in an otherwise noisy environment); and reds express passion as well as anger, creating feelings of energy and excitement. (Jump to Color Theory section.)

Medium, the materials the artist chooses: A painter may use watercolor or oil; a sculptor may choose clay, copper, bronze, or iron; a cartoonist may use pencils on paper; and a writer may use a digital medium. The medium can suggest the intended audience as well as the purpose of the communication.

Typography, the appearance of printed characters: What moods do the fonts create? Heading fonts may be different than body text fonts for the purpose of readability. Depending on the intended reader and purpose, fonts may be chosen to express formality or playfulness or to express a particular cultural or historical context.
Color theory looks at how colors work together to create effective and appealing designs. Certain colors also act symbolically to affect us emotionally.

The color wheel, first developed by Sir Issac Newton, provides a framework for understanding color harmony. The color wheel depicts the primary colors, red, blue, and yellow and the secondary colors (green, orange, and purple), which are formed from mixing the primary colors. The tertiary colors are formed when primary and secondary colors are mixed. The tertiary colors include red-orange, yellow-orange, red-violet, blue-violet, blue-green, and yellow-green.

Color harmony suggests that certain colors together create palates that are pleasing to the eye. These color combinations include analogous colors, or any set of three colors that appear next to each other on the color wheel such as blue, blue-green, and green.

Another formula for pleasing color arrangements is to choose complementary colors, or two colors which appear directly opposite each other on the color wheel such as purple and yellow. Finally, a designer may choose to mimic a combination found in nature such as the yellow, red, orange, and brown colors found in autumn foliage.

Color theory also includes the emotional effect of certain colors through natural association and symbolism.

Visual Rhetoric: Analyzing Pictures

When analyzing the rhetorical significance of a photograph, the goal is to uncover its argument. Does the photograph say something about love? Family? Patriotism? Wellness? Success? What happiness is?

In determining the argument, the first elements to analyze are the audience, context, subject, and purpose. Additionally, you’ll want to consider the following:

- **Material context**: Where was the picture published? Where is it displayed? Is it the original version or a reproduction (as might be the case for artwork and paintings)?

- **Rhetorical Stance**: What is the point-of-view of the photographer? Is the photographer a participant in the activity or scene being depicted, or is the photographer an observer? Are the subjects in the picture aware that their photo is being taken? Where is the focus of the image?

- **Reality or Abstraction**: Is the photograph of a realistic scene, or has it been edited into an abstract piece of art? How do the modifications (if any) affect the meaning of the image? Does
the editing serve the purpose of making the people in the picture look younger or more attractive than they might be otherwise?

- **Caption and Accompanying Text:** Does the photo have a title and/or a caption? Does it accompany written text such as on a website, in a newspaper, or in a magazine? How does the photograph support or illustrate the text? How does the text affect the meaning of the picture?

The next section of this resource covers images with text in more detail.

**Analyzing Pictures**

![Image of five marines and a Navy hospital corpsman raising an American flag on top of Mt. Surabachi, Iwo Jima during World War II.](Figure 2. Photograph Sample Analysis: "Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima," by Joe Rosenthal, February 23, 1945. Public domain photograph from the National Archives.)

**Photographic elements work together to communicate ideas.**

**Subject or content:** The scene or people the photo is depicting.

**Example:** *Five marines and a Navy hospital corpsman raising an American flag on top of Mt. Surabachi, Iwo Jima during World War II.*

**Purpose:** Why is the author creating this text?

**Example:** *The photographer was from the Associated Press. He was documenting the battle of Iwo Jima during WWII.*

**Audience:** Who is the author trying to reach?

**Example:** *The photographer likely intended to reach the American public who revere the American Flag as a symbol of pride and patriotism and who were awaiting news about the progress of the war.*

**Cultural Context:** What is the cultural or historical context of the photograph, and how does that context affect the photograph’s meaning and importance?

**Example:** *This photo was taken during the bloodiest battle of WWII when the American public needed reassurance that they were doing the right thing. The photograph was immediately popular and widely reproduced as a message to support the war.*

**Visual Rhetoric: Images and Text**

Authors and designers carefully consider the inclusion and interplay of visual images with text. For example, consider this picture quote from the Kaplan University Facebook page:

[Back to Table of Contents]
In this example, the image of the children holding hands sharing an umbrella interacts with the quote from Tomas Carlyle (1795-1891): “A loving heart is the beginning of all knowledge.” The text expresses a possible idea behind the image of the children who appear loving. And since Kaplan University is an educational institution, the connection to knowledge fits with the context of the webpage.

Consider how your reaction to this picture would be different if the text were removed? What about if the image were removed? Or if the image were changed? These questions are valuable when analyzing and discussing the visual rhetoric of print advertisements, television commercials, websites, and cartoons too.

Visual and spatial texts make arguments, and readers will have different understandings and beliefs about them. Analyzing a text’s subject, purpose, audience, and context, taking into consideration the colors, design, perspective, and the interplay of visuals and language is critical when it comes to developing your own understandings and beliefs and then communicating your own arguments about them.

References
