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Reading the Visual in College Writing Classes

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For about a decade now, scholars have been declaring that the age of printed text is all but over. Jay Bolter claims that we are now in "the late age of print" (2) and in 1994, Sven Birkerts estimated that printed books would be dominant for about another fifty years (121), to be replaced almost entirely with online hypermedia forms of communication. But regardless of whether one agrees with these and other obituaries of the print medium, it would be difficult to deny the importance of electronic and other visual media in today's society. The students now entering our classrooms have grown up with one hundred channels of television, and the World Wide Web is no longer a novelty, but part of their social, academic, and working lives. If we include nonelectronic sources of visual communication such as billboards, print advertisements, and the ubiquitous packaging that has taken such an important place in our consumer culture, then we have to conclude that most of the information that our students are exposed to is in a visual form.

There is little doubt that the increasing ubiquity of visual and aural forms of communication is one of the reasons that so many students arrive at the university with apparently little experience with the written word. However, while our students might engage relatively rarely with print text, we should not therefore conclude that their lives are devoid of information or of expression. Quite the opposite is true. Our students may have been exposed to more "texts" than any other generation in history, and many of these texts are dense with cultural information. One might argue that most of these texts are designed primarily to entertain or to sell something rather than to offer information or increase one's understanding of complex issues; nevertheless, our students are exposed to a broad range of information daily. So far, our educational system has failed to take seriously and to adequately respond to the fact that so much of this information is in visual form. As Barbara Stafford notes,

“In most American university curricula, graphacity remains subordinate to literacy” (5).

THE NEGLECT OF THE VISUAL

One might assume—or at least hope—that a major goal of the educational system is to help students develop the abilities necessary to comprehend, interpret, and critically respond to the textual forms that they will encounter as members of the culture. Since so many of the texts that our students encounter are visual ones, and since visual literacy is becoming increasingly important for everyday social functioning and even for success in the workplace (Kress and van Leeuwen 2-3), it would seem obvious that our educational institutions should be spending at least as much time and energy on developing students’ visual literacies as these institutions spend on developing students’ textual literacy. However, both in the classroom and in literacy research, the amount of time and effort devoted to developing students’ abilities to comprehend, analyze, and critique visual messages is relatively miniscule.

As a result, Americans tend to act as passive consumers rather than as critics or analysts of visual messages. While we are all being increasingly exposed to highly manipulated images meant to influence our beliefs, opinions, and behaviors, very few of us are adequately prepared to analyze and critique these images in order to make informed decisions about them. In fact, many people seem unaware of the rhetorical power of images and of their mediated nature. The adage “seeing is believing” is often applied, not just to natural objects that are being directly perceived, but often to visual representations of objects, people, and events, as well. Photographs and video, in particular, are typically treated as “direct copies of reality” rather than as representations designed to influence viewers in particular ways (Messaris, vi).

The field of rhetoric in general, and the subfield of composition in particular, have largely ignored visual types of expression, especially in the classroom. This is true for many reasons, largely historical. It could be argued that visual forms of rhetorical expression have not become predominant until recently, and that the methodological and theoretical work necessary for the analysis of visual rhetoric is in the process of catching up to its increasing presence and importance. But this argument cannot fully explain the scholarly neglect of visual information. From the iconography of the medieval church to the propaganda posters of the two world wars, it cannot be denied that visual forms of rhetoric have always existed and have always served important functions in society (Purves). Why, then, has visual rhetoric been so neglected, especially as its power and influence have grown steadily over the last century?

Perhaps this neglect can be largely attributed to a widespread and traditional dislike and disparagement of mass culture, and from our fears that visual and other modes of communication will overtake, replace, or diminish the importance of the print medium (Stafford; Stroupe; Welch). When most people think of visual media, they think of the “vast wasteland” of television (including the much-derided music video), comic books, picture books (produced for young children who have not yet “progressed” to purely verbal texts), “coffee table books” (usually considered more decorative than informative or scholarly), and Hollywood cinema (though, of these genres, film is generally assumed to have more promise as a “serious” medium). Despite our supposed postmodern rejections of canonical hierarchies that would place literary and scholarly texts above such commercially produced and widely disseminated “texts,” we still tend to favor words over images, and we worry defensively that our students are spending too much time watching television and surfing the Web, and not enough time reading books. Stafford describes the present situation in the scholarly community eloquently: “The passionate visualist, roaming the labyrinth of the postdisciplinary age, is haunted by the paradoxical ubiquity and degradation of images: everywhere transmitted, universally viewed, but as a category generally despised” (11).

When educators discuss among themselves the role of visual forms of communication (especially the culturally dominant, mass-produced forms), it is usually to express and reinforce the worry that students are already too reliant on the visual, in many cases almost to the exclusion of written forms, and that educators should be trying to arrest that trend in their classrooms, not reinforce it. Dealing with visual texts in university classrooms might seem like surrendering to the inevitable “dumbing down” of our society’s discourse or pandering to our students’ lazy tendencies (Stafford 3). However, the avoidance of taking images seriously in general education, and especially in writing classrooms, is based on some assumptions that may not be valid.

The most basic, and perhaps the most misguided, of these assumptions is that we could ever draw a distinct line between the visual and the verbal, or that concentrating on one can or should require ignoring the other. As W. J. T. Mitchell argues, “recent developments in art history, film theory, and what is loosely called ‘cultural studies’ make the notion of a purely verbal literacy increasingly problematic” (6). Communication has always been a hybrid blending of visual, written, and aural forms, and the new electronic technologies are making this melding of media easier and more common, requiring readers and writers to have a richer understanding of how words and images work together to produce meaning (Stroupe 618; Welch 131, 157). James Elkins argues that “mixed images” (incorporating some combination of pictures, words, and/or notations) are the norm rather than the exception (91). He goes on to argue that, while it may be useful to make a conceptual distinction between a “pure” image (requiring no verbal interpretation) and a “pure” text (with no meaningful visual element), we should recognize that this purity does not exist in the real world, and pedagogical efforts should be aimed toward helping students deal with combinations of picture, word, and symbol. Perhaps Mitchell makes the case most adamantly: “all media are mixed media, and all representations are heterogeneous; there are no ‘purely’ visual or verbal arts” (5).
Even if we could make a clear-cut and reasonable distinction between purely verbal texts and purely visual ones, it would still be a mistake to concentrate our teaching efforts on reading and writing to the exclusion of other modes of communication and to neglect visual forms. Most students enter the university unable to articulate any principles about how visual messages work and without any of the skills or habits necessary to critically analyze such messages. In fact, largely because they have adopted the prejudices and fears of their educators and of the larger culture, many university students need to be convinced that visual images constitute meaningful texts at all in the sense that people are used to thinking about written texts. The very dominance and ubiquity of visual messages suggest that our students should develop at least a basic understanding of how they work. Students also need to develop both the ability and the inclination to examine their own reactions to such messages, if they are to have any real independence and effectiveness as social agents.

Finally, images should be studied and understood because of the unique epistemic power they possess. As Stafford argues, images are not "just more efficient conveyors of extant verbal information"; rather, they are "indispensable in discovering that which could not otherwise be known" (40). In other words, images are not just another method for expressing propositions that could otherwise be expressed in verbal form. Rather, they are essential for expressing, and therefore for knowing things that cannot be expressed in any other form. To ignore images is to ignore all of the knowledge that they can help us develop, knowledge that cannot be logically deduced or proven; they "help us to organize and make sense of that floating world, that milieu, stretching considerably below certitude and somewhat above ignorance" (Stafford 39).

The public's general inability to interpret and analyze visual images has not gone entirely unnoticed. At its November 1996 meeting, the National Council of Teachers of English passed a resolution to "support professional development and promote public awareness of the role that viewing and visually representing our world have as forms of literacy" ("NCTE Passes Visual Literacy Resolution"). And educators are developing curricular units and materials on nearly every educational level to help students interpret and accurately respond to visual messages. Still, these initiatives are often treated as add-on units, subordinated to the larger goal of developing students' reading and writing abilities. For a variety of reasons, educators in general, and perhaps those of us in the humanities above all, continue to neglect visual sources of communication in favor of verbal texts.

If literacy development were a zero-sum game, in which our time and energies must necessarily be spent on either written or visual literacies, then this neglect would be understandable, perhaps even defensible. However, ignoring the visual aspects of rhetoric, even the visual aspects of written texts, hinders our efforts to help students develop an accurate understanding of the nature of rhetorical practice, including an adequate understanding of the potential, as well as the limitations, of written discourse.

Toward a Pedagogy of Visual Rhetoric

It is one thing to argue that university students should be exposed to more explicit instruction about the uses of visual communication, and it is quite another to develop a workable pedagogy for dealing with visual rhetoric. Such a pedagogy has not yet been developed, partly because no one recognizable discipline has staked a claim around the immense and vaguely defined area that is variously referred to as "visual communication," "visual rhetoric," or "visual literacy." Research and scholarship in the production, comprehension, interpretation, and analysis of visuals continually takes place in fields as diverse as art history, anthropology, education, semiotics, film studies, political science, psychology, and cultural studies, but none of these disciplines can claim the study of visual communication as its own, and there is little coordination among the various fields that study it. Roy Fox proposes an interdisciplinary endeavor that would be called "Image Studies," and that would draw from the sciences, social sciences, humanities, and arts. But until such a formalized collaboration exists, we have nowhere to look for a highly developed pedagogy of visual rhetoric.

In fact, because visual communication does not yet have a formalized disciplinary framework, we do not even have generally accepted definitions and parameters within which to work. For example, what sorts of visual input should be included in a pedagogy of "visual communication"? Or, working from the process of elimination, what sorts of visual input are we willing to say are not communicative? Humans process visual input continuously, and much of this input is consciously interpreted as carrying meaning or implying something beyond the specific empirical data being observed. For example, a viewer who sees a tree bending in a sudden wind may interpret the image to mean that a storm is approaching. Similarly, a viewer may see a person in ragged clothing pushing a shopping cart through a downtown area, and interpret these signs as indicating that the person is homeless (Worth and Gross). However, while these kinds of visual images are interpreted as carrying meaning beyond the visual data they provide, they would not generally be considered instances of visual communication because they are not images created by an agent for the purpose of communicating some particular information or ideas to others. Worth and Gross call these kinds of events "natural signs"—imagistic events that the viewer might consciously interpret, but without making any assumption that an agent is creating or distributing these images in order to communicate an idea.

On the other hand, a painting of a tree bending in the wind would be interpreted, not as a natural event, but as a conscious representation of such an event. The viewer interprets such images with the assumption that a deliberate intent to communicate is driving the production and distribution of the image. Worth and Gross call such image-events "symbolic signs." So, for example, if we are watching a documentary, and we see in the documentary a shot of a person in ragged clothing pushing a shopping cart through a downtown area, we assume that the producer of the documentary has consciously
chosen to include that image in the film in order to influence the viewer’s reactions. It is this intent (or, more precisely, the viewer’s assumption that this intent exists) that makes this shot in the documentary a symbolic sign.

These classifications are not objective ones. What distinguishes a natural sign from a symbolic sign is the viewer’s interpretation of the image event. For example, if two people see a homeless person walking down the street, the first viewer may determine that the homeless person is merely going about his or her business, mindfully of how the image he or she is projecting may be interpreted by others, while the second viewer may decide that the person being viewed is deliberately “playing up” the image of homelessness in order to affect the reactions of passersby. (A viewer could also suspect that the “homeless” person is a performance artist, a sociological researcher, or an undercover police officer, deliberately creating an image of homelessness in order to produce a specific reaction in passersby.) In this case, the first viewer would see the ragged clothing and the shopping cart as elements of a natural sign, while the second viewer would see the same elements as constituting a symbolic sign (a deliberate attempt to project an image of homelessness).

It is relatively easy to exclude naturally occurring events, those that are not produced or influenced by humans, from the category of symbolic signs (unless one posits some nonhuman entity deliberately attempting to communicate with us through these events). But it seems impossible to say of almost any human action that it is not in any way influenced by a communicative intention. Almost any human action (even sitting still or some other form of nonaction) could be interpreted as resulting from a communicative intention. However, if our aim is to develop a workable pedagogy of visual rhetoric, we will have to draw the boundaries around our subject matter a little more tightly.

Walker and Chaplin follow many theorists in distinguishing between mediated and unmediated vision (23). When we look at a cow standing in a field, we are directly perceiving the cow, unmediated by any outside filter. But when we see a painting or a drawing or a photograph of a cow, or see it in a film, then we are seeing, not the cow itself, but a representation of it. The representation works by instantiating our memories of cows we have seen firsthand, along with any of our feelings or attitudes about cows that the producer of the image would like to instantiate. Even if the viewer has never seen a real, unmediated cow, the viewer understands that such creatures exist, and that they have particular traits and associations that the creator of the image would like to bring to the forefront of the viewer’s consciousness.

From a purely theoretical perspective, of course, it is highly problematic to speak of concrete objects as being unmediated. Too many people make the mistake of insisting on a rigid binary distinction between mediated and “real” objects, in essence positing two separate worlds—the “real” world, which we can walk through or drive through, looking at cows and barns and trees—and the world of created images, consisting of paintings or photographs or drawings of these objects, as well as movies and television shows that include images of them.

In almost every instance in which the physical, “real” world and the world of representations are compared, the physical world is assumed to be the preferable, superior, the more “authentic” of the two, and therefore more epistemologically trustworthy. The assumption behind this hierarchy of values is that, while images are a representation of someone else’s perception of an event, and therefore tainted by that person’s biases and imperfections, the physical world provides the opportunity for pure, untainted perception. This assumption, though, cannot begin to stand up to the considerable challenges that face it. First, a vast amount of scientific research on the subject of perception makes clear that we perceive events around us very imperfectly and incompletely. Because we cannot possibly process all of the visual information that bombards us on a continual basis, we actively filter and prioritize the visual information we are exposed to, and this filtering and prioritizing process is driven by our own preconceptions, desires, biases, and value judgments.

The second challenge to the assumption of the purity of direct perception consists of a simple recognition that all of our perceptions are influenced by cultural values and assumptions. One of the most succinct and persuasive accounts of this recognition is given in a work of fiction: Don DeLillo’s White Noise. In DeLillo’s novel, Murray Siskind, a professor of popular culture studies, accompanies the novel’s narrator to “a tourist attraction known as the most photographed barn in America” (12). The narrator and Murray watch as crowds of tourists take pictures of the barn.

Murray maintained a prolonged silence, occasionally scrawling some notes in a little book.

“No one sees the barn,” he said finally. “Once you’ve seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn.” [. . .]

“Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender. We see only what the others see. The thousands who were here in the past, those who will come in the future. We’ve agreed to be part of a collective perception. This literally colors our vision.” [. . .]

“What was the barn like before it was photographed?” he said. “What did it look like, how was it different from other barns, how was it similar to other barns? We can’t answer these questions because we’ve read the signs, seen the people snapping the pictures. We can’t get outside the aura. We’re part of the aura. We’re here, we’re now.”

He seemed immensely pleased by this. (12-13)

What the fictional Murray Siskind understands is that no visual perception is a pure apprehension of objective reality. Comprehending and interpreting any image, whether it is a barn seen through a car window or a painting of a barn, requires an active mental process that is driven by personal and cultural values and assumptions. When we look at an object, no matter how mundane, our perception of the object is filtered through, and transformed by, our assumptions about it and attitudes toward it, assumptions and attitudes that may be highly idiosyncratic or widely shared within the culture. Seeing a rusted car on blocks in someone’s front yard may signal any range of
assumptions about the owner, whether the car is seen in a photograph or painting, or whether one is seeing the actual car. To use a quite different example, it is impossible for members of our culture to view a sunset without it bringing to mind a range of associations from literary and other cultural sources. As Murray Siskind would say, we’re part of the aura, and we can’t escape it.

Having said all of this, though, I think it is valid and useful to make a distinction between looking at an object and looking at a representation of an object. Though both may be activities involving mediating influences, there is a difference between the act of seeing an object “first-hand” and seeing a visual representation of it. In the first case, the mediation results from the individual’s past experiences with similar objects, experiences that are largely culturally shared but sometimes idiosyncratic. In the second case, there is an added layer of mediation—the conscious and sometimes unconscious choices that the producer of the image has made in order to further his or her own goals as a communicator. These choices can only influence—not determine—the viewer’s interpretation of and emotional responses to the object. But these choices can determine what the viewer actually sees, and this mundane fact should not be overlooked.

At some point in their careers, students should come to understand something about visual semiotics in a broad and inclusive sense, one that includes consideration of the ways in which even direct apprehension of concrete objects is influenced by cultural values and personal experiences. However, in order to deal with more immediate concerns—or at least ones that teachers of rhetoric and communication are more prepared to deal with—it might make sense to restrict our efforts, at least initially, to visual representations—objects meant to “stand in for” or to create in the viewer’s mind a representation of something else, whether that something else be a concrete object or an abstract idea. Visual objects that could be studied as representations include paintings, sculptures, murals, photographs, drawings, videos and films, logos, icons, symbols, and multimedia art.

It is necessary, before moving on, to make one more point about the category of visual objects we are dealing with. I have been discussing the difference between concrete objects and visual representations of those objects, but rhetorical images do not necessarily have to portray an object, or even a class of objects, that exists or ever did exist. A picture of a unicorn can carry meaning because the viewer has been exposed to other representations of unicorns, both visual and verbal, and can associate the new representation with memories of those encountered previously. And, like words, visual representations can stand in for abstract ideas. Many symbols (e.g., a swastika or a peace sign) are designed primarily to represent an idea or an institution or an ideology without attempting to look like any concrete object. But just like representations of concrete objects, these abstract symbols depend on the viewer’s ability and willingness to attach some particular meaning to them, and they will likely be treated as “symbolic signs”—that is, the viewer will likely assume that the producer of the visual symbol is attempting to instantiate within the viewer some shared cultural meanings that are commonly attached to the symbol (Worth and Gross). (The various controversies over the display of the confederate flag in some southern states powerfully demonstrate the symbolic nature of some abstract icons, and demonstrate also that the meanings of these symbols are not fixed.)

Even after narrowing the range of visual objects to deliberate representations, we are still left with the most basic pedagogical question—what, exactly, do students need to know about representational images? In other words, what exactly should we be doing with visual representations in our writing and rhetoric classes?

Of course, many instructors already deal with visuals in writing classrooms, and textbook publishers are beginning to take visual information more seriously as a rhetorical mode. In fact, a recent first-year composition textbook deals almost entirely with visual communication (Seeing & Writing, by Donald and Christine McQuade, published by Bedford/St. Martin’s). But there is nothing even approaching a consensus about what types of visuals should be used in writing classrooms or exactly what students should be doing with them. Perhaps, given the nature of the discipline, no such consensus will ever emerge. Nevertheless, as a point of discussion, I offer here some thoughts about how visuals can be profitably used in a writing and rhetoric curriculum. I consider these ideas to be an early step in the development of a coherent undergraduate pedagogy of rhetoric, a pedagogy that combines the visual and the verbal without subordinating either mode of rhetoric to the other.
THE PLACE OF VISUAL INFORMATION IN AMERICAN CULTURE

First, students can and should be taught about the cultural work of images in our society. Many of our most powerful and influential cultural concepts are encoded within what Richard Weaver called “God words” (e.g., “freedom,” “motherhood,” and “justice”). But we are a largely visual society, and many of these powerful cultural concepts are encoded within easily recognizable images (e.g., representations of George Washington, the Statue of Liberty, the Madonna and child, and the American flag). And besides these common images, advertisers and others continually create new images designed to exploit many of our society’s predominantly held values and assumptions. Visuals are also used both to take advantage of and to reinforce roles and stereotypes defined by gender, race, and socioeconomic status.

Students need to learn to appreciate the power of images for defining and reinforcing our cultural values and to understand the ways in which images help us define our individual roles within society. Students also need some understanding of the many ways in which the producers of images take advantage of these cultural values and use them for their own persuasive purposes.

The advertisement in Figure 1 is an example of an image that takes advantage of common cultural values for persuasive purposes. The advertisement constitutes an appeal to readers to purchase and maintain an amount of life insurance that is adequate to cover their family members’ needs. In the narrative at the bottom of the ad, we are told that, while “life suddenly changed for Mark when his father died,” his father’s foresight in purchasing adequate life insurance allowed his mother to pay the mortgage so Mark “can remain with his friends in the community where he grew up.”

The picture at the top of the ad (processed in a blue-gray duotone, to give the scene an old-fashioned, slightly dreamy quality) shows two boys (one of whom is presumably Mark, but we don’t know which one) laughing as if sharing a joke. The point, presumably, is to demonstrate the claim that Mark is relatively happy, given the unfortunate circumstances of his father’s death. (Clearly, the advertisement is not trying to claim that Mark is unaffected by his father’s death—just that having adequate life insurance did not make matters even worse than they had to be.)

Seen as a piece of evidence (albeit a fictional one, given that the picture is obviously posed), the image can be treated rather straightforwardly as evidence to support the author’s claims. However, as with any picture, the producers of the image had many decisions to make, and their decisions reflect some of the values and assumptions of the current American culture.

One of these values is racial integration and harmony. The picture portrays a European-American boy and an African-American boy playing and laughing together. (Their stance indicates that they are having a conversation.) While I hope and believe that interracial friendships among children are relatively common, it is almost certainly more common to see close friendships among children of the same race. But the creators of the advertisement are not interested in showing the world as it most typically is, but in creating a scene that will appeal to its target audiences—parents, and most specifically, fathers. Portraying children of two races playing together as friends helps fathers of both of those races identify with the children in the picture, and it also makes the scene more positive (if slightly idealized) by evoking one of the more positive values in American culture—a desire for racial harmony.

Given the target audience, it is also no surprise that the creators of the advertisement chose to pose one of the boys with a baseball glove (held up to his chin, in order to situate it prominently in the middle of the frame) and the other one with a baseball bat over his shoulder. When it comes to fathers interacting with their sons, perhaps no activity is more iconic in American culture than baseball. From Hollywood movies like Field of Dreams and City Slickers, to Ken Burns’s PBS miniseries, to the countless novels and nonfiction
books extolling its virtues and celebrating its Americanness, the message is clear—if you’re a father and you want your son to think back on your time together with fond remembrance, take him to a baseball game.

It is easy for an analysis like this to begin to sound cynical, painting the use of cultural values as a manipulative process. But it’s important to point out, especially to students who may be exposed to such an analysis for the first time, that this need not be the case. It may be true that the picture in this advertisement is deliberately designed to portray an idealized version of American boyhood; the point is to present boyhood as a parent would like it to be for his or her son. In order to accomplish this, the advertisers must necessarily play to their audience’s ambitions, dreams, and values. But this is true for any type of persuasive appeal; visual rhetoric is not unique in this regard.

Certainly, professional persuaders should be criticized when they appeal to some of the more negative aspects of American culture, including our fears and prejudices. And we can certainly find things to critique about the advertisement in Figure 1 if we are so inclined, such as the traditional gender roles that it represents. But we can just as certainly analyze the persuasive strategies being used and point out the use of common cultural values without the analysis turning into a condemnation of the agents behind it, and it is possible to find some instances of this strategy to be relatively benign. (And would we really prefer that the advertisers use surly, tough-looking teenagers, playing violent video games and smoking cigarettes, in a more “honest” attempt to stir fathers’ emotions?) An analysis of a persuasive appeal need not always become a criticism of its source, and an analysis of visual messages in which cultural values are reflected and reinforced need not, in every case, become a criticism of those values. These points are especially important to keep in mind when dealing with young university students, who may grow suspicious or weary of rhetorical analysis if they see it as inevitably leading to a criticism of the values they have been raised to accept.

Of course, this does not mean that a critique of widely cherished American values has no place in the classroom. And there are other types of ethical questions in respect to visual rhetoric that we should prompt students to explore. In the case of Figure 1, even if the ultimate goal of the ad is to increase the revenues of insurance companies, convincing parents to carry an adequate amount of life insurance seems largely unobjectionable. But we might feel differently if the picture were being used in an advertisement for cigarettes, or for a political campaign in which we thought that the candidate’s policy goals were actually harmful to American children. Such ethical questions are not trivial, and preparing students to deal with such questions should be a central goal of rhetorical education. But my point is that an instructor faced with a classroom of students who have never been asked even to think of images as rhetorical appeals, let alone to analyze the rhetorical strategies being used in them, does not necessarily have to cover all of this ground in one leap. The first step, the one that must be taken before such ethical and moral questions can be fruitfully addressed, is to get students to understand and accept that, more often than not, images used in persuasive messages both reflect and reinforce common cultural assumptions, biases, and values, and that examining these images reflectively can tell us a lot about our own culture that we might not otherwise notice.

Of all the ways in which images could be used in writing classes, writing instructors as a group are probably most comfortable with examining the ways in which images reflect and help shape current cultural assumptions. Many first-year composition readers contain articles in which cultural critics attempt to do this. Still, despite some individual success stories, getting students to analyze images for cultural assumptions can be extremely difficult. In a sense, we’re asking students to step outside of themselves and to see these familiar images as strange and exotic objects. Unfortunately, the more familiar the image, the more difficult it is for students to examine it reflectively. (I’ve shown the image in Figure 1 to several groups of students and asked them what American values and icons were being used in it, and not one has mentioned the reference to baseball.)

One method for overcoming this difficulty is to ask students to look first at images from cultures that are foreign to them, before asking them to examine more familiar images as cultural markers. The assumption behind this method is that, once students have gained some practice looking at images from foreign cultures, experiencing those images as outsiders of the culture, it may be easier for them to then take an outsider’s relatively disinterested stance when examining visuals from their own culture. However, the tendency to see a familiar image or cultural concept as transparent is a powerful one, and there is no significant amount of evidence that methods such as these can overcome the difficulty students have in analyzing images that they would normally take for granted. More effort needs to be applied to the development and assessment of methodologies that will help students make this kind of conceptual leap.

**Images as Rhetorical Constructs**

In addition to understanding the importance of images as cultural artifacts, students need to understand the psychological processes by which images persuade. Any advertiser, attorney, or political advisor—in short, anyone who engages in rhetorical practice for a living—knows that images can be extremely powerful persuasive devices. In terms used by Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, including an image of an object in a persuasive appeal can enhance the “presence” of the object being represented, thereby enhancing its value or importance in the viewer’s mind (117-120). Objects or ideas that are merely discussed, especially in abstract terms, have a low level of psychological presence, whereas objects or ideas that are pictured or represented in concrete, visual terms are given added presence, thereby becoming more real to the reader/viewer. “As far as possible,” say Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, “such an effort is directed to filling the whole field of consciousness with this presence” (118). In other words, when particular objects are given enough presence, they can crowd out other considerations from the viewer’s mind, regardless of the logical force or relevance of those other considerations.
Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s notion of presence is similar to what has been labeled by psychologists as the concept of vividness. In psychological studies, vivid information is identified as information that is emotionally interesting and concrete (Nisbett and Ross). Vivid information, which may take the form of imagistic language, personal narrative, or a representational picture, has been shown in experiments to be more persuasive than nonvivid information (Block and Keller; Smith and Shaffer; Wilson, Northcraft, and Neale). Vivid information tends to overwhelm information presented in abstract or technical language and to be given more weight than a coldly rational analysis would justify: Thus, a picture of a single starving child might move masses to action, while an abstract technical argument about crop yields and nutritional requirements might fail to instigate any action at all.

Kenneth Burke points out another way in which images can be rhetorically powerful. He claims that an evocative image is often associated in each individual’s mind with “many kindred principles or ideas” and that, when referring to the image, the rhetor implicitly brings all of these ideas to bear without having to explicitly argue for their relevance (87). (Burke is discussing the use of verbal imagery, as in poetry, but his observations are undoubtedly even more true when applied to the use of actual representational images.) For example, the famous picture of U.S. Marines raising the American flag on the Pacific island of Iwo Jima (Figure 2) may instantiate in an American viewer feelings of patriotism, pride, or even nostalgia. If an institution such as a bank or insurance company includes this picture in its promotional literature, the hope is that the image and the values that it evokes in the viewer (e.g., patriotism, valor, courage, sacrifice) will become associated with the institution itself. No explicit ethical arguments need be made for why the institution might deserve to be associated with such an event and, since the relationship between the institution and the attitudes and feelings associated with the image is not explicitly stated, it is not likely to be questioned or challenged.1

This process of building associations between an image and a specified product, institution, political candidate, or ideological concept may be the most common way that images are used persuasively. Whether the image represents a scene from a well-known battle, a sexy model, a cuddly puppy, a beautiful sunset, or a farmer standing in his field, the objective is to prompt the viewer to associate the values and emotions that he or she feels toward the object represented in the image with the product being sold. Unfortunately, we do not yet have a well-developed pedagogy for helping students analyze and evaluate such associative arguments.

Over the past century, we have developed a variety of tools for analyzing and evaluating verbal arguments. We can take such arguments apart piece by piece and show where the flaws are. Recently, several argumentation scholars have argued that at least some persuasive images can be analyzed using the conceptual tools that have been developed to analyze verbal arguments, but J. Anthony Blair and David Fleming offer convincing refutations of that position.

Because persuasive images are most often used, not to support arguments with logic and evidence, but to prompt viewers to develop new associations, the logical apparatus that has been developed to analyze and evaluate verbal arguments does not seem to apply to visual forms of persuasion.

The analysis of visual rhetoric does not yet have a detailed vocabulary and methodology on the scale of the ones that have been developed for the analysis and critique of persuasive verbal texts. There is, as yet, no an established and widely disseminated pedagogy for discussing persuasive images with students. But a substantial amount of theoretical work is being undertaken in a variety of fields to try to fill this gap (Walker and Chaplin 1-3), and while that work is ongoing, we can help students understand, at least in broad outline, the psychological processes that are brought to bear while interpreting and reacting to persuasive images, if only to try to build students’ awareness of some basic truths about the nature of such images as rhetorical constructs (e.g., that they work through prompting the viewer to develop associations rather than through building linear, rational arguments). Concentrating on such an endeavor can provide several important benefits. First, it can help students understand that images are not just ornamental supplements to written texts, but complex texts in their own right.
often relying on powerful and subtle psychological processes in order to be comprehended and to be rhetorically effective. Second, even with the relatively limited analytical tools that we have for working with images, providing students with such tools can go far toward empowering them to analyze persuasive images and to reflect on their own responses to such images—not just in the classroom, but in their daily lives as consumers, political agents, and social beings.

**The Visual Aspects of Written Text**

When students are faced with the task of interpreting and analyzing images in the classroom, they may resist. At the least, they will face some uncomfortable dissonance, perhaps confusion, when asked to treat images as another kind of "text." This is true for several reasons, all of which have been discussed above. First, students are simply not used to working with images in this way; both in secondary and in postsecondary education, the curriculum in the United States concentrates almost solely on written or oral modes of communication, so the act of dealing with visuals as informational and persuasive texts will be unfamiliar to most students. Second, images have been given a degraded status in our culture. Students may see a move to introduce visuals into the classroom as a "dumbing down" of the content, or they may not understand that the instructor expects serious work and sustained analysis to be applied to these types of texts. Finally, students may feel lost or inadequate when they realize that the familiar methods of analyzing verbal text cannot be applied to images.

One strategy for avoiding such obstacles and initial difficulties is to introduce visual analysis into the writing class by first demonstrating how writing itself is partly a visual medium. Too many people, including many writing instructors, think of the visual elements of written texts as mere ornamentation, or perhaps as aids to comprehension. What many people fail to understand is that visual elements are powerful and essential features of almost any written text. Even when all of the propositional content is expressed in verbal form, the design of the page or the screen on which the text resides, the relative location and proximity of textual elements, and even the font used can not only enhance readability, but be part of the message that is conveyed. Overall, the visual aspects of writing can have as much to do with the effectiveness of one's message as choosing an appropriate tone or sentence structure.

Yet general-education writing courses pay almost no attention to issues of page design. By specifying a particular format and font (almost always the default Times New Roman) in their assignments, instructors control issues of page design, and therefore pretend that these issues don't matter. But by making design elements a nonissue in our courses, we leave students unprepared to analyze visual elements as readers and to use them effectively as writers, and we implicitly send the erroneous message that these visual elements are unimportant. Now that digital technologies have given all writers the ability to easily manipulate design elements in their texts, it is past time for teachers of writing to begin to pay serious attention to the communicative and rhetorical aspects of page and screen design.

One obstacle to the teaching of text design in writing classrooms is that many writing instructors themselves have little or no background in text or page design. Changes need to be made in the education of high school teachers and university writing instructors to remedy this lack of knowledge. However, in the meantime, any writing instructor can learn enough to introduce some basic design concepts to students, if only to trigger in them an awareness that text design issues are not insignificant aspects of the rhetorical process.

There are several good introductory texts that any writing instructor could use to introduce students to text design issues, Kostelnick's and Robert's *Designing Visual Language* being a notable example. Almost any good technical writing or business writing textbook will also contain some information about design, and even first-year composition rhetorics and writing handbooks are beginning to include some information about page design (though their treatment of the subject sometimes makes an interest in design seem like an afterthought). For a basic introduction to some broad design concepts, an interested instructor could begin with Robin Williams's *The Non-Designer's Design Book*. In that book, Williams explains four basic elements of text design: proximity (manipulating and varying the amount of space between and around various text elements), contrast (using design features to indicate a hierarchy of importance among text elements), alignment (varying the alignment of text elements with different rhetorical functions), and repetition (consistently applying the same design features to text elements with similar rhetorical functions). Every general-education writing course could easily incorporate some instruction and practice in basic design elements such as these.

A simple example of how the first two of these elements can be introduced is demonstrated in Figures 3 to 6, which are variations of a title slide that I have used when giving presentations on the subject of this chapter.

**Figure 3.**

**Reading the Visual in College Writing Classes**

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In Figure 3, the text elements are placed together and are all in the same font and style, with no variation in proximity and no use of contrast.
FIGURE 4.

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In Figure 4, students can easily see that implementing the principle of proximity (placing elements close together or farther apart to indicate their relationships to each other) can greatly improve readability even of a very simple page and, Figure 5 demonstrates that varying the color, size, and text style of the different textual elements (thereby enhancing contrast) can increase readability even more.

FIGURE 5.

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But comparing Figures 5 and 6 demonstrates that using such format features not only increases readability, but can affect the meaning and rhetorical effectiveness of the verbal text. As my name increases in relation to the type size of the title, my sense of self-worth appears to increase, as well. I overwhelm the subject of the essay.

There may be situations in which emphasizing the speaker’s name in such a fashion would be appropriate (e.g., if the speaker is a “star,” likely to attract listeners by his or her very identity), but it is clear (and students can easily understand) that it would not be appropriate in many situations, and a speaker or writer who uses format elements inappropriately could elicit highly negative reactions from listeners or readers.

FIGURE 6.

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Instruction in text design need not be technical and dry—quite the opposite. In fact, I’ve found that even discussions about typefaces can be lively, and students enjoy the “eureka” moments that occur when they realize how much meaning is often carried by this most mundane textual element. Working from materials (advertisements, flyers, instruction manuals, labels, etc.) that they collect and bring to class, students begin by discussing the “tone” of different typefaces that they have found, until they come to some agreements about particular examples. (This usually results in vague assertions that a particular typeface seems more “playful” or “serious” or “modern” than others.)

Once students find some examples that they agree on, I have them try to determine why the writer/designer decided to use a typeface with those qualities—which necessarily involves a discussion of the writer/designer’s rhetorical goals and assumptions about his or her audience. Only after this discussion do we try to determine the specific concrete elements in the typeface that might be influencing the students’ judgments. In this final discussion, we touch on many concepts that experienced typeface designers would find familiar, though we might not use their technical terms.

Given the current state of word-processing programs, students can also easily practice manipulating the design elements in their own texts and instructors can use these features for a variety of creative purposes such as allowing students to experiment with typefaces, color, and design in their written work in order to express their reactions to particular texts. For instance, students who have read Mary Shelley’s novel Frankenstein are often inspired to represent their interpretation of the novel visually through typeface choice. The first example uses a Gothic style font, illustrating the student’s sense that the novel is a dark tale of dungeons and death:
been little more than a convenient fiction, and as new computer technologies become more sophisticated and more dominant, this fiction is becoming quite inconvenient. For a long time, embedding any kind of visual into one’s writing was possible only for professional writers, it often involved the work of several people with distinct sets of skills, and it was a complex and expensive process. Today, anyone who uses a standard word processor can manipulate text faces, styles, sizes, and colors and easily embed graphs, drawings, photographs, and even video clips. And the World Wide Web, which is quickly becoming the standard mode of transmission for many types of texts, relies largely on visual elements for its impact and its attraction. It is true that the typical university writing assignment in many disciplines still requires no design elements beyond discrete paragraphs and a centered title. However, with the increasing availability of digital imaging technology, this situation is changing, and it will continue to change. And outside of the academy, such non-visual texts are relatively and increasingly rare. Ignoring graphics and visual design elements in writing classes, even in first-year composition, is quickly becoming anachronistic.

Still, even given all these arguments, one could reasonably ask if university writing instructors can realistically take on the task of teaching students to interpret, analyze, and produce visual texts. General-education writing courses are already typically overburdened with goals and objectives, and such courses tend to suffer from “mission creep,” taking on more and more responsibilities as notions of critical literacy and empowerment continue to broaden. The goals statement for the first-year writing program at my university includes eight objectives, including the following:

- Teaching students to use new writing technologies.
- Encouraging students to interact reflectively with their peers.
- Developing students’ critical reading skills.
- Teaching the conventions of academic discourse.
- Teaching students to evaluate sources of information.

And the goals statement doesn’t even discuss issues that nearly everyone in the university assumes will be covered in first-year composition, including research strategies, proper citation and documentation, and grammatical and mechanical correctness. Other composition courses across the country take on tasks such as teaching students to analyze literature, raising students’ critical consciousness, and teaching them to argue soundly and logically. Clearly, the expectations placed on the first-year writing course are already too great, partly as a result of our own ambitions as instructors and program coordinators, and partly because of the unrealistic expectations of others in the university community. Why, then, should instructors of such courses accept the additional task of helping students learn to interpret and analyze visual images? More important, can they do so effectively, without resulting in an incoherent and watered-down curriculum, miles wide but an inch deep? Given what writing instructors are already faced with, how can we hope to accomplish the additional tasks of
helping students learn to interpret and analyze images, create their own rhetorical images, and manage the visual elements of their written texts?

A UTOPIAN PROPOSAL: THE RHETORICAL CURRICULUM

In a recent essay in the journal Writing Program Administration, John Trimbur addresses the problem of overburdened general-education writing courses and proposes that such courses be replaced with multidepartmental, multi course writing programs. Each program would look different and involve a different set of academic departments, depending on the needs and inherent strengths present on each campus. Trimbur’s proposal is a response to what many in the discipline already perceive as a set of expectations that no one university course could hope to meet.

I would go one step further, and say that we should have multidepartmental rhetoric programs—programs built on the recognition that writing, visual literacy, and oral communication are all essential skills, but that, in the real world, they work together in complex ways, not in isolation. Scholarship and research related to visual communication is already being accomplished on most American campuses, in departments such as art, journalism, communication, political science, and anthropology, and we can probably find colleagues in history and even literature professors in English who use visuals extensively in their classes. However, on most campuses, the only required general-education courses in rhetorical analysis or practice are in written composition and speech. Though a considerable amount of expertise exists in various areas of visual analysis and critique, students are exposed to this expertise only if they elect to take certain majors that prepare them for professional work in a related area. In other words, the only students who get exposed to principles of visual rhetoric are those who decide that their careers will largely involve the production of some form of visual communication. This leaves the rest of the students, the ones who will presumably make up the audience for these professional communicators, helpless to analyze or critique their messages. The university system is doing a good job of training a select group of students to produce persuasive visual messages. But shouldn’t we be at least as concerned with helping the rest of our students respond to these messages in an informed and critical way? If we can tap into the experience, expertise, and interest in visual communication that exists across campus, then we can build a new paradigm, one that takes rhetorical education seriously and that recognizes it for the multidisciplinary endeavor that it is.

Though it may seem like a drastic step, what is needed is a bottom-up reconfiguration of the notion of rhetorical education. As with Trimbur’s proposed writing program, what this reconfiguration will look like in curricular terms will vary from one campus to the next. On some campuses, it might involve sharing resources among departments such as journalism, art, and communication. On others, it might involve the creation of a new, stand-alone administrative unit. On still others, it might be accomplished solely within an existing department. What is important is that the interested people within the university work together to decide what their goals are for their students, identify the available resources on campus for achieving those goals, identify the unique set of institutional constraints that must be negotiated on their campus, and figure out the best way, given these resources and constraints, for addressing the issue of developing students’ critical and rhetorical literacy in a multimedia world.

No doubt many of us with a vested interest in the general education composition program as it now stands will feel threatened by such a proposal. However, for those of us who see composition as a course in rhetoric, I think implementing such a proposal would represent a new opportunity—an opportunity to have, perhaps for the first time, a campuswide discussion about what rhetoric is, what it means to make students rhetorically aware and rhetorically proficient, and what students need to know about rhetorical theory and practice in order to thrive as citizens in the information age. Following through on this proposal would be risky because it would force us to confront the myths about first-year composition that we have profited from (such as the myth that first-year composition will “clean up” students’ grammar). For perhaps the first time, we would have to lay all of our cards on the table. We should be worried only if we are not sure of our hand.

NOTE

1. A potential problem with such persuasive strategies is that the image being used may not be as familiar to a broad audience as one might expect. For instance, Messaris reports that only fourteen students in a class of twenty-nine undergraduates could name “even an approximate place and time (e.g., World War II battle) for Joe Rosenthal’s original photograph of the flag-raising,” one of the most famous American photographs of the twentieth century. Messaris reports similar recognition rates among U.S.-born graduate students (Visual Persuasion 94).

WORKS CITED


PART TWO

The Rhetoric of the Image