

# *Visual Literacy Toolkit*

Visual literacy involves developing the set of skills needed to be able to interpret the content of visual images, examine social impact of those images and to discuss purpose, audience and ownership. It includes the ability to visualise internally, communicate visually and read and interpret visual images.

Visual literacy also involves making judgements of the accuracy, validity and worth of images. A visually literate person is able to discriminate and make sense of visual objects and images; create visuals; comprehend and appreciate the visuals created by others; and visualise objects in their mind's eye. To be an effective communicator in today's world, a person needs to be able to interpret, create and select images to convey a range of meanings.

## ***Visual Semantics*** *the way images relate more broadly to issues in the world to gain meaning.*

Some questions you might ask to develop an understanding of visual semantics include:

- Who created the image?
- At what point of history and in what context was the image created?
- Who commissioned the image?
- For what purpose was the image created?
- In what context is the image being seen?
- Who is the intended audience of the image?
- In what form(s) of media will the image be seen?
- What has been omitted, altered or included in an image?
- What does the image say about our history?
- What does the image communicate about our individual or national identity? - What does the image say about society?
- What does the image say about an event?
- What aspects of culture is an image communicating?

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*The following table may be useful when talking about images:*

<b>Issues</b>	What issues are being shown in the image? How is the way the issue is shown in the image similar to or different from how you see this issue in the world? What might this image mean to someone who sees it? What is the message of the image
<b>Information</b>	Where has the information in the image come from? What information has been included and what information has been left out? What proportion of the image could be inaccurate? What information presented is factual/manipulated/framed? What is the relationship between the image and any text? What impact does the size of images within the picture have?
<b>Who</b>	What people are depicted in the image (even if there are no actual people in the image, whose culture or experiences are being shown)? Who created the image and for what purpose? Who is the intended audience for the image? Whose point of view does the image take?
<b>Persuasion</b>	Why has a certain media been chosen? Why was a particular image chosen? Why was the image arranged that way? Is the information contained in the image factual? What devices have been used to get the message across to the viewer? How has the message been affected by what has been left out or is not shown?
<b>Assumptions</b>	What attitudes are assumed? Whose voice is heard? Whose voice is not heard? What experiences or points of view are assumed?

## Visual Literacy Toolkit

### Visual literacy and technology

One of the major changes as the result of technology is the development of new ways of communicating.

Literacy will be about being able to imagine and model possible actions that might be taken into future world. These models will be communicated visually and sensually.

Human communication has always been made up of multiple codes, but as the information we need to communicate becomes more complex, diverse, deep and extensive, humans are exploring simpler ways to communicate that can make connections between increasingly complex forms. To address this need, the communicative environment is becoming dominated by images. Images play a major role in understanding the world. The "information age" has led to the need to process volumes of data quickly and efficiently and the adage of "a picture being worth a thousand words" is revealed in the way images are utilised in interactive media.

Pivotal to communication on technology is the way images can be manipulated. The idea that 'seeing is believing' is now a naïve concept. Manipulated images serve to re-code culture.

"We are now in the sixth wave (of communication), one of expansion to include all visual culture, which is grounded in global, socio-cultural concerns and what it means to live in increasingly image-based, technological environments". As Freedman (1998: 183)

### How do photographs convey meaning?

Here are a few of the techniques and strategies by which a photo conveys meaning:

**Angle:** The vantage point or direction from which the artist photographs the subject.

**Framing:** By deciding where the edges of the image will be, the photograph determines what you will (and will not) see—whether the subject will fill the frame and appear "close up" or will be seen at a distance as part of a larger context.

**Light:** Light is one of the most powerful tools of the photographer. The manipulation of light and dark and the sharpness of contrast between light and dark contribute to the mood a photograph conveys.

**Focus:** The clarity or blurriness of the image. The range between the nearest and farthest things that appear in clear focus defines the photograph's depth of field.

**Composition:** What is in the foreground? Are the elements arranged in any particular pattern? Do you see any geometric shapes? Are the lines of the photograph straight or curving, thick or thin? Do any visual elements repeat? Is the visual weight of the photograph balanced: on each side? top to bottom? diagonally?

Visual Reading  
in depth  
analysis

### Visual Literacy Question Bank

#### Questions on FORM

1. Which of the following formal elements most strongly captures your attention when viewing this image: color, line, shape, texture, space, etc? Describe how or why.
2. Describe the use of color by exploring how it is present or absent in the image you are exploring. You can do so by considering the following questions. Jot down your impressions along with supportive details as you analyze the image carefully. NOTE: While we perceive the color present in a photograph to be 'captured' *naturally* from nature or the natural environment, color can in fact be manipulated in the development of the photographic image. Moreover, if the image under consideration is not a photograph, color has been at least or even more selectively chosen. Think carefully then about the choices of color in the composition of the image you are analyzing.

# *Visual Literacy Toolkit*

## Questions on FORM Cont'd

1. What colors do you see? Are there multiple manifestations of any particular color along the visual spectrum? Try to distinguish them by their hues (e. g. pink, red, brick) as well as by their degrees of saturation and value contrasts, that is their light/dark tonal elements.
2. How do you think the use of color impacts the way in which you experience the image? On a scale of 1 to 10, note how important the use of color is to you in your interaction with the image and explain why you gave it that numerical rank. What elements of the image are more or less important than color in your estimation? Does the use of color evoke any emotion in your response to the image? If so, how would you describe that emotion?
3. Consider the use of line and shape in the image you are exploring by answering the following questions.
  1. What shapes are present in the image (used either in constructing the objects or the background of the image)? What shapes are most frequently employed or repeated?
  2. How is line used to create these shapes? How and when are the lines or they shapes used in dynamic ways to suggest movement? How and when are they used in static ways that do not imply active motion?
  3. Does the use of line contribute to an illusory three dimensional space in the image? Does line exist in two dimensional relationships?
  4. What is the relationship between line and the sensations of texture in the image? How do line and shape create textural impressions?
  5. How does line/shape combine to create patterns in the image? What patterns are created? How do any perceived patterns (including color patterns) owe their design effectiveness to the use of line and shape?
  6. Is the use of line and shape in the image a more or less powerful visual experience than the use of color in the image? On a scale of 1 to 10, note how important the use of line and shape are to you in your interaction with the image and explain why you gave it that numerical rank. Does the use of line or shape evoke any emotion in your response to the image? If so, how would you describe that emotion?
4. How is space used in the image?
  1. Does the space seem cluttered, busy, open, white, empty, colorful?
  2. What compositional designs are incorporated into the use of space? What types of angles or exterior lighting sources are present or implied? (If the image is a photograph, consider the selection and use of camera angles.)
  3. On a scale of 1 to 10, note how important the use of space is to you in your interaction with the image and explain why you gave it that numerical rank. Does the use of space evoke any emotion in your response to the image? If so, how would you describe that emotion?
5. How do the elements of color, line, shape, texture, space and so on work together to contribute to the design of the image? Consider their interactions:
  1. How are these elements arranged and/or balanced together within the image?
  2. Are any of the design elements dominant? What elements are less dominant? What would change about the image if you were to change the relationship of the design elements to one another to make another element dominant? How would your response to the image be altered?
  3. Imagine how you might change the image by varying one of the design elements discussed above. What element would you vary and how?
  4. What emotion(s) do the combined design elements create for you as you explore this image? What memories or associations are called up for you by the way in which the design elements are used? Do you think another viewer might interpret the use of design elements differently? Why or why not? Might individual or socio-cultural memories or experiences affect one's response to the design elements? Why or why not?
6. How do the pictorial elements, such as color, line, shape, space and texture, relate to the thematic elements of the image?
  1. Is there any written material or use of symbol in the image? If so, how does it relate to the pictorial elements described above?

2. In your judgment, what is the function of the image? How do the formal elements, both pictorial and symbolic, support this function?
3. Of what significance is the medium (oil, cartoon, photograph, map etc.) in thinking about the formal elements and/or the function of the image? How would they be altered if the image were to be reproduced in another medium (i.e., an oil painting or a map is photographed)? How does one explore an image differently is it a reproduction of an artifact or the artifact itself?
4. What is the size of the image? If the image is a reproduction, how is it altered from its original size? How does this affect one's response to it?
5. How do all the formal elements, pictorial as well as textual and symbolic, contribute to your emotional response or intellectual understanding of the image?

## 7. Does your image depict a landscape?

1. What are the natural features?
2. Are there flora and fauna? Is there vegetation? Does its presence provide clues about the season of the year? Does it provide information about the climate? What does it suggest about sources of water?
3. Is a sky visible? Does it indicate the time of day; of season; climate?
4. What does the terrain suggest? Is it "wild"/ "natural"? Cultivated? Landscaped?
5. How is the land organized? Is it flat or horizontal? Are there elevations? Are there depressions?
6. Is there an animal presence? Is there a natural or cultivated habitat for animals?
7. What is evident of the built environment? Are there buildings or other engineered artifacts like bridges? Roads? Dams?
8. What are the materials of the built environment?
9. What were the construction methods? Does the built environment appear to be handmade, made with the assistance of mechanization or pre-fabricated?
10. What is the relationship between each of the features?
11. What is the relationship between the land, animals, humans, and the built environment? Does this relationship suggest anything about the role of technology during the period the image was made?

## 12. Does your image depict people?

1. How many people are featured in the image?
2. Can you approximate their ages? Their races? Are they male or female?
3. Are they indoors or outdoors?
4. Does the image appear to be candid or posed?
5. Is it a formal or informal portrait?
6. Is it a still portrait? How are the figures depicted? In profile? From the front? From behind? Is there a backdrop? Are there props?
7. Is it an action shot? What is happening in the image? Where did the action begin? How are others responding to the action(s)?
8. Are there material objects in the image?
9. How are the people dressed? What type of clothing are they wearing? What type of shoes are they wearing? Are they wearing accessories like jewelry, hats, scarves? What does their costume suggest about the period, the place, the climate, the temperature, the season, the setting? Are there symbols associated with their dress or objects? Are they wearing uniforms?
10. What type of activities might they engage in?
11. Are the engaged in individual or collective activities?
12. What is the purpose of their activity? For personal pleasure? For worship? For work? For relaxation? Etc.
13. Is there any evidence of the presence or relationship to technology?
14. Is there any evidence of the presence or relationship to nature?

## 15. Does your image depict buildings?

1. How is the exterior of the building organized?
2. What are the features of the façade's composition?
3. Are there windows? How many? How are they arranged?
4. Is the façade a solid plane? Are there patterns?
5. How many stories is it?
6. What are the materials used?
7. Are there special details that have been applied or incorporated like trim, columns, medallions, clock faces?
8. What architectural style is it?
9. What is the scale relative to humans?
10. Where do people enter and exit?
11. How is the interior of the building organized?
12. How is the space created? By rooms? By walls? By manipulating ceiling heights?

13. Are the walls covered? Are the floors covered? Are the windows covered? Are the door openings covered?
14. Is there a decorative plan?
15. Are there furnishings?
16. Are there appliances?

## Questions on CONTEXT

### 1. What is the medium of the image you are examining?

1. Is the image a photograph/Digital image, video or animation?
2. In what environment/platform is the image located? Is it on paper? In a book? On cloth? On a computer monitor or movie screen?
3. Is this an original image or a reproduction? How can you tell?
4. If reproduced, what was the original medium of the image? What was its original size?
5. If reproduced, what details may have been lost or diminished when this image was reproduced?

### 2. What is the history of this image?

1. Have you ever seen this image before? If so, when and where?
2. Are there any written sources that give you background information on this image? If yes, what is that background?
3. Are there any "stories" you know or have heard about this image?
4. Does this image remind you of any other images? If yes, what are those images and when and where did you see them?
5. Does this image remind you of anything you've read or experienced? If yes, what are the details of those texts and/or memories?

### 3. Who created this image?

1. Was this image created by an individual? A group? A machine?
2. Was the image created by an artist? An advertising firm? A child? A corporation?
3. Can you tell if this image was produced over time by one or more people? If so, can you tell how many drafts or preliminary stages the image went through?
4. Did the creator have formal artistic training? Were they self-taught?

### 4. What audience was this image created for and where did the image first appear?

1. Was there an intended audience for this image? Was there a secondary intended audience? Has the image had an unintended audience?
2. Did it circulate when it was first made? If so, how did it circulate (e.g., on the internet, in books, on bootleg video tapes, on postcards)? Was the image designed/intended for circulation?
3. Was it displayed in an exhibition? If so, who attended the exhibition?
4. Was it published in a periodical? A newspaper, a magazine? A 'zine? What were the subscription and circulation figures of the periodical?
5. Was it published electronically?
6. How did audiences respond to the image? Was there a response by the general public?
7. Has the image been criticized? By professional critics? By other artists/journalists? By the general public or specific audiences (e.g., specific racial/ethnic audiences)?

### 5. What is the social, political, and/or cultural context of this image?

1. Can this image located within any social institutions? Does it belong to a family? Was it produced by a government? Is it owned by the media?
2. Is this image used in any social practices or rituals? Might it be given as a gift? Used in a ceremony? Displayed at social functions?
3. Does this image express any politics? If so, what are those politics?
4. Are there any politics surrounding the image? Any groups that have protested the image? Any groups that have fought for this image?
5. Does this image have any cultural meaning? Does the meaning vary for members of different cultures?
6. Does this image do any social, political, or cultural work? Does it explain any aspect of society? Does it win you over to any political position? Does it teach you anything about another culture, or your own?