

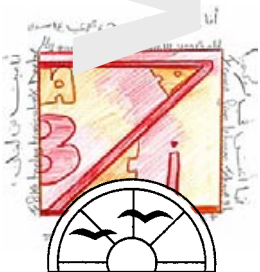


exploring visual literacy

The average teenager has watched 22,000 hours of television by the time he/she graduates from high school.

We live in a visual world. Our communications come to us through visual media: illustrated magazines and newspapers, movies and television, and visually engaging sites from the Internet.

As human beings, our brains are built to interpret images. We process visual images 60,000 times faster than text, because we take in all the data from an image simultaneously while we process text in a sequential fashion.



Reading a Photograph or a Picture



How do we read Photographs and Pictures?

1. Objects - shapes and figures which could be people, animals, places or objects. Some objects have been associated with certain emotions and feelings. An object can be used as a shortcut in a message but relies on the understanding of the symbol by the audience e.g. a lion is an animal but can also be used to symbolise bravery. Knowledge of the parts of a photograph (foreground, mid-ground and background) helps in the identification of specific objects, especially in a crowded picture.

2. Size of the object of interest. Important objects are usually large and located in the foreground while small objects that are in the background are considered less important.

3. Settings have symbolic significance and influence our response to a photograph- dry, country settings denote ruggedness and hardship while soft, green, rural settings suggest tranquillity.

4. Colour - White denotes innocence and black denotes death in some cultures. Hindu people mourn in white and marry in red. Colour often represents the stereotypes for maleness and femininity in popular culture- soft, pastel colours are associated with feminine stereotypes while dark primary or metallic colours are seen as masculine by some groups.

5. Position of objects, shapes and figures in photographs gives meaning e.g. centre, left, right, bottom, top, foreground, mid-ground, background and whether the objects are close together or far apart.

6. Direction In what direction are the objects, figures, people, animal etc facing? Is it at the camera, past the camera or at a person or object in the photograph?

7. Angle Where has the photographer placed us in the photo? A high angle shows dominance by the object that we are viewing while a low angle or us looking down on the object shows submission by the object being viewed. Equality is shown through the representation of an eye level point of view.

8. Light Different lighting effects or colours can provide meaning e.g. soft, yellow light or back lighting creates a halo effect and can suggest innocence. Overexposed lighting suggests heat while underexposed light suggests coolness or an enclosed feeling. Settings can be confirmed through time of day clues provided through the representation of light.

9. Body Language - posture, gesture and facial expression all tell about the way that we are feeling and thinking. Animals are often portrayed with body language to develop humour.

10. Clothing reflects our personality and can also be a symbol of period, culture and status.



(Adapted from: Quin, R., McMahon, B., Quin, R., 1996, Using Visual Texts in Primary and Secondary English Classrooms, Department of Education, Queensland.)



How we read comics?

1. Panels Comics are made up of panels which give a snapshot of the most interesting parts of the story. The reader must use her/his imagination to fill in the gaps in the story. Panels come in a variety of shapes and sizes. The shape of the panel can help to convey a meaning to the reader e.g.

- panels to create a feeling of doom
- words in the shape of a panel e.g. SMASH
- characters bursting out of panels
- star-shaped panels to sum up an explosive moment
- thin panels for tension
- a whole page panel for an exciting moment.

2. Camera Angles Comic artists use camera angles just as in a film, to give variety, visual interest and to create atmosphere e.g.

- wide shots give an overall view of the scene
- close up shots create drama, tension and emotion
- extreme close up shots increase tension
- overhead shots show vulnerability.

3. Closure is what the reader imagines is happening between panels. Closure is used to emphasise action and humour.

4. Words and Pictures sometimes say different things to give a new meaning or subtext. Subtext is used to add depth to the story-it makes the reader think about what the character is thinking and so to empathise with that character.

5. Symbols are simple pictures that mean something else and help to make it easy for the reader to identify with aspects of the comic.

6. Comic Talk There are three ways in which comics talk:

- word balloons are how the characters talk to each other
- thought bubbles tell the reader what the characters are thinking
- narration boxes tell the reader where we are and what is going on.
- Comic characters have their own way of talking. The way that characters talk and act gives them personality and makes them believable. The choice of words is important to help the reader identify with character.

Reading photographs and life-like drawings

Photographs tell us about who or what is in the text or to describe an idea. At the same time they make us respond in a particular way through a number of techniques outlined below.

Gaze

Images in a photograph or drawing can create a particular response in the viewer through gaze. For example, photographs or drawings of people can demand our attention if the person appears to be looking directly at us, while images of objects such as landscapes or people looking at an object offer us the chance to focus on any of the elements in the image first rather than being demanded by the gaze of eyes to start with the person in the photograph or drawing.

Angles and framing

The angle at which the photograph or drawing is presented will create a particular effect. We can look directly at an image or look up at or down on it. The use of a high angle makes us, the viewer seem more powerful and a low angle puts the person in the photograph in a more powerful position. The way an image is framed, ie close up, mid shots and distance shots also add to the way we respond. We feel quite distanced from a person in a long shot while the opposite is true in a close up.

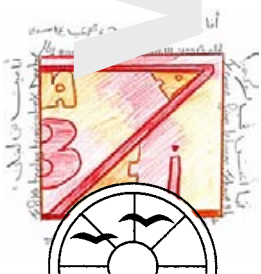
Colour

Images use colour differently. A black and white photograph or drawing in science or geography may be quite adequate for the purpose of giving information whereas a coloured photograph can add an extra dimension in detail and appeal. Colour can be described in terms of tone and saturation. Factors such as whether the image is crisp and clear or fuzzy and out of focus; use of shading and whether the colour is strong or washed out, light or dark, glossy or mat, real or surreal can all influence our response to an image.

Composition

The way the image is constructed also influences our response to a photograph or drawing. We need to consider what is the thing in the photograph that attracts our attention first (*salience*). The way in which our eye moves around the image (*reading path*). How are the people or objects in the photograph placed in relation to each other ie does one object seem to be placed in front of the other (*foregrounding*)? Is one image superimposed onto another? Are the objects in the image realistic in size in relation to each other? Does the image look complete or are there parts of the subject you can't see (*cropping*)?

Finally we need to think about whether we would respond to a photograph the same way if the images in it were positioned in reverse? This may seem like an unusual point to consider but is quite important when you understand that depending on your culture (Western or other) placing a person or object in the centre of a text or to the left or right will create quite a different effect. The left hand side of a page is referred to as the Given while the right hand side is referred to as New. In a similar way, placement



WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE



STORY AND PICTURES BY MAURICE SENDAK

A Picture Book Vocabulary

Discuss with the class picture books and what the students already know about them. Use the following to structure discussion:

- **Cover** What does the cover tell us? What predictions can we make about the story?
- **Endpapers** How do the endpapers take you into the story? What information is provided here? Do the endpapers set a mood for what is to follow?
- **Title Page** Look at the font used and the illustration-How are you positioned as a reader? How is your reading of the book directed?
- **Page Opening** is used to describe the two facing pages in a picture book.
- **Size** How does the size affect your response to the book? Does the size encourage sharing or the private viewing of the book?
- **Format** The picture book will be in a square, vertical or horizontal format. The format affects the shape that the artist fills with pictures. How does the shape affect what the artist can show?
- Other aspects include: **layout, plate, frame, vignette, bleeds, border and montage.** These might best be introduced using examples of art work.

