

READING THE **BIG** **PICTURE**

A Visual Literacy
Curriculum for Today

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In schools around the country, students are increasingly asked to create visual representations of ideas and information. Slideshows, infographics, and websites have become nearly as common as text documents. We spend years teaching students grammar and paragraph construction so that they can become strong written communicators, but rarely is the same attention spent on the elements of visual communication. Many educators assume that students “just know” how to create visual material; at fault is the myth of the digital native, the pervasive idea that comfort with typing, tapping, and swiping correlates to knowledge or skills. Our students communicate daily in an environment with rapidly changing norms; we must create opportunities for

explicitly teaching, learning, and practicing elements of visual communication—critical life skills.

Let’s step back and define what, exactly, is meant by “visual literacy.” Looking at the AASL learning standards, specifically 1.1.6 and 2.1.6 (AASL 2007), and the ISTE publication *Media Literacy in the K–12 Classroom* (Baker 2012), we see that visual literacy can be defined as reading and writing in (or through) pictures. In our school critically decoding the meaning of images is often addressed in arts and humanities classes. The school librarians teach a course that focuses on creation—the “writing” aspect of visual literacy. The use of visuals to communicate requires extensive education and support, yet is rarely covered elsewhere in the curriculum. We take a

broad view of visual literacy, encompassing text elements in presentations and infographics that integrate with, support, and are supported by the visual elements. In the end, our focus is on communication, which is often multimodal; images, text, even audio and video should all be considered part of the larger context of visual literacy.

Teaching visual literacy is two-pronged. One component is purely mechanical; there are tools that students need to master to cement their developing visual literacy. This aspect of instruction is akin to teaching handwriting or typing in traditional literacy education. The other component is the conceptual framework that determines whether the visually encoded information is clear and comprehensible as well as aesthetically pleasing.



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OUR **GOAL** IS TO HELP THEM UNDERSTAND THAT THE MEANING IS ALWAYS THERE, WHETHER EFFECTIVE OR NOT, AND THAT THEY, TOO, **CAN CREATE MEANING** BY HARNESSING THE POWER OF **VISUAL COMMUNICATION.**

We have spent several years teaching the concepts of visual literacy as part of a ninth-grade foundational course, and have found that for secondary students who come from disparate backgrounds (as many as twenty separate schools), establishing a strong conceptual foundation is critical. Frontloading the mechanics would make the curriculum focus on the tools rather than the content and lead to proficient tool users who still lack vital communication skills.

We come at this as librarians not designers. We have not been formally trained in design; we strive to be thoughtful consumers of visual information, and we've read widely over the years (see the resources listed at the end of the article). We are not teaching a course on graphic design, although that's a piece of our instruction, but on graphic decoding and encoding. Our

students don't realize that they decode visual information all the time. The seams don't show in the best design; even students alert to the communicative power of images can miss the subtler impact of visual messaging. Our goal is to help them understand that the meaning is always there, whether effective or not, and that they, too, can create meaning by harnessing the power of visual communication.

Despite all the jokes about PowerPoint, slideshows are still prevalent and relevant communication tools. They are simple, with a relatively low bar to entry; they work for presentations across a range of topics and for both synchronous and asynchronous communication. We've seen that the average high school student is responsible for several slideshows each year, giving them multiple opportunities to practice and consolidate the skills we teach.

With slight modification, these skills are transferable to other forms of visual communication.

We begin by giving our students the opportunity to purposefully decode visual meaning in a slideshow built for the class. The slides are deliberately poorly designed, and students are asked to critique them. Based on prior experiences, many students have already developed an aversion to poor color choices, distracting fonts, or improperly resized images. As they find the flaws and critique the design in front of them, students begin to see that they already possess the ability to identify elements of design, though they lack the technical vocabulary or framework for discussion.

The next step is for students to flip that skill, to go from knowing what contributes to bad design to understanding how to

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QUICK TIPS

To support less-visual learners, we balance the big ideas of graphic design with small, achievable rules:

- one idea per slide;
- use a plain background (never a template);
- minimize text; don't use slide headings;
- avoid bullet points;
- NEVER use animated transitions; and
- always fill the screen with the image.



create good design. We continue to use a slideshow to convey the principles, but these slides have been carefully constructed to embody the elements of good design. We take learners through the building blocks of graphic design: color, font, layout, and image selection. The slideshow consistently demonstrates and reinforces the ideas so that when students critique they can see what works; they are also encouraged to note aspects of the design that still aren't as effective as they could be.

Finally, the students practice designing with clear communication as their aim. With limited class time we aren't able to ask them to create a full slideshow, so we focus on making one excellent slide that is presented to and critiqued by their peers. This limitation has, in fact, turned out to be a benefit for the students. Intense focus on one slide gives students the opportunity to practice thoughtful design, a skill that they scale up as they are asked to make full slideshows throughout their high school careers.

Students frequently come back to the school library for support whenever they have a presentation due. They can justify their design choices and identify when they are failing to communicate effectively. By senior year, many of them don't need support at all.

Our results are anecdotal, but again and again, this is the strand of our curriculum that is mentioned by our returning graduates. Our students feel their communication and visual literacy skills give them an advantage in college. Everyone they meet knows how to write, but not everyone can convey meaning with their visuals.

Teens regularly share images on Snapchat, Instagram, and Tumblr and use emojis and GIFs to communicate with each other. They're interacting with visuals every day; our goal in teaching visual literacy is to teach young people to think critically about the design that's all around them. AASL's learning standards and the Common Core State Standards point repeatedly to the need for clear, effective communication. In school and at play, students need communication skills that move beyond text. Learning to use design for communication gives students practical, necessary tools for success.



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Recommended Reading:

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Kidd, Chip. 2013. *Go: A Kidd's Guide to Graphic Design*. New York: Workman.

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Samara, Timothy. 2007. *Design Elements: A Graphic Style Manual: Understanding the Rules and Knowing When to Break Them*. Gloucester, MA: Rockport.

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