

Visual Rhetoric for Student Writers

“Visual rhetoric” has been used to mean anything from the use of images as argument, to the arrangement of elements on a page for rhetorical effect, to the use of typography (fonts), and more. While we cannot hope to cover these and many other topics in depth on this handout, it will be possible for us to look at some of the common visual rhetoric problems encountered by student writers: the text elements of a page (including font choices), the use of visuals (including photographs, illustrations, and charts and graphs), and the role of overall design in composing a page rhetorically.

*Note: Much of the current use of “visual rhetoric” is directed at analyzing images and other visuals that already exist. This handout is meant to help you generate visual material.

TEXT ELEMENTS

Text is so highly visual that its visual nature and power is often invisible. While it might be interesting to look at the history of typography, or the way type has been transformed by computers, what we really need to do is think about what type does. Let’s consider a few examples using some words that are probably unfamiliar <<http://www.lipsum.com/>> to you so that you can better “see” the type without considering the actual meaning of the words (though we’ll talk later about why meaning and visual should and cannot be separated).



Even with just these four type faces, we can see different personalities (however limited), levels of formality, and even hints of the rhetorical concept *ethos* emerging (one’s credibility). Novice designers tend to choose fonts not according to their rhetorical situation, but rather to what they think looks pretty, or cool, or whatever. But it’s important to think about the kinds of visual/cultural associations that different fonts bring with them. Here are the same four fonts, with text that appears visually/culturally appropriate:

Operating Instructions

Dear Mrs. Smith,

Medieval History

Bigfoot Captured!

While the first two fonts (Arial and Century Schoolbook, respectively) may not jump out at you as having a whole lot of cultural associations; that's partly by design—the fonts are deliberately nondescript (especially Arial), and thus are used quite commonly. Not so with the fonts used for “Medieval History” (Dauphin) and “Bigfoot Captured!” (Futura Xtra Black Condensed Italic). The “Medieval History” text *looks like* our cultural conception of Medieval script. That is, the font looks almost like it was hand-written. Likewise, we've all seen tabloid papers in the checkout lanes of the supermarket, announcing in bold, loud text all sorts of incredible news.

Let's look again at a negative example, where these cultural codes are ignored:

In deepest sympathy

Lafayette Teen Center

Chemistry Lab Report

Museum of Natural History

Again, the first two examples may not jump out at you. But if “In deepest sympathy” were on the front of a sympathy card, it would seem cold, callous, impersonal. With the “Lafayette Teen Center,” that font face may be appropriate in, say, a fundraising drive, but probably not for promotional materials to get teens to come there off of the streets (for that, we'd want a font that was exciting, more “youthful” in appearance). The “Chemistry Lab Report” example might seem OK at first glance (it's formal, it evokes a sense of history with the word “chemistry”), but it fails rhetorically because it does not acknowledge the expectations of the general audience of chemists or chemistry instructors. Taken in that light, in fact, the text for “Chemistry Lab Report” looks ridiculous. Likewise with “Museum of Natural History”; we still see the tabloid headline in it, as though “Overtaken by Mutants” were the words we'd expect next!

Headline versus Body Text

Keeping in mind the ideas we've already covered, there is an issue of readability involved in font choices. For example, this script font is fine for the following headline text:

Lunch Menu

However, let's repeat the text from the preceding section in the same font:

Again, the first two examples may not jump out at you. But if "In deepest sympathy" were on the front of a sympathy card, it would seem cold, callous, impersonal. With the "Lafayette Teen Center," that font face may be appropriate in, say, a fundraising drive, but probably not for promotional materials to get teens to come there off of the streets (for that, we'd want a font that was exciting, more youthful in appearance).

Now, that font may be OK if that's all the text there is. But can you imagine reading that for five pages? 25? An entire biology textbook? I hope not! This is specifically why we have fonts like Times New Roman or Arial: they are comfortable to read for quite awhile; we don't have to strain to discern the words.

Text and the Web

When novice designers bring some of their bad font-choice habits to the Web, the results can be disastrous.

First, there is the issue of how fonts get handled on the Web. You may have a computer with hundreds or even thousands of fonts installed on it, and as you're designing for the Web on that computer, it may seem no big deal to use Poster Wangedoodle Medium Xtra Bold, or whatever font it is that you're using. However, you must realize that not all users have that (and many other fonts) installed on their computers. So stick with the simple standard for HTML text: Arial, Verdana, etc. In certain Web-authoring programs, you can also specify simply "San Serif" (no ornamentation, like Arial) or "Serif" (ornamentation, like Times New Roman); in these cases, your Web audience's browser will use a common font on the user's machine.

Second, and following directly from the first, is the issue of screen readability. Some fonts that looks awesome in print fail miserably on the screen. Again, even assuming the compatibility issues we just covered, fonts meant to look like handwritten script become practically illegible. And if the font used on a Web page isn't on the users computer, they may just get a string of boxes or nonsense characters.

TEXT SUMMARY: Questions to Consider When Choosing Fonts

1. What kinds of expectations does my audience have regarding fonts? Are they scholars or soccer fans? Church-goers or movie-goers?
2. What am I representing in my font choices? Am I a job applicant? A student writing a seminar paper? A club officer making a poster to advertise a formal dinner?

3. What kind of text am I running in different fonts? Headlines or fine print? Body text or bulleted lists?
4. What distance is my text being viewed at? On a greeting card or a bumper sticker? A poster or a flyer?
4. What fonts are commonly available on people's computers that I can use for the Web? What kinds of alternatives are available for text that cannot be displayed in Web browsers?

COLOR

There are thousands of books and Websites that cover the use of color from all sorts of theoretical perspectives. We will limit ourselves here to some basic ideas about color, know that we are only scratching the surface by giving primary consideration to contrast.

Contrast is one of the most basic and critical choices of color. Basically, contrast deals with the brightness of one color relative to another—and contrast typically is pushed to its absolute envelope on the printed page. That's why black text on white paper is so common: the contrast between black character and white space increases legibility.

However, black on white is not the most interesting use of color. And when designing for the screen, white may not be the best choice—it can be almost blinding on certain monitors. One of the more conservative choices, then, is to run black text over a neutral, light color like beige or event mint green.

Many beginning designers, however, find themselves overwhelmed by the palettes available on most computers, and begin choosing colors for the palette of their designed based on favorites. However, results like that can be disastrous.

Consider a palette of a bright red background and deep blue text

Can you read that? Not comfortably! Imagine an entire screen of text like that. Part of the reason that this color combination (which appears more frequently on the Web than you can imagine) is so hard on the eyes has to do with how computer screens handle color information. If you move your face close enough to the screen, you'll notice an almost black outline at the left side of the characters, and a strange, almost white glow at the right. Why? Computer screens are made up of tiny little boxes of light, called pixels. Each pixel contains a red element, a green element, and a blue element (you can see this even better on a standard television set). But what happens in this case is the red element of the red areas of the screen is full on (leaving green and blue dark), and the blue element of the blue areas is full on (leaving red and green dark). The result is a literal "black hole" on the left side (remember, RED GREEN BLUE), and a glow on the right (since both the far-right BLUE element is full on, as is the far-left RED).

OK, enough technical information. But another problem with this palette is the fact that blue and red do not have much contrast from one another—they are roughly the same brightness. Worse

than that, red is culturally-coded to jar us (and the bulls at the Plaza de Toros). That's why it's typically used on everything from stop signs and stop lights to warning labels and fire alarms.

Consider a palette of a dark gray on a muted yellow.

Now, this is not an ideal palette—but it does illustrate our concern with contrast. This may not be a fun palette for reading several thousand pages of an online novel, but it's great for small areas of text, and encouraging a soft, peaceful mood.

Consider its cousin, black on bright yellow.

Part of what's at issue with these colors—the black versus the grays, the muted versus bright yellows—is the idea of saturation. Saturation is how much of a color there is. You might think back to when you painted with watercolors as a child. If you really scrubbed your brush around in the yellow paint, you'd get a deep, bright yellow. But by watering the brush down, and dabbing just the tiniest bit of yellow, you got something of a more faint, muted yellow.

One of the common mistakes that beginning designers make is using highly-saturated colors (which is another reason the red-on-blue thing didn't work above).

Consider a slight variation on that theme:

Here we have a darker red color, with a desaturated blue color. Now, the relationships between these colors as the red and blue above are fairly complicated, but you can see the positive results of the two.

Finally, the advice we'll leave you with, besides go pick up a few dozen books on color theory, is this: just like we have certain culturally-loaded sensibilities when it comes to font choices, the same is often true for color. Think, for example, about the difference in color schemes between a Best Buy ad (deep blues, bright yellows) and a Fall catalogue for J. Crew (deep wood-tones, crisp blue-grays). Each one conveys a level of excitement (or not), and a degree of sophistication. Observe the colors around you—see what they do, and what impacts they have on you. Bring those ideas with you as you design.

COLOR SUMMARY: Questions to Consider When Choosing Colors

1. Does the combination of colors you're using lend itself to easy reading, either on-screen or on paper?
2. Are the cultural associations, if any, accompanying the colors appropriate?

USE OF IMAGES

The use of images as it relates to one's ethos cannot be understated. The illustrations you use, the charts or graphs that make up a presentation, and even the photographs you place within a design will have significant impact as to whether an audience takes you seriously.

A. Clip-Art

Very little clip-art looks good or has any type of sophistication—especially clip art that comes packaged with common software programs. It is often cartoony and silly, or abstract and general to the point of being useless. And remember: every user of Microsoft Word has the same clipart, and has probably used it, and will recognize it when you use it, and be unimpressed.

When choosing visuals, think about the kinds of extra information that is conveyed. For example, this piece of clipart seems to be a nice touch for advertising a pipe and cigar shop:



But then there are so many elements that surround the main bit, which is the pipe. Besides, again, the “cartoony” look, there are ridiculous, outmoded fashions (which may be OK if the design is striving for an antique/nostalgic look), plus there is an issue of colors that get introduced by the clipart (if your design scheme is using deep reds and yellows, say, this is going to look awful). And what's with the guy's facial expression? Yet most beginning designers will look no further than the pipe, and ruin their design because of it.

If the pipe is what's important, then seek out something along those lines:



Again, there is a palette at work here (although it's natural to what we think of as pipe); but more importantly, there is a style: the rough lines, for example. While it's not cartoony, this pipe may not fit into a total design (see the Overall Design section for more).

Why is clipart so difficult to work with? Because clipart is often stylized and colorful, it may be hard to find some that really works well with your design, and manages to pull off the kind of ethos you're striving for.

B. Illustrations & Diagrams

Like clipart, illustrations and diagrams can make or break a design. However, unlike clipart, which is meant usually as an accent, illustrations and diagrams often serve a central purpose to inform.

Always strive for clarity in illustrations and diagrams. Think about maps, for example. A driving atlas of the United States does not include representations and labels of every single office building, townhouse, apartment, gas station, and tool shed between New York City and Los Angeles. If it did, we'd have a hard time reading what we really want out of the map: the roads! Illustrations and diagrams are selective pictures of reality; that's what makes them useful. In the case of representing large amounts of complex information, it is probably helpful to break up the information visually or spatially—that's why driving atlases of the United States are in book form, and not gigantic maps; each state gets its own page, rather than the entire country.

C. Graphs

Programs like Microsoft Excel will automatically generate everything from bar graphs to pie charts; you can choose things like color and scale. Some issues to consider when choosing to graphically represent quantitative information:

1. Everyone likes pie charts, but they are only helpful in terms of showing parts of a whole. So if your figures are not in percentages, pie charts won't be of much help to you. And unless several pie charts are included, they are not useful for demonstrating changes over time.
2. Bar graphs are especially helpful for comparisons between a number of different numeric variables, even over time.
3. Line graphs are excellent for plotting changes in one variable over time, particularly over small time segments. When multiple colors are used, several variables can be plotted, but too many lines may be confusing, and a bar graph might be a better choice.

D. Photographs & Manipulated Images

Photographs were always popular design choices. But with the availability of digital cameras, scanners, and other imaging devices coupled with the easy electronic distribution of photo-quality images, photographs are more popular than ever.

Yet many beginning designers tend to avoid capturing their own images. Many will search the Web for images and, quality or not, copyright or not, will select the first available image. Again, we stumble onto the important question of ethos, which in the world of photographic images is primarily tied to two aspects of the photographic image: composition and quality.

We'll start with the second, quality. Practically every computer image format has some settings for "compressing" the image. That is, areas of similar color lose their information, and are filled in with approximations when the image is opened in a Web browser or other program. Especially when designing for a Web audience, there is a constant push and pull between the quality of the image, and its size on disk. The better quality image, the larger it is on disk, and thus the longer it takes to load in a Web browser. However, in terms of ethos—and this itself is audience-dependent—it is often wise to opt for a slightly larger image file, rather than sacrifice quality. Consider these two photos of the Purdue Memorial Union:





In both photos, the subject matter is clear; however, the quality is strikingly different. While the first photo still uses a fairly high compression, little details like the wisps of clouds and treetops are clear, as is the texture of the bricks and the panes in the windows. The second photo is clearly degraded—there are large blocks of blue visible in the sky area, and there are “sparkles” between the treetops and clouds, and the building and sky. Of course, the top photo file is three times larger than the bottom—but is the speed with which the second photo can be transferred worth the loss in quality? If this photo were in the context of a Web page meant to encourage students to come study at Purdue, which would have a more powerful effect on your decision? Why?

In terms of composition, remember that photos are basically frames of reality. Any given subject can be photographed an infinite number of ways, both in terms of the framing (what is where in the shot) and the exposure (shutter speed, aperture, etc.) When shooting or selecting your images, pay careful attention to how the shot is composed. Is the image light? Dark? What gets highlighted? What is the central subject in the shot? What do you notice? Is there anything inappropriate in the shot that you wouldn't want?

Now, there are entire books and courses on photography, so we'll have to limit our discussion to what has been said so far, with the exception of that last question: Is there anything inappropriate in the shot that you wouldn't want? Digital photo manipulation has opened up huge possibilities for image manipulation. Consider the following two images:





In the top image, various clutter (in this case, street lights) have been removed to improve the overall look of the Lafayette skyline. The question is this: what is the line between an accurate portrayal of reality, and an aesthetic representation of it? How is our ethos as visually-oriented writers affected, positively and negatively, when we manipulate images to achieve a certain effect?

OVERALL DESIGN

Each of the visual factors we've covered above—text elements, colors, and images—is a mammoth concern on its own. However, we rarely enjoy the luxury of only having to worry about fonts, or color, or visuals, or—obviously!—textual content. In any sort of visual design, all of these factors have to come together. Certain fonts don't work with certain colors:



To what? A vampire wedding?

Likewise, certain fonts don't generally fit with certain images, certain background colors destroy the color of images, etc.

So what should we do? Come up with the perfect design in our heads, and *then* try to work them out in PhotoShop, or Pagemaker, or Publisher?

The fact is that, just like writing, the best ideas are often not in our heads (at least in their final form), but appear from our interaction with them once their outside of us: on paper, in a word processor, or in a design program. Likewise with photographs: we have an idea of a perfect image, but when go to search for it or shoot it, we often find problems like the streetlamps in the Lafayette skyline photo.

A. Creating paths for the eye

There are, however, some basic guides to help you as you work to realize your visual design ideas. The first is creating paths for the eye. Pretend that we're creating a poster for a callout for a club at Purdue. Our primary concern, what with the flood of posters all over campus, is that we have something that is eye-catching. We might think about running a small amount of text at a huge font size, or perhaps a striking image that is identifiable from some distance away. We then go to a design program like Pagemaker and play with those ideas, keeping in mind the issues we've talked about regarding font choices and image size and quality.

However, it's not enough to just grab attention, if our rhetorical purpose is to inform a potential audience of Purdue students as to the what, when, and where of our callout meeting. Many posters feature centered text, sort of like this:

The Purdue Gymble and Gyre Club is dedicated to improving the
quality of life on the campus.
Come to our Callout on January, 31, 2004
at 7:00PM in Heavilon Hall room 511.
Light refreshments and coffee will be served before the meeting.

Now, if someone is *really* interested, they may wade through that. But consider how the information is dispersed: there's no good track for the eye to follow, short of reading every line. That's because the text, taken as a whole, is basically in an hour-glass shape. A redesign, with the text aligned left but NOT at the leftmost margin of the page, and rewording might look something like this:

The Purdue Gymble and Gyre Club is dedicated to
improving the quality of life on campus.

Come to our Callout:
7:00PM
January 31, 2004
Heavilon Hall 511

Light refreshments and coffee will be served
before the meeting.

So maybe it's not poetry, but we can quickly move from line to line, readily identifying the information. Add some different sizes to the text, and we might come up with a rough design that looks like this:

The Purdue Gymble and Gyre Club is dedicated to
improving the quality of life on campus.

Come to our Callout:
7:00PM
January 31, 2004
Heavilon Hall 511

Light refreshments and coffee will be served
before the meeting.

It's not going to win any design awards, but the most important information is highlighted here, and we've given clear "instructions" (hopefully) as to how a person's eye should move.

B. Design as rhetorical organization

What this points to, beyond simple clearing a path for eye movement (whether vertical, horizontal, diagonal, or even circular movement is what you're aiming for), is that, just like we organize certain topics and ideas in paragraphs when we write, we do the same thing when we design.

This seems like an obvious enough point, but think about how hard writers have to work at organization. Yet there are some obvious choices that can help you organize rhetorically when you design:

--Organize according to importance: important information gets large text, special fonts, color.

--Organize according to consistency: certain kinds of information appears in similar places, in similar style.

--Organize to surprise: rotate text 90 degrees, use faded-out images for backgrounds (rather than giving an image its own huge piece of real estate on your document).

C. Designing with consistency in mind AND avoiding pre-fab templates

This is another pitfall for beginning visual designers. With a palette of several million colors, a selection of several hundred fonts, and with a limitless supply of images from cameras or the Web to choose from, many beginning designers will try to use as much stuff as possible on any given page, whether paper or on the Web. In fact, it is often the presence of multiple pages, like on a Website, that make for serious temptation to include everything.

We suspect this is why so many people use pre-fabricated, ready-made templates in everything from Microsoft Word and PowerPoint to Macromedia Dreamweaver. The design is already there; it looks clean, maybe even good. However, therein lies the pitfall: everyone has seen the ready-made templates, and most everyone has used them at some point. If your ethos is based in part on your skills to design, using a template destroys that ethos entirely. You may be giving a PowerPoint presentation on the importance of creativity and innovation within a company, but many eyes are only going to see your template!

Now, templates are useful things—and the good news is, you can make them yourself. Many programs have special files for templates; however, you can just as easily set up a Web page in an HTML file, save that file as `mypage_template.html`, and then open it and add content and perhaps even slight alterations to the design. Consistency does not mean uniformity; the repeated use of a color scheme, a graphic, some header text, or even just a visual style in your typography can serve to remind an audience whose pages their reading, where this poster came from, etc. In corporate design-speak, this is known as branding.

C. Stepping back: would you read this?

You've carefully thought about your font choices, your colors, your artwork and images, and, of course, your content. You've come up with what you believe to be an interesting, appropriate design. Now it's time to step back from the work, and view it as your intended audience would, and answer the Big Questions:

--Is your design clarifying your information, or making it more confusing?

--Is your design unique enough to make it stand out from a pile of resumes, a stack of brochures, a wall full of posters?

--Is your design readable from its intended distance (don't print posters as though they were business cards, and vice-versa)? Have you tried to read it from 10 feet away? 20 feet? 50?

--Have you checked the spelling on everything? Remember, it's always some big, bold headline that has the typos!

--When designing for the Web, how does it look in different browsers? On campus computers? On Aunt Martha's 1988-vintage machine? How long do the pages take to load? Finally, remember that other people can help you see things in your design, whether good things you could make more prominent or bad things that need to go away; always seek a second, critical pair of eyes. And remember also that, just as nobody is born a brilliant, ready-for-press writer, design, too, takes hard work and dedication.