Visual Rhetoric/Visual Literacy Series

Are you trying to "read" a picture or "write" a web-site? Have you been asked to evaluate or reflect on a symbol or visual image? This handout will help you begin thinking about the power of persuasion and the elements of communication bound up together in texts you don't just read but see. Images, not just words, provide us with information and change the ways we think, reason, and act. They can speak to us in powerful ways.

Reading a Web Page

Visitors to Web sites don't read—they scan, glancing a couple of times across and then down the page in an "F" shape (http://www.useit.com/eyetracking/). What are they scanning for? What moves their eyes across and down the page? Scannable text.

As a result, Web pages have to employ **scannable text**, using

- highlighted **keywords** (hypertext links serve as one form of highlighting; typeface variations and color are others)

- meaningful **sub-headings** (not "clever" ones)

- bulleted **lists**

- **one idea** per paragraph (users will skip over any additional ideas if they are not caught by the first few words in the paragraph)

- the **inverted pyramid style**, starting with the conclusion and getting progressively more detailed

- **half the word count** (or less) of conventional writing

Writing a Web Page

If you are trying to create or Web site for an assignment, thinking about scannable text is a great place to begin. According to Jakob Neilsen, the tendency of user to scan Web pages means several things for you as a writer of a Web text ("How Users Read on the Web," Jacob Nielsen's Alert Box for October 1, 1997, www.useit.com):

- **Users won't read your text thoroughly**. Exhaustive reading is rare, especially when prospective customers are conducting their initial research to compile a shortlist of vendors. Yes, some people will read more, but most won't. **The first two paragraphs must state the most important information**. There's some hope that users will actually read this material, though they'll probably read more of the first paragraph than the second.

- **Start subheads, paragraphs, and bullet points with information-carrying words** that users will notice when scanning down the left side of your content in the final stem of their "F"-behavior. They'll read the third word on a line much less often than the first two words.
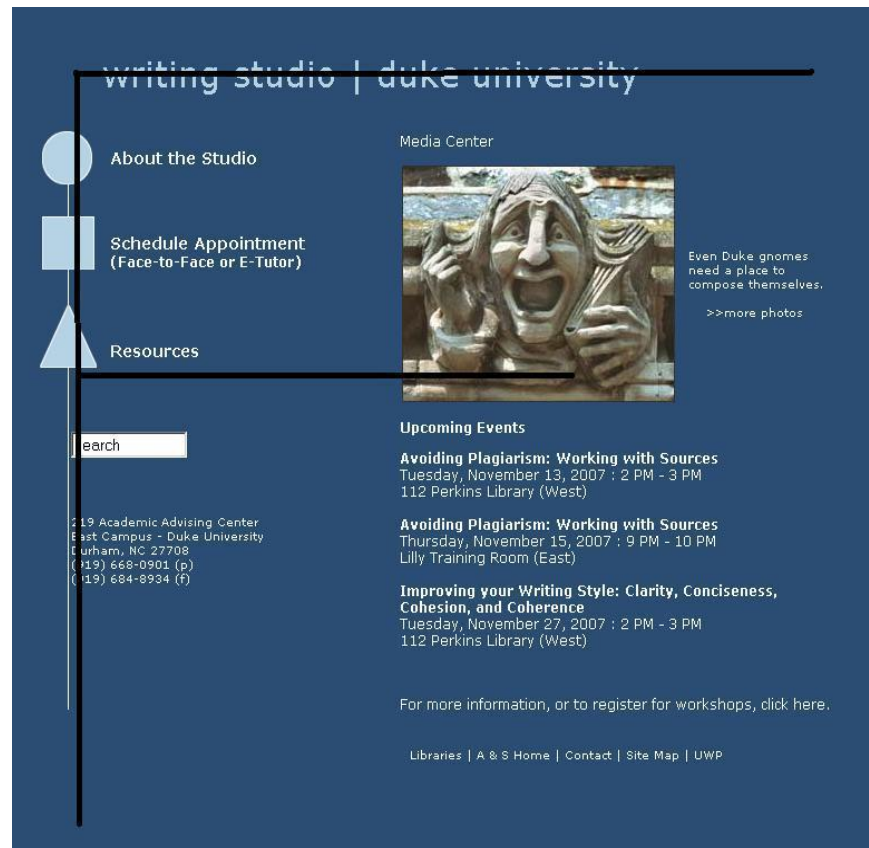
Thinking of "F"-shaped scanning, what elements of Duke University's Writing Studio home page are we trying to make sure users notice?

Some other guidelines for writing on the Web include:

- **Keep text concise and use images** for low-literacy and/or impatient viewers.

- **Use old key words** so your site pops up in a search.

- **Craft tag lines carefully**. Tag lines, (lines of copy that capture the theme of the web site and are placed prominently within it, are critical and should be clear and concise. You generally have ten seconds to keep your reader's attention. Neilsen's advice is to "[t]hink about your home page as analogous to a tradeshow booth. Why do you stop at some booths and skip others? And, no: having a live magician is not the answer for your home page. Clearly saying what you do and why users should care is the way to go."

Measuring the Effect of Improved Web Writing

To measure the effect of some of the content guidelines they identified, Jakob Neilsen and his colleagues developed five different versions of the same Web site (same basic information and site navigation, but different wording), having users perform the same tasks with the different sites.

As shown in the table below (adapted from Nielsen's example on www.useit.com), measured usability was dramatically higher for the concise version (58% better) and for the scannable version (47% better). And when the researchers combined three ideas for improved writing style into a single site, the result was stellar: 124% better usability. Again, by paying attention to Neilsen's research, we can not only learn how to construct a better web-page, but also how to evaluate Web sites as well as other instances of the use of visual rhetoric.

Site Version	Sample Paragraph*	Usability Improvement
Promotional writing (control condition) using the "marketese" found on many commercial Web sites	Nebraska is filled with internationally recognized attractions that draw large crowds of people every year, without fail. In 1996, some of the most popular places were Fort Robinson State Park (355,000 visitors), Scotts Bluff National Monument (132,166), Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum (100,000), Carhenge (86,598), Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (60,002), and Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park (28,446).	0% (by definition)
Concise text with about half the word count as the control condition	In 1996, six of the best-attended attractions in Nebraska were Fort Robinson State Park, Scotts Bluff National Monument, Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum, Carhenge , Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer, and Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park.	58%
Scannable layout using the same text as the control condition in a layout that facilitated scanning	Nebraska is filled with internationally recognized attractions that draw large crowds of people every year, without fail. In 1996, some of the most popular places were: • Fort Robinson State Park (355,000 visitors) • Scotts Bluff National Monument (132,166) • Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum (100,000) • Carhenge (86,598) • Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (60,002) • Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park (28,446).	47%
Objective language using neutral rather than subjective, boastful or exaggerated language (otherwise the same as the control condition)	Nebraska has several attractions. In 1996, some of the most-visited places were Fort Robinson State Park (355,000 visitors), Scotts Bluff National Monument (132,166), Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum (100,000), Carhenge (86,598), Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (60,002), and Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park (28,446).	27%
Combined version using all three improvements in writing style together: concise, scannable, and objective	In 1996, six of the most-visited places in Nebraska were: • Fort Robinson State Park • Scotts Bluff National Monument • Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum • Carhenge • Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer • Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park	124%

So, what's involved in really "seeing" a picture, a Web page, an image?

In the act of seeing, perceptual processes, time, movement, and memory are important. It is also worth considering the circumstances in which images are situated, as well as any relationship between picture and text, as you consider a Web site's visual rhetoric.

Handouts in the Visual Rhetoric/Visual Literacy Series

Overview: Visual Rhetoric/Visual Literacy
Writing About Comics and Graphic Novels
Writing About Film
Writing About Painting
Writing About Photographs
Using PowerPoint and Keynote Effectively
Creating Scientific Poster Presentations
Crafting and Evaluating Websites