

Using Visuals in Academic Writing

The image is more than an idea. It is a vortex or cluster of fused ideas and is endowed with energy.
-Ezra Pound

What do we mean by visual rhetoric?

Visual rhetoric refers to the use of **visuals** (rather than words) to communicate an idea or to support an argument. It suggests that images should be treated as texts, just like any other form of communication.



Figure 1: Ivan Farkas, "In Cold Blood" 1967.

What can we gain by using visual rhetoric in our academic writing?

We live in a world dominated by images. We should be able not only to read and interpret visuals, but also to produce and utilize them effectively. Successful visuals can make your writing memorable, direct your reader, provide clear emphasis, convey your message, set a particular tone, build credibility, and help persuade your reader to take your argument seriously.

But, use caution!

Make sure you have a clear and deliberate purpose for every visual choice you make. Ask yourself the following questions when considering whether to include an image:

- How will a reader likely react to this image?
- Are the implied suggestions of the image consistent with the text's purpose?
- Will the image effectively supplement the reader's understanding of the text's argument?

Choosing Images

Utilize images that are original and provocative, not generic or commonplace. *Be careful not to use images merely as decoration.* When choosing, consider your image in terms of:

- **Perspective:** Consider where the subject is in relation to the camera. What does the distance between the two suggest about the subject's importance? Is the primary subject shown in relationship to other objects in the image?
- **Balance and symmetry:** Asymmetry can create tension and uneasiness, whereas balance might imply harmony. What effect might asymmetry or balance have upon the viewer?
- **Point of view:** Low angle shots often make the subject seem powerful, whereas high angle shots reduce the size and therefore importance of the subject. What attitudes toward the subject may be inferred from these choices?

- **Juxtaposition:** An image can take on new meanings when placed next to another image. Think about how the two images differ or resemble each other in terms of color, focus, texture, scale. What relationship is inferred by their juxtaposition?
- **Framing:** Think about what is in the frame and what lies beyond it. What would happen if you were to crop the image? What information is vital to see, and what is implied beyond the frame?

Placing Images in Your Text

Make sure that the images you include are large enough to be seen clearly. Choose good quality images with appropriate resolutions for their size in order to avoid pixilation. Always place visuals near the text they refer to or in between two related sections. Consider different modes of wrapping the text around the image. It might be useful to add a line border or simply let white space accentuate the image.

Creating Captions

Some visuals may need captions to provide additional explanation. Captions may include the image's source, explain its larger context, and/or refer to its placement in your text.

Using Figures, Graphs, and Charts

Keep it simple! The simpler the visual, the easier it will be to convey your point. Avoid too many lines, colors, or other variables that may produce a jumbled impression. Make sure colors or patterns are clearly distinguishable from one another (especially if you are printing and the printer conditions are less than ideal). Always include a title and any necessary labels for units, parts, or axes in order to ensure viewer comprehension. As with all other images inserted into an essay, be sure to text-wrap and leave space to draw attention and to set your figure apart from your text.



Tehran, Iran—Veiled women learn how to shoot in the outskirts of the city, 1986. © Jean Gaumy / Magnum Photos. Reproduced with permission.

Citing Images

An image must be cited just like any other outside source. Although providing a citation for an image may seem like a challenge, every style manual provides instructions for doing so. Below are links to guidelines for citing images in three major styles:

- MLA <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/08/>
- APA http://www.landmark.edu/Library/citation_guides/apa.cfm#image
- Chicago <http://guides.lib.washington.edu/content.php?pid=56693&sid=518033>

Works Consulted

Faigley, Lester. *Picturing Texts*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2004. Print.

Odell, Lee, and Susan M. Katz. *Writing in a Visual Age*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2006. Print.

This handout was adapted from Adrienne Niederriter's presentation "Using Visual Rhetoric in Academic Writing," her final project in EDU1555, fall 2010.