

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

Guide to Interpreting Images

From Susan Hilligoss, *Visual Communication: A Writer's Guide* (London, 1999), pp. 34-38.

For full text see:

http://wps.ablongman.com/wps/media/objects/475/486554/compsolutions/pdf/long_hilligoss.pdf

Rhetorical purpose

- Where does this image appear?
- What is the image's purpose? Does it document a situation, event, or condition? Is it conceptual? If so, what is its point? Does it specifically support an appeal to buy something?
- Is the image realistic, like a photograph? Or more stylized, like a cartoon or caricature?
- If the image is realistic, do you detect any types of distortion? Describe any features that may be distorted.
- How polished or "professional" is the image?
- What tone does the image project?
- How seriously do you take it? Explain why
- Who do you think are the intended viewers of this image? What features suggest that audience?
- Who do you think produced this image? Is the creator or photographer stated?
- What would you say your relationship is to the producer or producers? Do you think they understand you as a viewer?

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Overall design

- What draws your eye first?
- What does the dominant part of the image portray?
- What is in the centre of the image?
- What is shown in front and larger? What is behind and smaller?
- What is shown in the upper half? The lower half?
- Are portions more blurred? Are there very distinct parts in sharp focus?
- We respond to what we think is the dominant area, in sharp focus. The centre of the visual field, page or screen is one common area of emphasis. We may also tend to place more emphasis on what is larger (in front) and in the upper half. Would you say this is true in this image? How so?
- On a sheet of paper, draw or trace the major areas of the image and label them.
- Is there empty space? What does the empty space “frame”?
- Are some areas or shapes very large? Are others very small?
- We respond to extremes of scale. Not only do huge areas seem very close while tiny ones seem far away, but together the two extremes may suggest tension or conflict. For example, a small outline of a child placed on a large white background may suggest to us that the child is alone and vulnerable, at odds with the vast background, or just less significant than the background.
- Describe the major shapes and lines created. Consider what effect the shapes and lines create.
- Describe the overall arrangement of parts. Are they ordered symmetrically or otherwise balanced against each other?
- Would you say that the parts form an array of smaller images?
- In what order do you look at these? Or are they a sequence to be read as a story? Does the arrangement convey anything about the purpose of the image?

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People

- Who is portrayed? Describe your inferences from each feature of the person(s) age, details of dress, gender, ethnicity, class, posture and stance, portions of the body shown, tilt of head, facial expression, gesture of hands.
- What is the person looking at? Follow her or his “gaze” or “eyeline.” Does he or she look toward something else in the image? Or out of the picture toward the viewer? What do you make of the direction of the gaze?
- If there are two or more people, what features suggest their relationships to each other?
- If there are two or more people, does one seem dominant? How is that expressed?
- As with shapes in general, people who are larger (take up more area of the image) or are placed “above” other people may seem more dominant.
- From what angle are the people shown? Do you seem to look down on them, as if they were below you as viewer? Look up to them? Look right at them?
- In film studies, the angle of viewing suggests the relationship between the viewer and the people portrayed. If we as viewers “look down” on people, they may seem powerless or helpless. On the other hand, looking up to them makes them seem powerful, even domineering. At eye level, neither above nor below us, they appear more “at our level” of power and freedom.
- Are the people shown close up? Far away?
- In an image, people’s apparent distance from the viewer suggests emotional distance. For example, a close-up of someone’s face may make us feel more emotionally involved with the person and the image as a whole. Extreme close ups may also seem cramped or claustrophobic.
- What do you consider to be your relationship as viewer to the person or people shown? Do you empathize with them or not? Explain why.
- If there is no one represented, imagine what sort of person would be at home in this image. Explain why.

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Setting

- If the image has a distinctive background, describe it. How does it relate to the dominant focus of the image - especially people, if any?
- What time and place does the image suggest? What is the effect of that setting?
- Is anything “out of place” in the image? What do you make of the incongruity?

Symbols and signs.

- Are there items or features in the image that “mean more than themselves”? Consider the connotations and associations of particular objects or features in the image. Then relate them to the rest of the image.

Colour

- Describe the colours, or absence of colour, in the image.
- Where is colour is applied?

Text

- If the image includes texts such as headlines, labels, captions, or paragraphs of explanation, relate the text to the image.
- In what ways does the text help you make sense of the image? Does it answer questions
- about the image, or only raise more questions?

Story

- What is the story being told in the image? Consider the people and objects in the image and their relationships to each other, the viewer, and the setting, and the text.
- Who can relate to this story? Who may not find it believable or interesting?
- Who or what is excluded from this image? Why do you think that?
- What attitudes - social, political, economic, cultural - are suggested in this image? Who
- benefits from the attitudes shown? Who doesn't?