

Chapter 2

“Show Me What You Are Saying”: Visual Literacy in the Composition Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Visual literacy is a requirement in many college composition programs; yet explicit methods for teaching it are often undefined. This chapter provides a pedagogical resource for composition instructors who seek foundational approaches for teaching visual literacy in the first-year and sophomore writing classroom. The pedagogy includes classroom exercises and assignments which emphasize teaching visual literacy using a combination of mass media (advertisements, magazines, Photojournalism) and popular media (social media, YouTube, music videos, video games, Websites, and screen-based technologies). Such media signify the visual rhetorical environments with which college students engage regularly, but less often consider critically. The author demonstrates a variety of approaches for teaching students to become engaged participants in their own visual meaning making. Sample assignments include a personal narrative photo essay, a visual argument essay, a multimodal research project, and a student-designed Website.

*The clearest way to see through a culture
is to attend to its tools for conversation.*

Neil Postman, Amusing Ourselves to Death (1985)

INTRODUCTION

Recently, I attended a faculty meeting of composition instructors at the university where I teach. A colleague had invited an international student to discuss the verbal challenges non-native English speakers face in our classrooms. The student, Emmanuel, observed that it took him longer than his native English-

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speaking peers to understand what the professor was saying. A faculty member asked, “How might we help you to understand better the spoken material in class?” Without hesitation, Emmanuel answered, “Use pictures.” He added, “Show me what you are saying. This really helps.” Emmanuel’s comments crystallized for me why I had long ago begun teaching with visual material in the writing classroom.

Visual references help to facilitate verbal comprehension for many students, regardless of socio-linguistic backgrounds. In truth, visual learning engages the majority of my college-aged students, many of whom are digital natives comfortably at home with multimedia. As one literacy researcher notes, “reading and writing rarely occur in isolation for today’s students whose environment is filled with visual, electronic, and digital texts that offer facilities for reading, writing, viewing, listening and responding simultaneously” (Walsh, 2008, p. 102). In the United States, “images are increasingly prominent carriers of meaning” (Bezemer and Kress, 2008, p.166). This “turn toward the visual” (Kress, 1999) has influenced many composition and new media scholars (Anderson, 2008; Murray, 2009; Selber, 2008; George, 2012; Wysocki, Johnson-Eilola, Selfe, et al, 2004) to contend that “multimodal discourse” (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001) and “new literacies” (Yancey, 2009) should expand, even replace, the traditional definition of literacy as fluency with only alphabetic texts. Lutkewitte (2014) reasons that if writing instructors require that students “compose in one mode using only one technology,” p. 280) then we do “little to empower our students” (p. 279) for the multimedia communications required in their personal, professional, and civic lives. Students need “multiliteracies” (Selber, 2008), especially fluency in reading and composing with image-based texts, to navigate the digital world.

Visual literacy and multimodal composition are now required learning outcomes in many college composition programs;¹ yet specific methods for teaching such literacies may be undefined, and effective pedagogy varies. Educators need “new models of composing,” and “new pedagogies,” to teach new literacies (p. 8). Thus, the question for many writing instructors today is not *if* we should teach visual literacy in the writing classroom, but rather *how*? To address that question, this chapter discusses how I integrate visual literacy pedagogy into my first-year and sophomore-level composition classes at a small, private university with students of diverse learning backgrounds. My discussion includes visual-textual rhetorical strategies for reading and writing, sample classroom exercises, and multimodal assignments. This chapter is designed as a resource for composition instructors who seek foundational approaches for integrating visual literacy into the composition class, but need applied methodologies to do so. Wysocki, et al, (2004) argue that “this is the kind of work that teachers of writing are prepared to do precisely because of how they see texts as complexly situated practice embedded in the past but open to possible futures” (p. 8). However, composition instructors require new pedagogical resources for integrating successful multimodal assignments into their existing curricula (Anderson, et al, 2006).

Introducing visual artifacts for study in the writing classroom is not new, but composition pedagogy needs to move beyond “the visual [as] something one admires but does not perform” (Rice, 2007, 135). George (2014) points out that until very recently, composition instructors “interested in using the visual in writing classes have generally limited their discussions to analysis because there were few options for doing otherwise” (Lutkewitte, 2014, pg. 228). However, with new technologies available, the conversation has turned to visual “design” in writing studies (New London Group, 1996; Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996; 2006; Trimbur, 2000, George, 2002; Hocks, 2013). This chapter assumes that visual literacy pedagogy in the writing classroom teaches students not only how to read and write about images (as objects of rhetorical analysis) but also how to “compose/design/advocate” (Wysocki and Lynch, 2013) with images.

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