Teaching Visual Rhetoric in the First-Year Composition Classroom

First-year composition students engage with visual rhetoric via interpretation and analysis through a trip to a local art museum for the first essay assignment and through an exploration of photography for the second essay assignment.

What Is Visual Rhetoric and How Does It Inform My Pedagogy?

For me, visual rhetoric is a focus on the practical, relevant, and functional as opposed to an aesthetic analysis or use of visual elements for beauty. As a rhetorician, I examine the deployment of a visual in terms of its effect, as Sonja Foss explains in “A Rhetorical Schema for the Evaluation of Visual Imagery.” However, I also examine a visual as an ideological artifact. Drawing upon Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright’s definition of images as “both representations and producers of ideologies of their time. . . . [and] factors in relations of power,” visual rhetoric can be an argument for a particular viewpoint instantiated in a visual artifact (72). The interpretation of an image is never a neutral, “natural” act, but rather it reveals entrenched cultural codes, depths of personal knowledge, and ranges of experience.

Visual rhetoric needs to be a part of composition courses. Speaking as a compositionist and a rhetorician, John Trimbur suggests that “visual communication constitutes part of the available means of persuasion” and thus should be taught in our writing courses. He relates visual rhetoric to document design, arguing that writing teachers highlight design as “fundamental to composing” (106). In the course he shares with us, “Theory of Visual Design,” students use Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen’s *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* and Richard Hollis’s *Graphic Design: A Concise History* to analyze images from a historicized design perspective, but Trimbur brings in the ideological perspective through in-depth discussions of examples of documentary photography (111). Although an emphasis on the social production of visual texts pervades all of his chosen texts for his course, Trimbur’s students have time to practice the design principles, and mine do not. Instead, I emphasize reading and interpreting images to reveal something about those images as well as us as interpreters.
Visual Rhetoric in English 150: Invading Images with Ideas

Visual rhetoric has been defined in a number of different ways. A quick look at the table of contents in Marguerite Helmers and Charles Hill’s *Defining Visual Rhetorics* shows us a sample of the wide range of scholarship on the visual. For example, David Blakesley writes about the rhetoric of film (111–34), Janis L. Edwards describes how visual images build the shared memory of a culture (179–94), Greg Dickinson and Casey Malone Maugh illustrate the rhetoric of the visual in a grocery store (259–76), and Andrea Kaston Tange argues that a sense of identity in the Victorian middle class was based upon visual concepts associated with one’s home (277–302). Visual rhetoric is not limited in subject: gestures, clothing styles, architecture, landscaping, a city’s layout, a map, a photo, a painting, a billboard, a street sign—the list goes on. It also is not limited in analytical frameworks for engaging with it. However, I have students primarily focus on the visual rhetoric of photographs in my class.

In my fall semester first-year composition class, we start by examining the process of observation and what one can learn from such a process. Primary research is done by engagement and description, and then through recognizing the student’s role in interpreting the visual. Just as Roland Barthes describes in “The Rhetoric of the Image,” the symbolic elements of the visual reveal that an image can be “read” in different ways because readings depend upon “the different kinds of knowledge—practical, natural, cultural, aesthetic—invested in the image,” and the “plurality and a co-existence of lexicons in one and the same person” who decodes based upon the limit and extent of her knowledge (46, 47). Thus, not only does an image not have a singular meaning for all viewers or readers, but the language into which we put our descriptions is also just as fraught with a multiplicity of meanings that might be attached to a descriptive word (47, 48). Students learn these concepts firsthand by focusing on the process of observation.

To practice observation, the first essay assignment requires students to visit our local art museum, the Longwood Center for Visual Arts (LCVA). Usually students relish the opportunity to see something new outside of the classroom, but after reading this semester’s drafts of the first essay, I discovered that this group sincerely dreaded the idea of visiting an art museum. They assumed it would be boring, full of paintings of fruit in bowls, dull scenery, or people they neither knew nor cared to know. Instead, they got a wonderful surprise. The LCVA director and staff had put together an engaging collection of art called “It’s Giving Me the Creeps: Art from the Permanent Collection That Scares the Staff.” Posted next to several of the pieces were staff comments that gave the students ideas about how that piece was frightening, if they could not already guess. As part of the “collecting” done for prewriting essay one, the students were asked to photograph the artwork, write a descriptive paragraph, describe the rhetorical situation and its elements, and then write a five- to ten-line entertaining poem about the work of art they had chosen.

In class, we focused on two essays from Stephen Reid’s *The Prentice Hall Guide for College Writers*, namely “Take This Fish and Look at It” by Samuel H. Scudder and Farley Mowat’s “Observing Wolves.” In both, we analyzed the readings...
for examples that they could use to generate their own thesis statements. That is, we decided that an appropriate thesis for Scudder’s essay, if he were to write one for my class, would be about the fact that it was the process of observing this fish that turned him into a scientist. Scudder’s entertaining essay relates his frustrations with days on end of observing a fish. We scanned it for examples of how to observe through drawing what we see and making guesses about how what we see connects to larger theories, just as Scudder tried to deduce generalizable facts about fish from the one with which he spent so much time. We decided that a thesis for Mowat’s essay might be that direct observations can challenge and change one’s assumptions. The students worked in groups to answer several discussion questions that asked for them to consider elements such as the “four keys” to effective description, the interpreter’s subject-position, the genre, the wider scientific world through a directed web search, a brief analysis of a photo of a wolf, and a letter composed in response to a rancher’s opposition to wolves (73, 74).

The next step was to draft a three-page essay. The assignment sheet explained that they were to focus on the process of observing and then deduce what they had learned about observing from experiencing that process. Most of the forty-five students found that a story about the painting emerged as they spent more and more time contemplating their observation. One wrote about how observing a work of art helped her to observe the rest of her world more carefully and to consider the stories embedded within the everyday landscapes she inhabited. Another student became enamored of the African art displays and spent his time researching the stories behind them before interweaving them with his own, focusing mostly on the wooden effigy of a dog. Another wrote about a painting called *The Poem* by Norman F. Strike. Four panels were grouped with a line of poetry beneath each. The poem read: “They came for the Jews, but I was not one, and I said nothing. / They came for the trade unionists, but I was not one, and I said nothing. / They came for the communists, but I was not one, and I said nothing. / Then they came for me, but there was no one left.” This student realized that art was about life and that her own life might have elements to it that had passed by unnoticed before. Most students mentioned a recursive learning experience.

Students spent time viewing, then thinking and writing, and then returning to view the paintings again. Although I required them to take photos of the artwork, it was not enough for many of them. The presence of the art in its spot on the wall at the Longwood Center for Visual Arts made it speak to them in a way that a reproduced photographic image could not. The essay and analysis became a lived experience, and the art became a part of their own lives. It was an example of what happens to students when engaged in the analysis of stories they come to love, but this engagement came alive in a much different way. Overall, the assignment was a success because the students became actors in the stories Mowat and Scudder were trying to tell; they became observers themselves. Scientists of the visual, they looked for clues, formed hypotheses, and deployed their conclusions in analyses embedded in the reality of their lives.
One of my students, Nicholas Lee, agreed to share his experience in writing this essay. His narrative provides a firsthand account of how visual rhetoric was understood and applied as a tool of analysis in this first essay.

**Student Insight, Observation Essay: Nicholas Lee**

When I first heard that our English class was going on field trip, I did not know what to think. Since when did English classes go on field trips? My temporary state of confusion was soon put at ease as I learned that I would be writing an essay on a piece of art. But before I could write such an essay, I first had to be lectured on my seemingly undeveloped ability to observe. Our class learned the various techniques of observing, including sketching our subject or free-writing. By the time I was done observing my particular art piece, a freakish depiction of the artist’s father’s stroke, it was easy writing my essay. Here is how I began:

Recently I visited the Longwood Center for Visual Arts, commonly referred to as the LCVA, during an exhibition aptly named “It’s Giving Me the Creeps: Art from the Permanent Collection that Scares the Staff.” Arriving a little late, I proceeded to quickly shuffle through the eerie art pieces not receiving the “creeps” I had originally expected. After exiting the first room thoroughly disappointed and a little worried at how easily the LCVA staff can be frightened, I entered a new room of more supposedly creepy art. Again I quickly shuffled through the collection of art until, out of the corner of my eye, I saw it. I slowly approached the ominous piece, both attracted and repulsed by its outlandish subject. I found that I could not look away from “My Father’s Stroke #2.” I stood there and studied the piece, took a picture, and went back to my dorm to study it further. After much observation and thought, I realized that this particular piece of art had opened a portal to the world in the eyes of the artist, David Dodge Lewis. I realized how every little detail plays a role in the making of the work of art.

The next step was to write a detailed description of the piece:

Before me hung a portrait of a figure, a reptilian-like head wrapped in bandages capped with a black winter beanie, a scarf wrapped around its neck, shrouded in black garments. This figure stands erect surrounded by a cloudy sky. Out of his screaming mouth a gull’s head protrudes giving its own scream as well. The figure’s right arm seems to be folded across his chest while the right side of his face is hidden. All around the splotches of paint and smudges of charcoal illuminate the chaos that the piece exemplifies.

Finally, I had to derive meaning from its details, which include noticing that the figure had only a mouth and lacked any other sense organs. I wrote: “There is a famous saying that says the eyes are the window to the soul. Without eyes we perceive the creature to be without a soul.” Another detail I wrote about was the dark color scheme that evoked “a feeling of evil and a macabre tone.”

This assignment not only helped me appreciate art, but my surroundings as well. After reflecting on the trip to the LCVA, I stated that “Through the piece’s details many things were revealed to me that if I had not studied it so thoroughly,
might not have been. I came to the LCVA in search of a work of art, and I left with the ability to get so much more out of both art and life by the simple act of paying attention to detail."

**Putting It under a Microscope: The Analysis of a Photograph**

My fourth essay assignment required students to analyze a photograph. We practiced analyzing photographs in class. Helmers and Hill address a famous 9/11 photo with three firefighters raising a flag over the rubble in the introduction to *Defining Visual Rhetorics*. In class, I asked the students if this photo reminded them of any other photos. Invariably, when I ask this question, at least one or two students mention Iwo Jima. We then described what we see: symbols of patriotism, the religious connotation of the three firefighters mentioned by Hill and Helmers (10), the upward looks of hope, the obvious struggles, and the juxtaposition of the symbol of our country against backdrops of obvious destruction. Most interestingly, we composed narratives of the types of heroism apparent in each one, describing how the firefighters might have been surprised by the attack, but despite the dangers and the scope of the destruction, they still worked to save lives. Although they lost comrades on that day, they still chose to raise a flag to symbolize hope for their country. In contrast, we talked about how the Marines must have boarded a boat for Iwo Jima after having pledged their lives for their country. They left their homes for an island where they would almost assuredly meet pain if not death, where they would watch their brothers die, where they would experience firsthand the brutalities of war. Yet they still chose to raise a flag of hope. Helmers and Hill provide the needed details for discussing each of these photographs, but most importantly the students learn that iconic photographs tell stories rooted in their own cultures' symbols and hero-narratives, and they learn to investigate the contexts of photos for clues to meaning.

**Questions for Interpretation**

I then pointed out to students that we have created a narrative for each of these photos based on our own experiences and knowledge, our own readings of the body language, the backdrops, the symbols. I described culture as a set of social practices guided by a community’s dominant ideology because those values and beliefs determine social practices. Interpretation is understood as a negotiation. No singular meaning exists, but not all meanings are validated by what we see. We then visited Dorothea Lange’s *Migrant Mother* photo online and looked at two other photos of her in the *Prentice Hall Guide* (Reid 233). The students are sometimes reminded of their vague and scattered knowledge about the Great Depression while looking at the woman in Lange’s photo. In class, we again practiced constructing a narrative about who she might have been and what her attitude was and that of her children. We talked about what she is not (a carefree object of desire) as well as what she is in her vulnerability and in her strength. I drew upon Kress and van Leeuwen to point out that the circular arrangement of the children is supposed
to depict harmony, but her facial expression instead creates a visual paradox. As I sketched out the story of how her photo became a political statement, we discussed the power of photographs. Although I did not use the language, we discussed John Louis Lucaites and Robert Hariman’s idea of “individuated aggregate,” that is, of the “trope whereby the population as a whole is represented solely by specific individuals” (38). As we talked about how the woman’s representation of impoverished migrants moved other Americans to demand help, I quoted Lucaites and Hariman: “The individual is the locus of value, but the collective is the locus of power” (40). Thus, the students saw clearly how one photo can not only represent reality but can also present a persuasive argument for changing it.

The students were then asked to consider subjects for their own essays. In order to emphasize thoughtful analysis rather than personal anecdotes, I asked them not to choose personally symbolic photos from their private collections. I also asked them not just to use an image found on “Google images,” but to trace that image back by its link to see its context. I asked them to write a thesis that indicated whether or not the photo was effective for its intended audience. By tracing the photo back to a context, they could determine its purpose and intended audience without making ungrounded guesses. In class and on the assignment sheet, they were asked to do some prewriting by answering questions posed by Stephen Reid:

What is excluded from the main figure or background? What use of color, contrasts of light and shade, or repeated figures are present? How do these composition details come together to create a purpose or message for the intended audience/viewer? How does the focus (or lack of focus) contribute to the purpose or message of the image? Who has power in this visual? Who does not? Who is included or excluded? (219, 220)

Questions we addressed either directly or through implication in our discussions include the following:

> What kind of culture produced the image? According to Sturken and Cartwright, culture is the production and exchange of meanings by people in a group. It is a set of processes by which meaning is made. It is not a fixed set of practices and interpretations, but is grounded in social practices. (3, 4)

> How has meaning been constructed? By the photograph? By the one who disseminated the image? By the viewer(s)? (Sturken and Cartwright 19)

> Does the photograph appear to be objective, to act as evidence? What is a connotation appearing as a denotation? (Sturken and Cartwright 22)

> What myths does it perpetuate? What rules, conventions, beliefs, cultural values does it portray as universal instead of specific to certain groups? (Sturken and Cartwright 102)

> What type(s) of power relationship is evident? (Sturken and Cartwright 102)

> Does the photo perpetuate a “false consciousness,” that is, the illusion that the world created by it supports an ideology indistinguishable from the “real” world? (Sturken and Cartwright 51)

> Does the photo make you reflect upon yourself as a consumer? (Sturken and Cartwright 198)
What do the signs signify? What disparate concepts do they link together? (Barthes 34, 35)

Does the value of the image depend upon wide reproduction? (Benjamin 221, 222)

Is the image an icon? Or is it a play on an iconic image? What is its new meaning? (Lucaites and Harriman 37, 38)

Do you identify with the message of the photo? Or did you take an oppositional approach? (Sturken and Cartwright 25)

Interpellation is how a viewer recognizes and identifies with the ideal subject for a photo (Sturken and Cartwright 52, 53). What are its points of identification for you?

What image conventions does it conform to? (Kostelnick and Hassett 1–3)

How does the intended viewer determine the image and to what extent? (Barthes 47)

How does the image exercise “biopower” over the viewer? How does it make the viewer want to work, to fight in wars, to reproduce? To be clean, to be healthy, to show signs of meeting the norms? (Sturken and Cartwright 99)

Is the photo an example of surveillance? (Sturken and Cartwright 99)

How is the photo a tool of propaganda? (Sturken and Cartwright 21)

What follows is a brief explanation of how one of my students approached writing the fourth essay.

**Student Insights, Analysis Essay: Dustin Shuman**

In writing on a self-selected photograph, I was able to use creative writing and thinking to engage the audience by constructing a well thought-out and appealing essay. I did find it much easier to research and write about not only an item of my choosing but also about a concrete object rather than an abstract topic. Additionally, I drew upon my experience with the high-school newspaper when I interpreted the various elements of the photograph. Like many students, I am a visual and hands-on learner, so actually having a tangible subject for an essay made the writing process very simple. Also, by having the freedom to choose my own topic, I felt a passion in what I was writing; thus, I had more motivation to write an interesting essay that would fully engage and fascinate all audiences. Also, it really helped to have an assignment sheet provided to direct the writers in our writings. Although this assignment sheet had several points that could be used, we were not forced to include them all. Rather, we could include the relevant points throughout our pieces to form an intelligent and remarkable essay.

I chose to write about a photo from the Associated Press showing Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as he gave his famous “I Have a Dream” speech. The assignment sheet required that our thesis include an indication of how effective or ineffective the photo was for its intended audience. I wrote: “This piece is effective in conveying its purpose by charging the audience to understand the circumstances of the picture, capturing the emotion of the subject and those around him, and the significance of the event.”
To begin, I wrote about the photo’s historical background, which included my interpretation of its purpose. I continued by describing minor images that played a key role in comprehending the photo:

Of course, Dr. King is the very center and obvious focus of the piece. However, one cannot put little significance of his surroundings: the plethora of microphones that yearn to catch every phrase that springs forth from his mouth, the numbers of supporters and/or security that envelop Dr. King and the two men in the forefront of the picture that seem to be the president’s secret-service counterparts. The microphones, though numerous, show no evidence of impeding in allowing all to see Dr. King. Certainly, this is in strict contrast to the conferences or addresses made in the present times when a superfluity of microphones easily hide the presenter and hinder the audience’s ability to fully grasp a matter when they are oblivious to emphatic facial features. The photographer also captured a wonderful scope of support for Dr. King as he delivered his speech. Behind him, a large mass of people stand with support buttons pinned as lapels to show-off their support. Also consider the mass amount of law enforcement in attendance; one can only speculate the amount of those there to “serve and protect,” and those there in support of Dr. King and his “dream.”

After that I addressed the emotions of those around Dr. King and more importantly of Dr. King himself. Next I compared it to a photo from the same day with a different emotional tone in order to gain more insight into the magnitude of the historical context. I concluded by reemphasizing the photo’s ability to convey a story and to evoke emotion among the audience.

### Conclusion

An emphasis on visual rhetoric can be incorporated into a variety of classrooms. While I recently finished designing a course called “Visual Rhetoric and Document Design” for Longwood University’s emerging Rhetoric and Professional Writing Concentration, I have also incorporated a focus on visual rhetoric into my professional writing, technical writing, and advanced composition courses. I recently presented a paper on using humor to teach visual rhetoric in the service-learning projects students complete in my advanced composition class. In the future I will include a focus on visual rhetoric in my “History of Rhetoric” course. Visual rhetoric is tied to memory and delivery, but, of course, it is deployed in the visual-textual social spaces of the Web that students must learn to see as rhetorical constructs. In conclusion, I urge other teachers to investigate ways in which visual rhetoric might be used to enrich their courses.

### Works Cited


Scudder, Samuel H. “Take This Fish and Look At It.” Reid. 60–64.


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