

# Understanding Visual Arguments

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## What is Visual Rhetoric?

When scholars discuss rhetoric, the immediate implication is that they are referring to written or spoken language. For instance, one thing rhetoricians study is how writers, including bloggers, journalists, business proposal writers, science writers, students, penpals, and others use distinct tones and methods to reach their audiences and accomplish their purposes. However, with new media and technologies, the way in which persuasion happens with words is changing quickly: text messages present new linguistic standards, tweets force writers to stick to character counts, and eBooks change the way readers interact with texts. However, as much as it has affected the way writers construct words, digitalization may have changed the landscape of composition most profoundly through its effect on images and visual rhetoric.

As recently as the 1990s, the term “mobile phone” was reserved for clunky receivers in fancy cars. Today, wireless handheld cell phones can be found in the hands of Americans in nearly any public space. Popular smartphone apps include Google maps, Instagram, Facebook, and snapchat, which all rely on one’s ability to compose and share images. As technology develops and encourages more and more casual writers to join Facebook, twitter, and other social networking forums, it is also turning more people into graphic designers. Although snapping a photo may seem effortless, your work can have serious implications for persuasion in the same way that writing choices do.



For example, in March 2013, many Facebook users in support of marriage equality changed their profile pictures to a red version of the equal sign logo of the Human Rights Campaign. This political statement was purely visual; without words, it became evident which side of the controversy some people stood. Some personalized the logo with extra images or shading, and others objected to the movement by changing their profile pictures to images that countered the gay rights movement leading up to a Supreme Court vote on Proposition 8. Consider what other images have been used as political statements, historically and more recently. These are examples of visual rhetoric—attempts to persuade others to believe or to act based on a viewer’s reaction to an image.

## Analyzing Visual Rhetoric

To understand the central persuasion techniques of a composition, particularly one that combines textual and visual elements, you can start by breaking the composition into manageable elements then analyzing the rhetorical appeals of each element. Fortunately, there are countless elements that comprise visual com-

positions, so images lend themselves to rich analysis. It can be easy to get caught up in the details of image analysis when each design decision contributes to an overall message, so it's important to keep in mind the purpose and audience of your specific analysis in order to select the 3-4 major visual elements that play into the message you are interpreting.

So, what should you be focusing on as you try to understand visual rhetoric? A good thought experiment is to consider yourself as a designer. Imagine that you are using an app on a tablet or smartphone, a graphic design program on a desktop computer, or even a pencil and paper to compose a message from scratch. What decisions do you need to make? What decisions are you able to make with the tools you have? More importantly, you should first consider questions about (1) the audience, (2) composer, and (3) context (the rhetorical triangle). In other words, what will my audience expect? What is the point of the image you are using? How do you want to persuade your audience? Think of a social issue that you feel passionately about, and draw up an ad that would convince your family and friends to join your cause. As you draw (or think about what you would draw), write down the decisions you make as you come to them. What person, animal, or object are you featuring? Why? If you're using the image of a person, what age and ethnicity is that person? What is he or she wearing? What kind of lighting or shading are you using? What effect do these considerations have?

It's likely that your answers relate to rhetorical appeals. If a designer uses dark shading and close-up shots of a child's downward eyes, she is using pathos to evoke an emotional response from her viewers. Obviously, bright colors and a smiling child would have the opposite emotional effect. If you are conducting a visual rhetorical analysis of an image that you feel emotionally about, think about what details are working together to create that feeling. If there are some elements that contradict that feeling, then the designer may be asking the viewer to reconsider common associations. For instance, an ad that features a smiling child with bright clothing may evoke a sense of innocent joy, but if the picture is covered by text written in a dark, bold font about child homelessness, then the contrasting elements may be prompting the reader to reconsider the connections we make between childhood and innocence. Similarly, a trophy or blue ribbon would indicate success and build ethos, but used in a document that supports equal access to education, those symbols might encourage the reader to realize a disconnect between competition and education. Lastly, a series of graphs on a scientific poster uses logos to back research conclusions, but those same graphs could be put in a different context, for instance next to statistics from a larger study that show opposite results, to lead readers to throw out the initial, small-scale results and replace them with the author's more comprehensive research. Both cases use logos to draw readers in visually and convince them of an argument; however, analyzing how that analysis works can help you understand the composition and the argument. Ultimately, a successful visual analysis will not only pull out details about an image but also consider how these details work together towards one goal that supports a central purpose.

In her article on understanding visual rhetoric, Mary Hocks emphasizes the hybrid nature of verbal and visual rhetoric. In other words, because we receive compositions as entire packages, we should not try to divorce visual elements of a piece of writing from the text but instead remember that they work together. We do not live in a binary world, so rather than consider just the text or just the image, we should strive to interpret compositions holistically as working together.

## International and Cultural Considerations

As we grow up, we develop associations that are often supported by societal influences such as parents and guardians, teachers, and surrounding media. Oftentimes, these associations become engrained, and

we don't question them on a daily basis. For instance, people who have been involved in the fight against breast cancer might associate a pink ribbon with that cause. They might have a magnet on their car, wear a fundraiser teeshirt, or iron a patch into a bag with the symbol to show support and rally. However, ribbons have only been a symbol of solidarity since the late 1970s, and the first pink ribbons were not given out until the early 1990s (Fernandez, "History of the Pink Ribbon"). While they may be commonplace now, it's important to understand that images like this are the product of movements, and only those in similar cultural settings will automatically draw associations between two things like a pink ribbon and breast cancer research.

Because cultural values vary in context, an image that is interpreted one way by one audience may be confusing or even offensive for another. Pink is not an international symbol for femininity, and the original ribbon symbol emerged as a response of an American military wife to the Gulf War (Fernandez, "History of the Pink Ribbon"). Thus, using a pink ribbon to on materials distributed to raise funds for breast cancer research might confuse people where in countries like Botswana, where women traditionally wear a wide spectrum of bright clothes, and ribbons are not generally commonplace. Using a more recognized symbol for femininity, like a bracelet, might be more effective in achieving the intended goal.

Consider international McDonalds menus. Cultural gastronomic values determine that not all global citizens favor greasy cheeseburgers and fried chicken nuggets for fast food, so the company developed new menus that accommodate the preferences of local populations. Imagine, for instance, if the company marketed a *hamburger* to countries with predominantly Muslim communities, where pork consumption is forbidden by the religion. Not only would the product not sell, but also it might be so offensive to the Muslim community that its members might stop eating at the restaurant altogether. For this reason, the sandwich is labeled "beefburger" for clarity.

Organizations must be able to anticipate confusing or offensive cultural assumptions in diverse environments, and visual analysis can be an important starting point for understanding the cultural values that an organization reflects. As you perform this kind of analysis, think about whether the connections that a designer relies on for understanding are universal or, if in a different context, they might be read very differently. This extra step will help you support claims about the message of an image as you deconstruct it.

## Works Cited

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