

ANAYLYZING VISUALS in ELA

By Paul Reimer

We are to teach “reading” of all texts and further, to teach reading strategies that will help students to successfully understand and then respond to all the various texts they encounter, I’ve quickly thrown together a somewhat detailed outline, but more specifically and more recently, what I teach students in my current photography class.

Analyzing, critiquing, or just discussing a VISUAL (like in prep for the Provincial ELA Exam) is something we do any time we look at any form of visual art (movies, paintings, sculptures, photos, posters, design, architecture, etc). When our language/vocabulary, specific to discussing these things increases, we tend to be able to have more profound and sometimes, more interesting discussions about a piece of art. It follows, therefore, that learning this language and learning something about “reading” art, will assist our students in becoming more literate and more capable in completing an exam question on a provincial exam. This is just one benefit.

Following, I’ll share what I teach my photography students, while learning to compose and to critique photographs or paintings. As part of our learning process, we view photos online, photos that I have taken, and eventually photos that my students have taken while I (and eventually they) critique each one with the language/terms that we are learning. I require students to use this new vocabulary in their critiques of photos, art and design while we look at photographs and paintings, each day.

First of all, we want to answer the question, “what does looking at art (photos, paintings, sculptures, etc” do for/to us?” Why do we either engage in making or appreciating art? A few obvious reasons:

- For emotional connections / reasons – fulfills some need in us or inspires us or entertains us or reminds us of certain times/places/people
- To represent reality – architecture, sharing a scene, for history, advertising, diagrams, maps
- To teach or instruct – text book materials, diagrams
- For formal concerns of art – to play with ideas and techniques in art, often called artistic expression

I’ve divided the main content that I teach into three (3) categories: A) elements of art in design/photography/visuals, B) principles of art in design/photography/visuals, and then C) a few “other” photographic/visual techniques or skills or “do’s and don’ts” that are employed to compose pleasing images. Although I have a huge selection of photos that I use with each lesson and to demonstrate or illustrate each concept, I encourage you to find your own photos. That way, the stories you can tell while teaching the concept are ramped way up in the mind / experience of the class and it gives you some major social capitol. Once I know how, I’ll put them online and share those photos that way. Or, you can join the February photography session I’m leading for Hanover teachers to see some of these examples. Anyway, here is a summary of what I teach about visuals:

A. Elements of design in VISUALS (photography or paintings or any other art, for that matter) – the following six (6) elements are foundational to all that follows. Before we can begin to play with and manipulate all the ingredients of art or in order to make and play with new art, artists, art historians, and photographers have commonly agreed on these six elements as the “building blocks” or foundation, upon which the principles will rest. These are the first considerations when creating art. Interestingly, each of these elements provokes specific, culturally-defined psychological interpretations or responses that are part of their convention. The fact is also, that most visuals have more than one element present in them. But one or two will usually stand out clearly, as the dominant element, which then influences our reaction to the piece in the biggest way. They are:

- 1.** LINE
- 2.** SHAPE
- 3.** TEXTURE
- 4.** SPACE
- 5.** COLOUR or GRADATION
- 6.** VALUE

1. **Line** – line provides emotional reaction and direction in a photograph. Lines are divided into four (4) basic categories, each of which symbolizes something unique:
 - a) Horizontal lines – denote stability, calmness, rest, etc
 - b) Vertical lines – implies size, strength, masculinity (a bit Freudian)
 - c) Diagonal lines – show motion, tension, action
 - d) Curved lines – lead the eye, create smooth movement, are sensuous and feminine
2. **Shape** – shape (or form) are either two-dimensional (up/down, sideways) or three-dimensional (sideways, up/down & back/front) shapes found around us, everywhere. We see these shapes used in construction, in nature, in design, and even in the shapes of people around us. We also tend to assign symbolic meanings to each (“don’t be such a square!”). The most organic and frequent shapes tend to fall into categories of:
 - a) Square
 - b) Triangle
 - c) Circle
3. **Texture** – refers to the quality of touch a surface gives us or the way something feels when we encounter it. But in visual terms, when we don’t actually touch it, the sensation must be interpreted visually, through what we see well-represented. Terms that we use to describe visual texture (just to name a few) are:
 - a) Slipperiness
 - b) Roughness
 - c) Wetness
 - d) Dryness
 - e) Softness
 - f) Smoothness
 - g) Coarseness
 - h) Hardness

4. **Space** – is either “positive” or “negative”. Positive space is the outline of the main subject in a visual. It may take up a very tiny portion of a photo or a huge amount of space. Negative space is all of the rest of the space in that same visual. It’s what is outside of the positive space, or main subject. Space helps to direct the eye toward an area of the photo/visual. It can create claustrophobia, if there is not enough room to “breathe” or “move” at the edge of a photo, or it can also have the effect of relaxing our eye. Space also helps to make a photo dynamic by forcing our eye to move from place to place, in the photo.
5. **Colour** – refers to the primary colours, mixed colours, black and white colours, in a photograph or in/on a visual. There are millions of colours, all made up of a mixture of the primary colours. Our cameras and computers work in a Red, Green, Blue (RGB) colour-pallet format. Each colour that we encounter, again, has very specific culturally determined psychological associations that have come to symbolize a whole library of meanings. When we view a visual, we are already interpreting that piece, with pre-determined symbols for colour, which then subtly (sometimes not so subtly) pushes us toward certain interpretations. Advertising photography and designers are very, very aware of these associations and they use them to the fullest and most aggressive means. Psychologically, colours are thought of as (just to name a few):
 - a) Red – love, life, passion, heat, warmth, heart - draws most attention (is the first thing noticed)
 - b) Yellow – fear, warmth, fall, cheerful
 - c) Green – envy, greed, growth, nature, relaxing, fertility, wealth, peace, spring
 - d) Blue – cold, peaceful, tranquil, trustworthy
 - e) Purple – royalty, luxury, sophistication, feminine, romantic
 - f) Black – authority, power, submission, evil, sinful, male, strength, grief
 - g) White – innocence, purity, virginity, cleanliness, sterility
 - h) Brown – earthy, genuineness, sad, wistful, friendship, stability
 - i) Pink – most calming of all colours, gentle
6. **Value** – is the quality of light in a visual (photo). It refers to the brightness or darkness of a particular colour in the photograph. For example, a photo may have a wide range of values of one colour in it, as the sky moves from sun to another part of the photo, nearer the horizon, where the colour has become much darker. Another way to think of it, is to see the quality and richness of the colours in the photo and how they fade or intensify from one area to another.

B. Principles of design in art (photography or any visual) are the ways in which we arrange the elements or building blocks. It’s how we play with the elements. And to describe or label the ways in which we play with the elements, we’ve given specific names to each different “principle”. What we do with the elements, according to the principles, gives us more ways to speak about and manipulate art. Principles help our eye/mind to find appeal or surprise or interest in a photograph. It also helps us to have more ways to speak about a visual which is a way of analyzing art. Principles provide a dynamic engagement in a photo. So, principles are what we do with the elements, to make them interesting to look at and appreciate, or to create

a new way to see. Many principles are very close to each other or even overlap in concept.

Principles include:

- a) Balance
 - b) Unity
 - c) Contrast
 - d) Simplicity
 - e) Rhythm
 - f) Pattern
 - g) Movement
 - h) Proportion
 - i) Perspective
- a) **Balance** – is the equal or unequal distribution of weight across a photograph. We talk about it in terms of evenness or heaviness or crowdedness and their opposites. There are two types of balance. They are:
- a. Formal balance – which is the PRECISE EQUAL WEIGHT distribution across a photo. It's identical from one side to the other, in weight (size, colour, shape, number, etc). Formal balance provides a sense of equilibrium. It's safe and predictable and it's also 'anal'.
 - b. Informal balance – is the unequal or unbalanced weight distribution across a photograph. It adds a sense of dissonance or jarringness to a photo. Informal balance creates a sense of uneasiness or shiftiness. It's the opposite of 'anal'. It's messy.
- b) **Unity** is the similarity of subject matter in a photograph. It refers to same colours, same or similar shapes, same content, etc. It's the opposite of the song, "which of these things does not belong...". In other words, all of the things belong together in a photo. The photo is unified through the similarity of content (whether line, space, shape, etc).
- c) **Contrast** refers to subjects, colours, content, textures, or any other content found in a visual, that are opposite each-other. This is a photo of things that do not belong together or that make a statement against the other. It can be very subtle or quite obvious. Another way to think about this is to see how different things are or how much variety we see – this is contrast. Obvious examples of contrast are "tall & short" or "close & far" or "black & white" or "rough & soft" or "old & young" or "wet & dry" or "slow & fast" or "bald & hairy" or "squares & circles" or "dressed & naked" or "bright & dim" or "short & long" or "start & end" ...
- d) **Simplicity** is another term for EMPHASIS. It means that one simple subject is clearly the center of attention in the photograph. There is nothing (and I mean, NOTHING!) else competing for our eye's attention – the subject is the only thing drawing our attention in the piece. Simple is always best. Simplicity is one of the most important principles in all of art – especially photography. To get simple, limit depth of field, use telephoto or macro lenses, or get in close. Make sure the background or anything else that might be distracting will be cropped out. Busy photos are just too distracting and our eye does not know to what to pay attention. So, keep it simple.

- e) **Rhythm** is another word for REPETITION. When we see an element repeated over and over again, in a photo, we say it shows rhythm. This is similar to in music, when we hear the same beat repeated over and over or the same riff repeated over and over again. Rhythm is the repetition of something in a photo. It could be lines or shapes or colours or even specific content like many balloons, many faces, many red coats, many tall buildings, many roads, etc.
- f) **Pattern** is the IDENTICAL repetition of elements in a photograph. It could be colour or shape or line or subject that is repeated identically, that creates a pattern. The easiest way to think of this is to think of fabrics that have patterns repeated or maybe to imagine seeing 100 KIA Sorentos parked next to each other, all the same year, colour and model.
- g) **Movement** is another word we use to describe capturing the feeling of movement through either freezing or stopping movement at its peak of speed or height, or we capture the feeling of movement through the blurring of the action. Often we can detect the direction of movement in a photo through fast shutter speeds or through the use of slow shutter speeds. Panning is another technique for blurring movement, when the photographer slows the shutter speed and follows the subject while tripping the shutter.
- h) **Proportion** refers to the size of subjects in the photo, in comparison to other things in the photo. Sometimes the subject is seen in the foreground compared to further back in the photo, using perspective. Photographers (artists) can think about proportion in playful ways and play proportion tricks on us so that we are fooled into thinking things are bigger or smaller than they really are. This is done often, with the use of f-stop or the use of various lenses.
- i) **Perspective** is another way of saying point of view. In visual texts (photos) perspective refers to the exact location of the camera (and photographer), when it took the photo. So, it's the shared experience or view from which we get to see the photo. To achieve perspective the photographer places his camera in a unique location, in order to capture a photo that will give a fresh/new view and a new way of seeing a particular sight. We are so used to just seeing from our eyes – from a certain height, that we love to be entertained by photos that are taken from a “bird’s eye view” or a “worm’s view” or a “soldier’s view” or an “athlete’s view”, etc.

Other visual / photography skills used in composing photos:

- Rule of thirds – psychologically, we are drawn to the invisible intersections on a photo, where the lines of third meet. When the main subject is placed there, we find that our eye can travel back and forth instead of being trapped in the middle, which is pleasing. A good photograph avoids the “bull’s eye trap”, which places the main subject dead-center.
- Framing – is the process of placing the main subject inside a naturally occurring or man-made frame of some sort. The frame could be an opening in a set of curtains or the space between branches, where we see a man’s face. His face is framed in that spot.
- Close ups – are typically photos taken with macro lenses and are microscope-like enlargements of tiny subject material. They fill the frame entirely and are often

freakishly strange for us to encounter, visually, because our naked eye isn't used to seeing that sight.

- Telephoto shots – are photos of subjects that are brought closer to us, from far away, with the use of huge focal length lenses. They allow us to see what's far away.
- Orientation of frame – the frame of a photo is traditionally orientated either PORTRAIT (vertically) or LANDSCAPE (horizontally). However, by just slightly tilting the camera, a tilted photo has a new dynamic added that often makes it appear more lively and interesting, because of the feeling that that small tilt provides.

Things that are just wrong about a photo:

- Frame splitting – when the line of horizon is dead-center and cuts the photo in half.
- Camera shake – one of the two ways that makes photos blurred. When the shutter speed is too slow, the camera shakes from our hand motion and the photo ends up looking blurry or shaky.
- Blurry photos – when the focus is off either because the photographer didn't realize the camera was set in "Manual focus" mode and didn't focus the shot, or because the focal point is not on the main subject, but on some other spot in the photo.
- Over or under-exposed photos – when not enough light or too much light is shed on the main subject in a photo.
- Pop-up flash use – creates a flat, whited out look to subjects in a photo. It's a cheap flash and the results of using it cheapen the photo.
- Use of wrong lens or perspective for the scene/subject.