

Visual Literacy

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As a composition teacher, I welcome the fact that *An Inconvenient Truth* challenges my notion of what a text—and a college’s Common Reading, at that—should be. I suspect *An Inconvenient Truth* will be less of a stretch for my students, many of whom are avid consumers of visual information. Thus, I see *An Inconvenient Truth*’s emphasis on images as a means for students to build on their familiarity with the visual so as to master visual literacy strategies and how these relate to thinking, reading, and writing.

For instance, because *An Inconvenient Truth* challenges our notions of genre, of what a “proper” book must be, it allows for a series of stimulating activities on what constitutes a text. Here are a few simple questions to get us started thinking and writing about *An Inconvenient Truth* as text:

What is a book? Is *An Inconvenient Truth* a book? If so, how does it differ from traditional books? How is it similar to traditional books?

How does *An Inconvenient Truth* deliver its overall message? Is it a lecture that combines words with photographs and graphics? Is it a slide presentation with the presenter’s script made visible? (Note: if students classify the book as a type of printed slide show, it might be interesting to evaluate how compelling and informative the slide show is. To get started on this type of exercise, go to “Further Readings and Activities” at the end of this page).

Why do you think the author decided to publish *An Inconvenient Truth* in its particular format and not as a traditional book that has text supported occasionally by images? (Note: Al Gore did author such a traditional book, entitled *Earth in the Balance*, in 1992. *Earth in the Balance* is the basis for Gore’s slide presentation). Who is the audience for traditional books? Who do you think is the audience for *An Inconvenient Truth*?

Another way to approach the subject of genre is to ask students to make a cognitive inventory of their impressions of the book:

Browse through *An Inconvenient Truth*. Make a list of your impressions, feelings, and reactions as you do so. Go over your list. Go back to the book and try to identify *what* about the book makes you feel or react the way you have. Are there other texts or media that make you react this way? If so, what are those other texts or media, and what does their connection to *An Inconvenient Truth* tell you about *An Inconvenient Truth* and its audience?

Once we are more comfortable with the general purpose behind the design of the book, we can analyze specific sections of *An Inconvenient Truth* in terms of visual literacy. Here is where the general guidelines of college textbooks such as Norton’s *Picturing Texts* and Bedford/St.Martin’s *Seeing & Writing 3*, which specialize in teaching students

how to analyze and use visual texts, may to help us engage critically with specific images from *An Inconvenient Truth*. The following is a list of visual analysis questions derived from the methodologies of both textbooks:

Origin/Background/Context

Who composed the image? Where/when was it originally published? Does there seem to be a political, social, historical, or cultural slant to the image? Is the image part of a bigger whole, such as a still from a film? Is the image a news picture, a commercial picture, or an art picture?

Type/Purpose/Audience

Is the image a chart, a graph, a map, a painting, or a photograph? What is the subject, content, or concept the image is trying to convey? Can you describe who the target audience is based on this image?

Focus/Narrative/Point of View

What is the dominant impression given by this image? What in this image first draws your attention? What in this image seems to be just background? Is the image in color, or black and white? If the image is in color, how is the color used? Is any part of the image emphasized through color, size, typeface, etc.? Is the scale of all parts of the image proportionate to the rest or is one part in a different scale? Does the image tell a story? Are parts of the image related through comparison and contrast? Does the image follow a recognizable pattern? Are there metaphorical or symbolic meanings to the image? From whose point of view are we seeing the image (that is, where are standing)?

Design/Composition

Where is the image placed on the page? What is above, below, to the right, and to the left of the image? What comes before and what goes after the image? Is the image part of a series? Is the image part of a bigger whole? What effect does the arrangement of the image have on how you read it? Does the image include words? How are the words used?

Once students become familiar with the concepts above, we can assign a few visual analysis tasks. Here are two general exercises that we can make specific by choosing particular images from the book:

Choose an image or a series of related images in the instructional section of *An Inconvenient Truth* and use the list of visual analysis questions to decipher its/their overall message. Write down what you consider to be the image's/images' message and then describe how the composition and design convey that message. Compare your findings/your interpretation of the messages with those of your classmates.

Compare the instructional sections of *An Inconvenient Truth* to its biographical sections (those framed by a light yellow background). Are the images in the

instructional sections used as decoration, or are they used as a means of communicating a message? If there is a message, can you put it into words? Are the images used in the biographical sections used as decoration, or are they used as a means of communicating a message? If there is a message, can you put it into words? Compare your findings/your interpretation of the messages with those of your classmates.

Here is a visual analysis exercise that uses *An Inconvenient Truth*'s cover design:

Examine the front and back covers of *An Inconvenient Truth*. In what ways do the inside covers relate to one another? (This question may be particularly useful if asked *before* the students read the whole book, and then once again *after* the students have read the book). Why is the outside cover white? (Note: C. Jason Smith has suggested that, as in the case of the Mass Market Paperback edition of *The Catcher in the Rye*, the purpose is for the white cover to be sullied by its interaction with human hands, thus visually producing the effect of "pollution"). In what ways is the front white cover connected to the image of the Earth seen through the cut-out? What is the meaning of the title and the subtitle in black letters? What is the focus of the biographical blurb of Al Gore on the back cover? What does the photo of Al Gore tell you about him? How is the back white cover connected to the photo?

For more specific assignments on visual arguments in *An Inconvenient Truth*, click here. => connect to C. Jason Smith's activities, please.

Further readings and related activities:

Byrne, David. "Learning to Love PowerPoint." *Wired* Sept. 2003. 18 June 2007

<<http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/11.09/ppt1.html>>.

(Click here for full text) => <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/11.09/ppt1.html>
David Byrne is an artist who uses PowerPoint as a creative medium. His short essay stands in stark contrast to Edward Tufte's "PowerPoint is Evil" (further down this list) and so makes for interesting discussion about the uses and abuses of PowerPoint.

Faigley, Lester, et al., eds. *Picturing Texts*. New York: Norton, 2004.

This book is at the LaGuardia library Reserves Desk. In particular, see "Engaging Critically with Texts" (18-19), "Working with Visual and Verbal Texts" (25-46), "Charts and Graphs: Explaining Visuals" (48-51), and "Some Questions for Analyzing Images" (114-115). For the autobiographical sections of *An Inconvenient Truth*, see "Making Lives Visible" (150-168), particularly the section entitled "Composing Life Stories" (167-168).

Graham, Margaret, Katherine Hannington, and Paula Curran. "Imagine: Visual Design in First Year Composition." *Journal of Visual Literacy* 25.1 (Spring 2005):21-40. Academic Search Premier. EBSCOHost. LaGuardia Community Coll. Lib., Long Island City, NY. 23 May 2002 <<http://search.epnet.com>>.

For those into theory, this is a reasonable article on the need for (composition) teachers to use aesthetic theory when teaching students to analyze images.

McQuade, Donald and Christine McQuade, eds. *Seeing & Writing* 3. Boston:

Bedford/St.Martin's, 2006.

This book is at the LaGuardia library Reserves Desk. In particular, see Appendix A, "On the Theory and Practice of Seeing" (678-718), which includes an excellent explanation of the relationship between words and images by Scott McCloud entitled "Show and Tell." Also, Appendix B, "On Reading Visual and Verbal Texts" (722-730), outlines some useful guidelines to interpret and use images. *Seeing and Writing* also contains several exercises that connect images to particular philosophical and scientific writings for students to discuss. For example, the image of the Earth as a "pale blue dot" taken by NASA's Voyager 1 that appears on page 299 of *An Inconvenient Truth* is displayed in *Seeing and Writing* next to astronomer Carl Sagan's "Reflections on a Mote of Dust, May 11, 1996" (click here for full text) => <http://obs.nineplanets.org/psc/pbd.html> , and then both are juxtaposed to environmentalist Bill McKibben's essay on global warming, "Worried? Us?" (click here for full text) => <http://www.granta.com/extracts/2032>

The goal of this juxtaposition is to make us discuss the importance (the "scale") of humanity and human civilization in terms of our planet and the universe.

Tufte, Edward. "PowerPoint is Evil." *Wired* Sept. 2003. 18 June 2007

<<http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/11.09/ppt2.html>>.

(Click here for full text)=> <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/11.09/ppt2.html>
Edward Tufte, a professor emeritus at Yale, is generally considered *the* expert on information design. Tufte's argument that PowerPoint "turns everything into a sales pitch" may be a useful starting point for a discussion about the purpose behind the design of *An Inconvenient Truth*. This essay may be contrasted to David Byrne's in "Learning to Love PowerPoint" (the first entry on this list), or used in conjunction to selected clips from the documentary film *An Inconvenient Truth* that show Al Gore imparting his slide presentation and how the audience reacts to it and him. For further information on Tufte's work, see *Envisioning*

Information (1990) and *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information* (1983), both available at the LaGuardia Library.