

**Shifting Focus: The Role of Visual Literacy in the Twenty-First Century English
Classroom**

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Chapter 1: “From Text to Image: A Shift in Communication”

The average American receives and sends hundreds of messages on a daily basis. We watch the morning news as we get ready for work, listen to talk radio shows in the car, glance at the billboards and flashing signs beside the road, scroll through our social media newsfeeds during the walk from our car to our desk, check our email inbox and the office answering machine as soon as we arrive at work, flip through magazines in the dentist’s waiting room during our lunch hour while also catching the basic plot line of the soap opera on the small television screen, text our children throughout the day, call our spouse on the way home from work, watch a crime drama over dinner, then turn on late night television and scroll through Pinterest boards until we fall asleep. The Cisco Visual Networking Index calculated that the global internet traffic was approximately 100 gigabytes per day in 1992; 100 gigabytes per hour in 1997; 100 gigabytes per second in 2002; 20,000 gigabytes per second in 2007; and 20,235 gigabytes per second in 2015. They anticipate global internet traffic to increase to 61,386 gigabytes per second by the year 2020. We are surrounded by constant stimulation and communication, particularly visual messages.

Postmodern culture has become increasingly dependent on the visual in both professional and private communication. Magazine and billboard advertisements have gradually replaced text with images, GIFs and emojis dominate digital conversations between teenagers, newspapers have reduced the average amount of text on a page to make room for photographs in an attempt to compete with television news, instructional manuals have become “how-to” cartoon strips with little to no textual guidance, and social media sites that consist almost exclusively of images, such as Instagram and Snapchat, have increased in popularity in place of text-focused sites like Twitter. According to the Newspaper Association of America and the PEW Research

Center, newspaper sales have steadily decreased from approximately 46 million dollars in 2003 to 22 million in 2012 (Edmonds et al.). In another article published by the Pew Research Center, 57 percent of American often use the television to receive news, while only 20 percent receive news from newspapers (Mitchell et al.). Amy Mitchell and the other authors state, “In 2016, Americans express a clear preference for getting their news on a screen – though which screen that is varies. TV remains the dominant screen, followed by digital” (“The Modern News Consumer”). Americans consistently turn to visual modes of communication over traditional textual forms whether they are communicating with their friends about dinner plans or searching for information about a presidential election.

In addition to communication, the visual has also taken over contemporary entertainment. Both children and adults commonly turn to television and film for entertainment instead of to the written word in novels or poetry. Instead of reading books, children are playing interactive games on iPads, competing with older brothers on Xbox, or watching Playhouse Disney on television. Likewise, adults tend to watch television channels such as ESPN or HGTV, browse the trending YouTube videos, scroll through social media feeds, or binge watch Netflix shows instead of reading the latest New York Times Best Seller. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in the year 2015, Americans spent an average of 2.78 hours per day watching television and only 0.29 hours per day reading (“American Time Use Survey”). In her article, “The Educator’s Role in Preparing Visually Literate Learners,” Susan E. Metros describes our current dependence on the visual for communication in all areas of contemporary culture:

[P]oliticians wage campaigns not on issues, but through their visual persona; wars are televised live through the eyes of embedded journalists; criminal trials have become 24/7 international spectator events; newspapers have had to reduce text to pack their pages

with charts, graphics, and photos to compete for market-share; and even radio directs its listeners to Web sites to illustrate the spoken word. (103)

Even as early as 1993, W.J.T. Mitchell commented on the dominance of the visual in his award winning book *Picture Theory*: “Certainly I would not be the first to suggest that we live in a culture dominated by pictures, visual simulations, stereotypes, illusions, copies, reproductions, imitations, and fantasies” (2). In the 20 years since Mitchell identified this iconological shift, the supremacy of images in our culture has only increased. Despite the obvious prevalence of visual stimuli within contemporary culture, many educators in America neglect to teach students the visual literacy skills necessary to thrive in a visually dominant society. Due to society’s shift toward visual communication and entertainment, English language arts educators across America should implement visual literacy skills into their classroom curriculums to aid students in becoming truly literate members of society.

Although a shift away from textual communication and toward visual communication has certainly occurred, we did not become a visually-dominated society overnight. The way human beings communicate gradually changes over time with shifting cultures. Before the current communication shift toward visual images, ancient cultures transitioned from primarily oral to written communication. Walter J. Ong defines “writing” or “scripting” as “a coded system of visible marks invented whereby a writer could determine without limit the exact words and sequence of words that a reader would generate from the text” (7). The first form of writing by this definition that we know of was developed around 3500 B.C. by the Sumerians in Mesopotamia. The alphabet, which Ong says was invented only once “so that every alphabet in the world derives directly or indirectly from the original Semitic alphabet,” was developed around the year 1500 B.C. (6). Ong spends a considerable amount of time in “Writing and

Consciousness” defending the claim that writing is a technology. He says that all individuals in all cultures around the world, with the exception of psychologically or physiologically impaired individuals, learn to communicate through spoken speech. However, writing differs from speaking in that it is not an inevitable production of the unconscious human mind. Individuals must be taught to write and follow an established system of rules (Ong 5). Therefore, writing is an intrusion on the natural world, a technology. Ong states, “[W]riting (especially alphabetic writing) is a technology, calling for the use of tools and other equipment, styli or brushes or pens, carefully prepared surfaces such as paper, animal skins, strips of wood, as well as inks or paints” (4). Ong discusses writing as a technology, foreign to natural humanity, but he notes that “[t]he use of a technology can enrich the human psyche, enlarge human spirit, set it free, intensify its interior life” (6). Just as the invention of more specialized and highly technical musical instruments (or musical machines) has greatly impacted the sound of today’s orchestras by providing musicians with “unnatural” tools to create distinctly human masterpieces, the written word is a technology that opens doors to an infinite amount of human creativity and expression.

Although writing has become an essential and seemingly “natural” part of human life today, it was not as readily accepted in ancient cultures. In *Phaedrus*, Plato’s Socrates condemns writing because of its artificiality, unresponsiveness, inability to defend itself, and its negative influences on the mind. Ong points out that many of Plato’s complaints about writing are strikingly similar to complaints about contemporary technological inventions such the computer and the television. However, Ong claims the creation and use of writing in communication was the most drastic communicative shift in human history, unparalleled by television or the computer: “[Writing] initiated what printing and electronics only continued, the reduction of dynamic sound to quiescent space, the separation of the word from the living present... [Writing]

moves speech from the oral-aural to a new sensory world, that of vision” (5-7). Before we could transition from communicating with text to communicating with images, we had to first transition from communicating by sound to communicating with vision. Thus, the transition from orality to literacy with the invention of writing was essentially the first step toward a visually dominated culture.

Following the transition from oral to written communication, we transitioned once again to printed communication. Though not quite as radical as the turn away from orality, the shift to print communication further technologized the word in a visual sense. The invention and widespread use of the printing press allowed the general public access to popular literature, newspapers, political pamphlets, and religious texts that were previously only circulated among elite citizens. As printing became widespread and common over the next few centuries, it completely revolutionized the way that people received and distributed information. In “Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key,” Kathleen Blake Yancey compared our present contemporary moment in visual culture to the nineteenth century when “a new reading public composed of middle- and working-class peoples came into being. Technology played a major role in this creation: with a new steam printing press and cheaper paper, reading material became more accessible” (299). While writing fundamentally shifted communication from aural to visual, the printing press allowed textual information to spread and reach a larger audience than ever before.

Similar to the invention of the printing industry during the fifteenth century, the photographic process was a technological advancement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that played a vital role in the direction of public discourse. In reference to the invention and use of the photography, Frank Serafini states, “Until this period, visual images were often

used as fine art or solely for purposes of entertainment rather than as evidence of actual events...As technologies for producing and distributing visual images emerged and expanded through television, movies, digital photography, and the internet, they have challenged the cultural monopoly of written language” (30). Since the invention of the photographic process, the camera advanced from an expensive, bulky apparatus available only to wealthy aristocrats to a small disposable camera selling for less than ten dollars at any drug store to a feature on almost every cell phone in America. As the technology advanced, the camera became easier to use and much more affordable. Most contemporary Americans now use the camera on a daily basis whether they are taking a “selfie,” Facetimeing a friend, or posting a picture on Instagram. The accessibility and affordability of the camera in the twentieth century helped to expand the impact of visual communication, a phenomenon similar to the way the printing press provided widespread access to print communication in the nineteenth century.

Just as the technologies of writing, the printing press, and the photographic process fueled the shift toward widespread visual discourse during the early modern period, technology continues to influence communication and informational shifts today. Technology has undeniably contributed to our turn toward the visual in contemporary literature and culture. Even though telegrams, air travel, and long distance telephone calls across continents were common during the twentieth century, the twenty-first century gave new meaning to “global culture.” Because of the emergence and success of the internet, people from around the globe are now able to communicate on a daily basis and in real time. Diverse cultures have never before had the ability to interact and influence one another in the ways that they do today. In the twenty-first century, communication and news on a global scale are common for many countries around the world. Technology is a part of normal life for the majority of individuals alive today. Even in

extremely low socioeconomic areas, few people are completely isolated from the outside world. Wang Ning claims an iconological society was an inevitable result of the globalization of culture (31). Information is now mass distributed across continents, to people of various ethnicities that speak different languages. Metros claims that “the ability to communicate instantly and universally has become paramount, and visuals provide that shorthand” (103). The language of images offers individuals a way to break down language barriers and gives them the ability to communicate with ease. Mitchell further underscores this globalization of visual culture when he states, “[T]he fantasy of a pictorial turn, of a culture totally dominated by images, has now become a real technical possibility on a global scale” (15). Without modern technology, this globalization of culture would be nearly impossible. According to Robert E. Horn, “This spectacular increase in the use of visuals worldwide mean[s] that much more of humanity [is] able to see the world without leaving home” (49). Technology drives the direction of contemporary societies toward a unified, visually-dependent, global culture through its impact on our communication.

Some critics identify the beginning of the cultural shift toward images as early as the seventeenth century during the Scientific Revolution; others ground it during the early twentieth century along with the rise of television, and still others locate it as late as the 1980s and 90s with the emergence of the internet. Although many critics do not agree on precisely when this most recent shift first began, they do agree that a cultural shift is never immediate; two modes of communication often overlap during a transitional period in history. In his book *The Humiliation of the Word*, Jacques Ellul addresses the gradual nature of the shift toward visual culture:

The text is progressively retreating everywhere...Previously images were mere illustrations of a dominant text. Language was by far the most important element, and in

addition there were images to make the text's content more explicit and to hold the reader's attention. This was their sole purpose. Now the situation is reversed: the image contains everything...The text is there only to fill in empty spaces and gaps, and also to explain, if necessary, what might not be clear in the images...Thus the relationship has been reversed: images once were illustrations of a text. Now the text has become the explanation of the images. (116-17)

Although Ellul does not advocate for the prevalence of the image in postmodern society, he dedicates an entire chapter of his book to describing its current dominance in our world. Neil Postman would agree with Ellul's suggestion that this cultural shift from text to visual occurred over time. Postman situates the shift alongside the widespread use of the television in American homes. Although the television was invented in 1927, it did not become prevalent in American culture until several decades later. Postman claims that his book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, is "an inquiry into and a lamentation about the most significant American cultural fact of the second half of the twentieth century: the decline of the Age of Typography and the ascendancy of the Age of Television" (8). Although Postman identifies the end of the nineteenth century as the beginning of text's recession, he acknowledges that the visual continued to rise and overlap with text through the first half of the twentieth century as photography and telegraphy became the dominant means of communication.

The realm of popular culture and entertainment usually welcomes new technological inventions, but the fine arts almost always initially rejects new technologies. However, over time, many technologies eventually infiltrate fine art forms, despite society's original rejection of their value. Yancey attributes the emergence of a new "literate public" in early nineteenth century England to the spread of popular literature such as the novel: "From the perspective of

literature, the genre receiving the most attention was the novel, which is said to have encouraged readers and in some ways to have created them” (Yancey 300). The widespread use of the printing press during this period enabled new forms of writing to emerge, and the general public began reading in new ways and for new purposes. Yancey points out that this new literate public did not originate or develop in schools, but instead, it emerged from common parlors, pubs, and dinner tables (300). During the nineteenth century, many individuals did not classify the novel as serious literature, but a mere reflection of the current popular culture and technological advances. Even Dickens’ novels that now firmly reside in the literary canon were not items of serious literary study during the period in which they were published. Similarly, in Ancient Greek culture, poetry was a form of “popular literature,” thus explaining Plato’s harsh rejection of it in Book X of his *Republic*. Alexander Nehamas defends Plato against the argument that he was “blind to the real value of art” by claiming that his attitude toward poetry was not an objection to the fine art of poetry, but only a rejection of the popular entertainment of the period (215). Although Nehamas defends Plato’s position by providing context for the argument against poetry in the *Republic*, he offers a suggestion other than Plato’s complete ban of popular entertainment. Nehamas expresses the need for specific criteria and values in the critique of television and other current popular media forms. He describes this shift toward visual communication in literary criticism as similar to the beginning of the serious study of poetry (228). Although Mitchell admits that developing an all-inclusive theory to critique images may indeed be impossible, *Picture Theory* “attempts to suggest some questions, problems, and methods for a curriculum that would stress the importance of visual culture and literacy in its relations to language and literature” (6). Mitchell aims to open conversations and thinking within academic and social contexts about pictures and images as vehicles of meaning within postmodern culture. Instead of

rejecting new forms of literature simply because they are results of new technologies and are considered “popular entertainment” in the current culture, we should search for ways to critique and analyze them.

Instead of dismissing the visual culture as “pop culture” as Plato dismissed poetry and nineteenth century Britain dismissed the novel, we cannot ignore the visual’s vital role in contemporary culture. Therefore, we must work to create a standard by which to critique, analyze, evaluate, and understand visual communication. Although most people acknowledge the turn toward the visual and away from the verbal in postmodern culture and communication, few are able to clearly articulate a critique, an analysis, or an evaluation of an image. In the introduction to *Picture Theory*, Mitchell acknowledges the need to break down barriers between the humanities in an effort to critique and analyze images as the complex beasts that they are:

Anxieties about the power of visual culture are not just the province of critical intellectuals. Everyone knows that television is bad for you and that its badness has something to do with the passivity and fixation of the spectator. But the people have always known, at least since Moses denounced the Golden Calf, that images were dangerous, that they can captivate the onlooker and steal the soul... What we need is a critique of visual culture that is alert to the power of images for good and evil and that is capable of discriminating the variety and historical specificity of their uses. (2-3)

Images are powerful, and their potent presence in our world is undeniable. In order to gain some form of control over their power in our society, we must first learn to “read” them.

As human beings, we naturally communicate and learn to communicate through language. Rune Pettersson and Esselte Forlag discuss the way a person creates and interprets a message, whether the message is visual or verbal. They claim that although verbal and nonverbal

communication modes differ in function, structure, and perception, studying the combined features of these communication types strengthens one's understanding of both visual and verbal "language." Pettersson and Forlag reference Lotman when they suggest that "any system used as a means of communication between people can be regarded as a language" (295). According to this definition of "language," there is a very real visual language at work in postmodern methods of communication through images. However, Pettersson and Forlag admit that serious study of this verbal language requires one to sort through the "flood of general 'pictorial noise,' a kind of mental pollution" (300). Despite the sheer amount of visual information present in the current culture, serious study of the vocabulary, grammar, and rhetoric of the image is still necessary in order to avoid a visually illiterate society.

Visual communication influences contemporary Americans on a daily basis, but many of them do not understand how to correctly interpret, analyze or evaluate images. The first step toward establishing a means by which to "read" images is to examine the way images function as "texts" and the way we interact with them as human beings. In his book, *Reading the Visual: An Introduction to Teaching Multimodal Literacy*, Frank Serafini discusses four processes that he says are foundational for the way humans interpret and analyze visual texts: perception, representation, interpretation, and ideology (29). According to Serafini, visual perception includes more than a simple observation of an image or an object. He links observation and interpretation together as two parts of a whole: perception. John Berger distinguished between "looking" as the mechanical process of a person's eye and brain receiving an image and "seeing" as a person's ability to interpret and construct a meaning by looking at an image (8). Berger's "looking" and "seeing" are combined in Serafini's definition of perception: "Visual perception begins with attending to the visual stimuli presented, and interpretation is considered a secondary

contemplation or analysis of the stimuli attended to” (32). Each person perceives an image differently due to the circumstances and experiences that are unique to that particular individual. “We see through frameworks and filters produced by our culture and by our personal histories” (Schirato and Webb 1). Understanding the nature of visual perception is the first step in understanding visual images.

Serafini cites representation as the second foundational process of analyzing a visual text. Following a structuralist approach to language, Serafini cites Ferdinand de Saussure to claim that written and visual languages are systems that are used to communicate meaning. The basic premise of Saussure’s argument is that essentially all human constructs, including language, function as systems of meaning-making. He believed that words do not inherently contain worth or value and they do not “mean” anything. Therefore, each system is made up of “signs” that contain no inherent connection to the objects or concepts that they represent. Words in a written language are signs for larger and more abstract concepts. For example, there is no intrinsic reason for us to associate the word “rose” with a soft flower and a thorny stem. Saussure saw no fundamental connection between the letters that come together to make up the word “r-o-s-e” and the actual object that we refer to as a “rose.” Even though signs are not universal and their meanings can change over time, Serafini claims that “[r]epresentation stabilizes an idea or concept in a durable, public, and primarily visible form” (33). Just as the word “rose” only represents a rose and contains no essential connection to it, a drawing, photograph, or painting of a rose functions in a similar manner. A picture of a rose is not an actual rose. Even though a photograph might look strikingly similar to an actual rose, it is still only a representation of a rose. “Words and images represent our worlds differently, draw upon distinct logics (temporal and spacial), and are both mediated by the sociocultural contexts in which they are produced and

received” (Serafini 34-35). In Western culture, specific images have come to represent abstract concepts, not because of some inherent connection or resemblance, but simply due to frequent association. For example, a red rose has come to symbolize love due to a socially constructed meaning rather than any intrinsic quality. When we attempt to analyze or critique an image, we must acknowledge the representational quality of the image before we begin our search for meaning.

Serafini’s third foundational process in image analysis is interpretation. Interpretation of an image is inevitable. Just as interpretations of written texts are focused around the author-text-reader-word relationship, an interpretation of a visual text is influenced by a creator, a viewer, the image itself, and the context in which the image is created and viewed. Just as there are an infinite number of interpretations of a verbal text, a visual text is never approached the same way twice due to the infinite number of nuances present in this creator-viewer-image-context system in which an image exists. An image cannot be perceived objectively, and there is no concrete, objective meaning because objective observation by a human being without subjective interpretation is impossible. Interpretation is a human process, and is always influenced by the intricacy of the human experience. Meaning in images is ambiguous for the same reasons that textual meaning in novels and poetry is inherently ambiguous. Both textual and visual language are human constructs, thus making objective interpretation impossible. However, just because meaning is ambiguous does not mean that there are not “right” and “wrong” interpretations of an image just like there are “right” and “wrong” interpretations of a written text. “The meaning of a picture does not declare itself by a simple and direct reference to the objects it depicts; viewers must learn the processes and structures through which images speak” (Mitchell qtd. in Serafini 38). By learning the processes and structures of visual languages, a viewer can learn to correctly

interpret an image, even if that interpretation is one of several correct interpretations.

Serafini refers to ideology as less of a process in understanding visual images and more of a framework within which the other three processes occur. He says, “[T]he process of perceiving, representing, and interpreting a visual image or multimodal ensemble always occur within the ideological and sociocultural contexts in which they operate” (Serafini 39). Giorgia Aiello defines ideology as “a set of socially constructed meanings or norms that become embedded and naturalized in the cultural fabric, to the extent that they become invisible or common sense” (92). Ideology’s role in the analysis or evaluation of an image is inevitable because we are all influenced by various ideologies which causes our interpretations to also be influenced by them. The biased and subjective nature of ideologies influences the way we perceive, represent, and interpret visuals.

As Serafini discussed, all images are representational; however, the meaning of some images is easier to decipher than others. Pettersson and Forlag begin their exploration of visual language by distinguishing between symbols and pictures. Symbols are “signs” that have a clear and understood meaning. Although all images are forms of representation in that they visually represent the objects that they depict, the meaning of symbols is usually clearly understood, but the meaning of pictures is ambiguous. Therefore, pictures are open to multiple interpretations depending on their context. In his article, “Technical Rhetoricians and the Art of Configuring Images,” Carlos Salinas suggests that we should recognize an image’s original context and address the ideologies and cultural values that it represents within that particular context in order to correctly interpret a picture’s meaning (166-67). Without knowledge of this original context, many interpretations could violate the intended purpose and message of the image. In order for accurate communication to take place in any language, a message must maintain a clear and

consistent meaning during transmission from a sender to a receiver. If we are examining visual images as a language and a form of communication, we must not disregard the original “speaker” of the message and its original context in our search for meaning.

In order to examine, critique, analyze, or interpret an image, we must first understand the way visual language works. Sending and receiving messages in a particular language requires that both the sender and the receiver adhere to a set of commonly understood rules and conventions for communication. Just as verbal languages contain building blocks such as letters, syllables, and words to form sentences, visual languages contain their own foundational elements, vocabulary terms, and grammatical conventions.

We will begin our analysis of visual language within the framework of traditional linguistics. Traditional verbal morphology examines the way that morphemes and phonemes combine to form words. Similarly, visual morphology examines the way that dots, lines, and areas are the building blocks of a visual languages. Pettersson and Forlag give a detailed description of the way these components work in an infinite number of combinations to create images:

A dot may vary in size, shape, color, value, grain, position, and context. A line may be varied with respect to its starting point, length, direction, curvature, shape, thickness, evenness, points of changes, printing, color, value, grain, brightness, orientation, terminus, and context. An area can be varied with respect to size, ‘emptiness,’ shape, color, value, grain, texture, shaded, non-shaded, gray scale, color combinations, brightness and context. Three dimensional pictures also possess volume in different forms. (303)

Although dots, lines, and areas are similar to morphemes and phonemes in verbal languages,

their function is not identical. Not all combinations of dots, lines, and areas are intentional or essential to the meaning of an image, but these elements work together to create meaning and ensure successful communication in all visual mediums. “In a picture, the basic image components—dots, lines, and areas—form shapes which form visual syntagms or sub-meanings. These components interact to form complete meanings in stills, picture series or moving pictures” (Pettersson and Forlag 303). Therefore, in order to properly “read” a visual language, we must begin with these essential elements in order to understand the way an image works.

Building on the basic components of dots, lines, and areas, Serafini cites color, size, scale, and position as important design elements in visual art. Choices that an artist makes when creating an image concerning these elements are just that—choices. An artist must not only choose *what* to represent, but also *how* to represent it. When we strive to analyze and understand an image, we must look at the artistic choices that the artist made in the creation of the visual as if they are his or her specific “word choices” in a visual language. If images are meant to communicate through visual language, we must search for the “words” that they use to communicate and also for the possible meanings of those “words.” When an artist chooses to use specific colors in an image, he or she understands that the colors of an image carry certain connotations. These connotations are almost always socially constructed, but they are nevertheless suggestions for possible meanings in an image. Serafini lists the following as potential meanings that are commonly associated with colors:

Red: power, warmth, anger, energy, activity

Green: nature, cool, calming

Blue: restful, detached, serenity, melancholy, passivity

Yellow: happiness, caution, warmth

Orange: fall, changing of seasons, fire

Black: scary, dark moods, night, depressing (58)

Although this is certainly not an exhaustive list of implications that accompany color choices, it is a good place to start. We must go beyond “looking” at colors in images and begin to “see” them with all of their possible interpretations and meanings within a given context.

In addition to color choices, if an artist chooses to portray one object as larger than another object, he or she is making an artistic decision to represent one item more prominently. Generally, we perceive larger objects as dominant and more powerful or important than smaller objects. The position of elements within an image can also be significant. Items placed in the center are generally more important than items in the periphery. In Western culture, we read texts from left to right; therefore, we also tend to “read” images from left to right, noticing things on the left before we notice things on the right. When working to “read” and interpret images, we should seek to analyze what the artistic decisions in color, size, scale, and position suggest in relation to established social conventions relating to these elements. We need to consider the way an image-creator utilizes these components of an image to manipulate our interpretation instead of just blindly “looking” at an image.

When the photographic process was invented, the compositional elements of images exploded into a new dimension. The use of a machine gives artists a broader range of visual “word choice” when creating an image. Although photographers still use the basic visual design elements, a more complex and specialized visual vocabulary emerges when artists use cameras to create images. Photographers still make artistic choices in their representation of color, size, scale, and position, but they also make choices in the way they use their camera to represent the world. Photographic language choices are closely tied to the technology of the photographic

process and are only available when an artist uses a camera to create an image. Photographers do not “create” images in the same sense as painters and sculptors create images. Traditional artists “model” their visual creations after their perspectives of the world in a creation process that takes place over time, but photographers literally “reflect” the world that exists at a specific moment in time. The representational quality of images takes on a whole new meaning in relation to photography. Although photographic language is a form of visual language, it communicates using a broader vocabulary and additional grammatical conventions than are present in basic visual language.

In her book, *The Elements of Photography: Understanding and Creating Sophisticated Images*, Angela Faris Belt describes the grammatical elements that are specific to photographic language:

The elements that make up the technical foundation, as well as dictate the visual outcome of all photographic images...are: the photographic frame and its borders, the aperture or lens and its effects on focus and depth of field, the shutter speed and its effects relative to time and motion, and the physical media used to create the aggregate image...Because these elements are inherent to cameras and the physical media upon which images are captured, they provide an excellent framework for studying photography.

(“Introduction”)

Belt claims that photographs communicate successfully when a photographer uses these grammatical elements of photographic language to communicate meaning, but visual grammar does not function in exactly the same way as textual grammar. Daniel Tecucianu notes, “Written and spoken languages have both prescriptive and descriptive grammars which analyze and determine the selection and combination of words into sentences... [But visual languages

contain] certain conventions that are often followed to determine particular emotional responses or to create the illusion of continuous action in time and space” (252). Visual grammar is largely prescriptive in that rules are often bent and broken in order for the artist to communicate most effectively. However, there are specific techniques inherent to the camera that are used as vehicles of meaning. When referring to visual “grammar,” we are referencing techniques and common ways that these techniques are used to produce meaning. In order to understand a written language, we have to understand the grammatical conventions to which it adheres to. In the same way, before we can interpret the meaning of a photograph, we must first understand the grammatical constructs (techniques) used to create its meaning. A photographer’s choices concerning these grammatical elements of photography act as “filters” through which the viewers see the world from the perspective of the photographer. Carolyn Fortuna states that “[g]rammar is a system of logical and structural rules of language, and grammar provides readers of print texts with a foundation of knowledge that can be transferred to linguistics of all kinds... Through their knowledge of grammar, readers, speakers, viewers, and listeners can analyze how a communicator creates particular messages and specific subtexts” (11). Therefore, artistic decisions in framing, aperture, shutter speed, and physical media are grammatical “word choices” in photographic language that work together with other visual elements to communicate meaning.

Belt identifies framing as the first element of photography. She says that the process of framing applies to all camera styles and formats. Regardless of the size, shape, or definition of a camera, all cameras “crop” the image to a certain size. In essence, the frame of the photograph determines the content of the image: “One certainty is that every camera imposes a frame; as soon as you place it between the world and your eye, you engage with the first photographic

element that directly affects the visual outcome and meaning of the image” (Belt). Just as an author is intentional in choosing what words, characters, actions, and scenes to include in a short story, a photographer intentionally chooses what to include and what not to include in an image. Photographers convey meaning through what is in the frame as well as what is excluded from the frame.

According to Belt, there are three aspects of framing a photograph: picture planes, vantage point, and juxtaposition. Belt explains, “Picture planes operate on a continuum from negating to exaggerating the illusion of three-dimensional space within the frame” (“Framing”). Picture planes manipulate the viewer’s perspective to emphasize or obscure the transition of a three-dimensional reality to a two-dimensional image by the photographic process. Picture planes can visually distribute objects differently than they exist in reality, thus communicating various messages about those objects. Vantage point is the literal position and distance of the camera from the subject of an image at the time a photograph is taken. By adopting a lower vantage point, a photographer can communicate messages of inferiority, or messages of superiority with a higher vantage point. A photographer can also distribute objects from foreground to background by altering his or her vantage point, thus communicating various objects’ order of importance within the image. Juxtaposition is the choice that a photographer makes to include multiple objects in the same photograph in order to communicate a message about the relationship between those objects. “Juxtaposition is a key component in any language. The solitary word or isolated image content leads to narrow meaning and interpretation. But the relationship between multiple words or image contents creates higher levels of meaning” (Belt). To illustrate the power of juxtaposition, Belt points to a photograph she took of a leaf in the first stages of dying that is in direct sunlight. She states, “For me the juxtaposition between intense

light and dying holds powerful connotations” (“Framing”). Belt captured the juxtaposition of light and death in a single frame to convey a specific meaning. Picture planes, vantage point, and juxtaposition are techniques photographers use to convey meaning through a camera which are closely related to the basic visual design components of size, scale, and position.

Belt references focus as the second element of photography that creates meaning in a photograph. The choices in lens type and aperture setting to capture a photograph directly influence the focus and depth of field within an image. While the lens is part of the camera’s hardware, the aperture “refers to the opening through which light enters the camera to produce an exposure” (Belt). The lens and the aperture setting work together to determine the degree of focus and depth of field in a photograph. The location of a photograph on the continuum between sharp and soft focus contributes to the meaning of the image. Belt notes that “sharply focused photographs carry connotations of specificity and, by extension, truth and reality. Viewers more readily equate sharp focus with what was present in front of the camera, and the more descriptive it is, the greater our degree of trust in the accuracy and factualness of an image” (“Apertures”). On the other side of the spectrum, a softly focused image guides viewers to be more aware of the representational quality of the image—the separation between the photograph and the world. Additionally, soft focus can also convey a mysterious or dream-like tone in an image. Depth of field refers to the contrast between the foreground and the background on the continuum of focus. Images vary between the foreground and the background being equally in focus, the foreground in focus while the background is not, and vice versa. By limiting the depth of field within a photograph, a photographer limits the information a viewer perceives. “Although human vision has relatively shallow depth of focus, we adjust our focus distance continuously to take in more information at varying depths around us, which gives us a clearer picture of the overall

scene” (Belt). Conversely, a photograph contains a fixed depth of field, and thus, a fixed amount of information. Therefore, the depth of field a photographer chooses for an image makes a visual statement about the contents of the image. Although the lens choice and aperture setting used in capturing a photograph greatly influence the image quality, they also make visual statements about meaning.

The third element of photography that Belt identifies is shutter speed. The shutter speed on a camera controls the length of time that the image receives exposure to light, or the length of time the aperture is open. Like many of the other elements of photography, decisions in shutter speed occur on a continuum. This continuum ranges between a moment frozen in time and a photograph blurred to the point of unrecognition. When photography first began, photographers went to great lengths to avoid a blurred image, but “as media sensitivity increased, the degree of freezing to blurring motion could be controlled, and photographers could better use shutter speeds as an aesthetic and communicative tool” (Belt). Photographs exist as a static medium; they capture an objective perspective of time. Belt claims that they are objective expressions of time because they “are captured through the physics of light and time, and the image is of something that was actually there in front of the camera through the exact moments of exposure” (“Shutter Speeds”). However, photographers combine an objective perspective of time and various choices in shutter speeds to express a visual statement that viewers will inevitably interpret subjectively. Similar to the connotations of sharp and soft focus, a photograph that completely freezes time without blurred motion conveys a sense of objectivity and truth. However, a photograph that contains blurred motion portrays a less realistic representation of reality because our eyes do not process movements as blurred motion. Higher shutter speeds that produce blurred photographs can record the passing of time in a static image, thus conveying

messages relating to the image's content. Although the shutter speed setting used to be merely a mechanical feature on a camera, it has evolved into a tool that photographers often use to communicate specific meanings.

Belt identifies the final element of photography as the materials and processes used to create the aggregate image. This element has less to do with the actual camera hardware and settings and more to do with the physical photograph; therefore, if essentially the same picture is displayed on a computer screen and in print form, the difference in this "grammatical" element can slightly alter the meaning of each image. Belt says that an aggregate image contains two broad categories: the structure and the size/scale of the image. The image structure refers to the amount and color of light, the tone (the characteristics and combination of inks used to produce the photograph), the tint (the color characteristics of the material on which the image is printed), and the texture (perceived and physical) of the complete photograph. The size and scale of the image refers to the literal size of the photograph in relation to the objects that surround it. Because the image essentially becomes its own three-dimensional object within the real world, these characteristics of the physical photograph can also carry meaning and significance.

Although we can study and search for meaning within each of these elements of photography separately, a photographer never uses them in isolation. Every photographer has his or her own unique style, made up of various combinations and degrees of these four basic elements. A photographer combines the grammar of photography with the content of an image to produce a specific visual message. Belt emphasizes a photograph's ability to communicate a message when she states, "Taking pictures is like looking; it's a passive act requiring little attention to what is seen. But making photographs is an active engagement that combines our own perception of the world with how cameras translate it" ("Conclusion"). Although we may

not always correctly interpret what a photographer is communicating through an image, by using the elements of photographic language to aid in our interpretation, we will come much closer to the intended meaning than if we did not use these elements.

The components of visual language expanded once again during the late nineteenth century when motion picture cameras were developed. A different language is required to “read” motion pictures than to “read” and interpret static images. Blain Brown explains, “The term cinematography is from the Greek roots meaning ‘writing with motion.’ At the heart of it, filmmaking is shooting—but cinematography is more than the mere act of photography. It is the process of taking ideas, actions, emotional subtext, tone and all other forms of non-verbal communication and *rendering them into visual terms*” (ix). The grammar of cinematography builds on the foundation of basic visual design and photographic language to create an even more diverse vocabulary and grammar to discuss moving elements of visual culture. Brown goes on to compare the language of cinema to other languages:

Cinema is a language and within it are the specific vocabularies and sub-languages of the lens, composition, visual design, lighting, image control, continuity, movement, and point-of-view. Learning these languages and vocabularies is a never-ending and a fascinating life-long study. As with any language, you can use it to compose clear and informative prose, or to create visual poetry. (ix-x)

In relation to teaching a grammar of cinematography to students, Fortuna states, “When we invite students to accommodate a grammar of film, we can accentuate their linguistic and cultural competence. Students can gain familiarity with codes of the dominant culture in our contemporary society” (12). Fortuna’s article and Blain Brown’s *Cinematography Theory and Practice* work together to provide a working glossary of terms in the language and grammar of

cinematography to aid in any critical discussion of motion pictures.

Brown states that when cinematography was first invented and filmmakers began to use it for dramatic presentation, films were largely conceived as “filmed plays.” Therefore, the camera was positioned as if it were a member of the audience. According to Brown, “In this type of film, you can never get away from you are looking at the scene from this detached, impersonal point-of-view” (2). Where a play is a three-dimensional form of entertainment and a live performance, a “filmed play” lacks this appeal. Therefore, filmmakers realized that the limitations of the screen demanded more than the static nature of films created as a “filmed play.” Brown notes that “[t]heir first response was to break the action up into shots and sequences of shots...As soon as the idea of shots is introduced, it is clear that a logical and expressive arrangement of the shots and sequences is essential” (2). Brown describes following types of shots as the basic building blocks of film grammar:

- Wide Shot (or long shot)
- Full shot
- Medium Shot
- Two Shot
- Close-up

Brown defines the wide shot as “any frame which encompasses the entire scene” (9). The establishing shot is often a wide shot in order to “establish the geography” of the film. A full shot “refers to a shot which includes all of the subject, whether it be an entire building or a person. For example, a ‘full shot’ of a car includes all of the car. A shot which only includes the door and the driver would be more of a medium shot” (Brown 11). Medium shots (or midshots) are relative to the subject of the shot. They show more detail than a wide shot, but do not focus on a

particular object or character like a close-up shot. Brown says that “[t]ypical medium shots might be people at a table in a restaurant, or someone buying a soda, shown from the waist up. By being closer in to the action than we were in the wide, we can now see people’s expressions, details of how they are dressed, etc. We thus become more involved in what they are saying and doing, without focusing on one specific character” (11). A Two Shot is a shot that includes two characters, one of the most fundamental elements of storytelling with a camera (Brown 12). A Close-up Shot is an important cinematic term, and is generally “from the top of the head to somewhere just below the shirt pockets,” however, it can vary depending on the type of close up or the subject of the shot (Brown 13). A close-up is also known as a single. If the filmmaker doesn’t include any portion of the other actors in a character’s close-up, it is called a “clean-single,” but if a little bit of another actor is in the shot, it’s called a “dirty single” (Brown 13).

Brown lists the following terminology for close-up shots:

- Extreme Close-up: eyes only on a human subject
- Choker: from the throat up
- Big Head/Tight Close-up: from just under the chin and cutting off a little bit of the head
- 3Ts: from the breasts up
- Medium: from the waist up

The shot is the cardinal element of filmmaking, but cinematographers can convey meaning even within this foundational component in their choice of distance between the camera and the content of the shot.

Although the shot is the most basic element of a film, Fortuna identifies the sequence and the scene as larger building blocks in cinema. If we compare the grammar of film to textual grammar, shots resemble letters, sequences are similar to words, and scenes function like

sentences. A sequence is a group of shots that depict a single action. Because a film's length of time dedicated to representing a single action fluctuates, sequences range from just a few to many shots. A scene is a combination of sequences (or sometimes a combination of shots if no sequences are present) that occur in a single location or depict a single event in the narrative structure of the film. Brown states, "Shots are 'fragments of reality.' It is the filmmaker who decides which fragments and in what order the audience will see the overall reality. It is the filmmaker who decides that this piece and that piece are what the audience sees and in what order they see them" (2). Although all types of motion pictures (feature length films, documentaries, television shows, YouTube videos, GIFs, etc.) contain shots, they do not all contain sequences and scenes. The presence of sequences or scenes in a cinematographic production depends on the form and purpose of a particular film.

Following her discussion the basic building blocks of film, Fortuna identifies a few key terms in reference to camera movement. The pan, tilt, and zoom of the camera all refer to movement beginning from a stationary position. Pan is the movement of a camera from side-to-side, tilt is the movement up or down, and zoom is the movement inward or outward, toward or away from a subject. Tracking is also related to camera movement, but unlike a pan, a tilt, or a zoom where the camera does not move, the camera tracks along with a character or an object during a tracking shot. Tracking is when the camera moves to follow the movements of a character or object. Typically, a camera is mounted onto another piece of equipment such as a glidecam, steadicam, dolly, crane, or vehicle for a tracking movement. The content within the frame shifts during panning, tilting, zooming, or tracking. The subject of a tracking movement or the speed and direction of a pan, tilt, or zoom also communicates meaning visually. The artistic choices of what to include in the frame and what not to include during a camera movement,

along with the camera's speed and direction, visually communicate a specific message to the viewer.

In addition to camera movements, Fortuna also discusses camera movements and angles in cinema. This element of cinematography is similar to the basic visual element of position or the photographic vantage point in that "a character filmed from a low angle will seem strong, powerful, tall, proud, etc.; in contrast, if a high angle is used, the subject will appear weak, insignificant, vulnerable, or small. The viewer's impression of a structure or an object can be manipulated in a similar way" (Fortuna 19). Brown notes that "when the camera is above eye height, we seem to dominate the subject. The subject is reduced in stature and perhaps in importance" (57). Similarly, he states, "With low angles, the subject tends to dominate us. If the subject is a character, that actor will seem more powerful and dominant. Welles used low angles extensively in *Citizen Kane* to suggest the power and overbearing personality of the central character" (Brown 58). Fortuna notes that a filmmaker can use a distorted angle to cause a particular scene to seem more frightening or unsettling (20). Brown agrees that "very rapid and erratic camera movements suggest energy or restlessness or chaos, especially in conjunction with rapid cutting" (60). Camera movements and angles are vital elements of cinematographic grammar that have the capability to visually communicate powerful messages.

Fortuna also identifies some lighting techniques as part of the grammar of film. The lighting of a scene is a large contributor to the emotion conveyed in that particular scene. Brown states, "Every element, every color, every shadow is there for a purpose and its part in the visual and storytelling scheme has been carefully thought out...[Lighting] is inherently part of the storytelling, an integral narrative device" (158-60). High key lighting floods a scene with light and creates a cheerful, positive tone. For low key lighting, "illumination is low and soaked with

shadows, creating an ominous or melancholy mood” (Fortuna 20). Spotlights draw attention and allude to the importance of a particular character or audience. Backlighting can “separate the subject from the background” (Fortuna 20) or create silhouettes if a subject is not illuminated from the front. Sidelight “adds solidity and depth, accentuating the features and sometimes hiding facial marks” (Fortuna 20). “A side-light close-up may reveal a face, half in shadow, half in light, at the precise moment of indecision” (Silver and Ward qtd. in Brown 160). The filmmaker’s choice of lighting in a particular scene almost always correlates with the atmosphere of the action or the emotion of characters within the scene.

Although editing is a process that occurs after the original filming has taken place, the editing is still an essential aspect in creating a complete motion picture. Editing in a strict sense of the term is the process of assembling the shots into a logical sequence. In some ways, the editing process actually creates the sequences and the scenes in a film. Fortuna describes the ending of a shot as a “cut” and the images at the beginning and end of a shot as the “inpoint” and “outpoint” of that shot. She notes that sometimes filmmakers will overlap the outpoint of one scene and the inpoint of the next to transition smoothly from scene to scene. Films can also transition between scenes by a fade in/fade out or a dissolve. In a fade in/fade out transition, one shot disappears gradually, “brightens to full-strength for a full second, or darkens to fade out,” and then the next shot slowly appears (Fortuna 19). A dissolve transition occurs when the outpoint and inpoint images of two shots visually overlap while one is fading in and the other is fading out. The pairing of various shots, one after another, in editing can also communicate messages. Shots often alternate between characters during a conversation or from a character to what he or she is viewing in order to visually portray point-of-view. Quick transitions between shots can cause a scene to feel more exciting or anxious where slow transitions can calm and

relax the viewer. The transition back and forth between two different scenes or time periods can also visually depict some sort of relationship between them, similar to the element of juxtaposition in photography. Tecucianu refers to the cuts, fades, dissolves, pairing, etc. of film as its “punctuation.” Just as certain types of punctuation can communicate meaning in written language, visual punctuation is also an important element in visual grammar (253). Editing decisions are just as significant to a film’s meaning as the decisions made during the shooting, and they largely contribute to the visual message that the filmmaker engraves in a film.

Many other elements contribute to the creation and experience of a film besides just the visual component. Since film is a form of multimodal media, aspects such as sound techniques and special effects often portray meaning just as much as the purely visual elements. However, the film industry is rooted in the visual. When films first became popular forms of entertainment, they were silent films and functioned only as moving images. Tecucianu points out that although cinematic productions today are much more complex and communicate many more nuanced meanings than when films first emerged, the success of silent films prove that cinema is still able to effectively communicate without the use of sound (251). Without a basic knowledge of cinematic techniques, or cinematic grammar, viewers are still able to enjoy and understand many films. However, they will also miss many messages and connections that the filmmakers worked hard to visually embed into the film. In order to fully appreciate and accurately interpret any form of cinematic art, we must be familiar with the vocabulary and grammar of cinematic techniques that filmmakers employ to create meaning in a film.

Although text is still a major aspect of twenty-first century culture, there is no doubt that individuals tend to gravitate primarily toward images instead of words to communicate with one another. This societal shift toward the visual did not occur overnight as the result of a single

event; it occurred gradually over several centuries due to numerous contributing factors. But even though the visual invades almost every aspect of contemporary life, very few individuals are able to confidently and accurately analyze, evaluate, or critique a piece of visual communication. On one side of the spectrum, citizens readily accept elements of visual culture, but have no real foundation to accurately interpret them, and on the other side, academia tends to neglect the visual aspect of culture, dismissing it as merely a trend that will eventually pass. By establishing a basic understanding of visual design elements, photographic grammar, and cinematographic grammar, we begin to open doors for analytical and critical conversations about visual culture. The dominance of the visual in contemporary culture is here to stay, and it communicates in a rich and nuanced visual language that we should be actively seeking to understand and interpret.

Chapter 2: “Serendipity and Contemporary Literacies”

Critics and scholars often cite statistics on the number of “literate” individuals in America, but what criteria are they using to determine if an individual is “literate” or “illiterate” in twenty-first century American society? When a kindergarten student can successfully write his name, say the alphabet, and sound out all the words in *Dick and Jane*, do we consider him to be literate? When a second grade student can write in cursive, read a chapter book, and pass a reading comprehension test, do we consider him to be a literate member of society? When a high school student writes a research paper on *The Scarlet Letter* about Hawthorne’s religious beliefs and the implications of those beliefs within the character of Roger Chillingworth, do we consider him a literacy success in the American education system? Is the adult that attends weekly literacy classes at the public library and eventually obtains his GED considered literate only after receiving a passing score? Is the elderly woman with a sixth grade education that reads her King James Bible every morning considered illiterate due to her lack of formal literary training?

Commonly accepted requirements for a literate individual include the ability to read and write, the ability to understand and interpret a text, or the ability to think critically about a piece of writing. However, the complex and nuanced nature of literacy and literature leaves linguists, educators, and critics at a loss for a universally accepted definition of literacy. As Richard L. Venezky points out, the term *literacy* differs from other lexical terms such as *kitchen*, *femur*, or *oxygen*. He compares literacy to terms such as *liberty*, *justice*, and *happiness* in that “we assume [these words] contain simple, primal qualities—necessary and desirable attributes of our culture—but under scrutiny [they] become vastly more complex and often elusive, yielding to no simple characterization or definition” (Venezky 2). Although a universal, precise definition of literacy may not be currently attainable, serious work and study of this term and its implications

in twenty-first century America is essential for our education system to remain relevant, engaging, and effective.

The most basic definition of literacy is a person's ability to effectively and accurately communicate with language. Shoffner and the other writers of "Multiliteracies in the Secondary English Classroom" define literacy in the broad sense as "[t]he ability to see a message and interpret a message—be it visual or text based" (78). According to Venezky, the terms *literate* and *illiterate* are derived from the Latin word *literatus*. In ancient Rome, the term *literatus* referred to an educated or learned individual (Venezky 3). Although the contemporary understanding of literacy is closely tied to education, a literate individual in the twenty-first century is not necessarily synonymous with an educated person. Many of the current American school systems provide citizens with many years of formal training in developing reading and writing skills focused on written texts. High school and college graduates are often able to participate in intellectual conversations about the works of Shakespeare, the poems of Robert Frost, and canonized novels such as *The Great Gatsby* because their educational backgrounds made them familiar with classic literary texts and provided them with the skills to analyze and interpret these texts. While an individual's competency in textual reading and writing skills is certainly a necessary component of literacy, it is not the only essential element. One educational theorist, Paulo Freire, notes the distinction between fundamental reading and writing skills and a person's level of literacy: "To acquire literacy is more than to psychologically and mechanically dominate reading and writing techniques. It is to dominate these techniques in terms of consciousness, to understand what one reads and write what one understands, to 'communicate' graphically" (48). Literacy involves more than the mechanical skills of reading words on a page and understanding their meaning or writing sentences in order to transfer an abstract concept or

thought into a strict system of linguistic signs. Literacy extends beyond this definition and beyond the printed page into all realms of nuanced, intelligent communication. However, many American educators neglect to pay significant attention to components of literacy outside of traditional reading and writing skills.

Literacy is not an inevitable result of formal education with static standards and expectations; it is a socially constructed concept comprised of various skills that shift over time and between cultures. At its core, literacy is an element of culture. Ntiri states, “Literacy cannot be idealized and abstracted from its social purpose. It is ultimately a social construction that determines and is determined by a given social order” (102). Because society is constantly changing and evolving, our definition of literacy will also change over time in order to adapt to an ever-changing culture. Educational theorists like Freire saw “literacy as a political, human, and transformative process capable of liberating learners in their own historical and cultural contexts...For him [Freire], literacy was as much about ‘reading the world’ as it was about ‘reading the word’” (Ntiri 99). Defining literacy in the strict sense of a person’s ability to read and write written texts is to limit it to a single mode of communication, therefore, denying the social and cultural aspect of literacy. Serafini determines that literacy ultimately “requires one to be able to use the various forms and modes of representation to make sense of the world and convey meanings in particular social contexts for particular social purposes” (20). Ntiri also states that “literacy cannot be divorced from cultural and sociopolitical contexts, and though learning to read and write is an achievement, the act of acquiring literacy has social and political consequences that transcend the individual ...Undeniably, there is not yet a definition suitable and appropriate for all of the contexts in which people think about literacy” (98). Literacy is much more about a person’s ability to understand and think critically about the world,

communicate effectively within the world, and evaluate the world than it is about a person's ability to use and understand the written word alone. "Literacy... must be seen as one of the primary ways that we exist in and make sense of the world" (Jacobs 158). The textual reading and writing skills students learn in school are essential elements of literacy, but many other elements of the complex and nuanced socially constructed concept of literacy are often not included in classroom curriculums. Many school systems in America assist in literacy instruction, but students also gain invaluable experience and instruction from the world around them that they are not currently receiving in the classroom. Yancey notes that "literacies are social in a way that school literacy all too often only pretends to be" (302). Because literacy instruction in America often neglects the cultural and evolving aspects of literacy, a highly educated individual may not necessarily be a highly literate individual.

Although a specific definition of literacy is difficult and nearly impossible to establish, most critics agree that all types of literacy are measured on a continuum of degree. Diana Slaughter-Defoe and Heraldo Richards state, "Literacy cannot be thought of as a single set of skills, but various skills by which a person may demonstrate different levels of competence. Characterizing someone as literate or illiterate raises the question of degree and type of literacy" (129). Any complete definition of literacy encompasses numerous types and degrees of proficiency. A person can be highly literate in one type of literacy and completely illiterate in another type. Therefore, a person is not simply literate or illiterate; these labels are inaccurate and neglect to account for the intricate nature of literacy itself.

Many critics separate literacy into two categories: functional literacy and critical literacy. Jacobs views a literate individual as a person possessing both functional and critical literacy: "Literacy thus involves not only encoding and decoding screen and print texts (both of which

may use visual and alphabetic sign systems, often in various combinations)—what might be called functional literacy—but also thinking critically about the ways in which such texts situate us and the ways in which we can situate ourselves in these texts” (Jacobs 157). We distinguish between functional and critical categories of literacy based on the separate skills that are required to “read” various texts. Functional literacy typically involves the learned skill of using language to communicate—to both send and receive messages in a way that allows an individual to adequately function in the world. Critical literacy involves different skills that allow a person to evaluate, analyze, and think critically about text (both print and non-print). In order to be critically literate, one must first be functionally literate. Therefore, functional and critical literacies are broad categories representing degrees of literacy.

Richard Sinatra divides literacy into five separate categories representing various types of literacy. He believes that competency in all five categories is required for a person to be a “literate” individual. He lists “five faces of literacy” in *Visual Literacy Connections to Thinking, Reading, and Writing*: “Visual literacy as primary, oral literacy, written literacy, visual literacy as representational, computer and technological literacies” (ix). Sinatra identifies visual literacy in the primary sense as the most basic and foundational aspect of language and communication. He says, “Because visual literacy emanates from a nonverbal core, it becomes the basic literacy in the thought processes of comprehending and composing which underlie reading and writing... This active aspect of visual literacy develops immediately in life and may precede or develop concomitantly with stages of oral literacy” (Sinatra 4-5). Visual literacy as primary occurs even before a child is capable of understanding and expressing thought verbally through language. According to Aristotle, “Without image, thinking is impossible” (qtd. in Benson 141). Young children are active explorers and visual learners even before they learn to speak their first

word. By differentiating between primary and representational visual literacy, Sinatra essentially separates functional visual literacy and critical visual literacy into two distinct categories of literacy. Almost all human beings are literate in terms of functional visual literacy because they have practiced this type of “meaning making” throughout their entire lives, even before they learned to speak, read, or write.

Although our society is generally literate in Sinatra’s first type of literacy, visual literacy in the primary, but we are largely illiterate in his fourth type of literacy—visual literacy as representational. Contemporary society’s literacy gap exists in individuals’ lack of critical visual literacy. Nicholas Mirzoeff notes that “[t]here exists in the academy a big gap between the wealth of visual experience and our ability to analyze it” (Mirzoeff 3). Metros noticed this common visual illiteracy within the academic community in a course she taught for college freshmen in 2005. She states that “[t]hey do not have the skills to understand how to decipher an image and make ethical decisions based on validity and worth...although the students were tested as visual learners and travelled seamlessly in a world rich with sight and sound, they lacked the ability to express themselves visually” (Metros 103). Even though teenagers and young adults in twenty-first century America were born into a visually rich world and thrive in a visual learning environment, most of them are unable to think critically about images. Elizabeth Daley notes that although young adults generally have less fear of technology and more advanced technical abilities, “they have no more critical ability with this language than do their elders—perhaps less. They need to be taught to write for the screen and analyze multimedia just as much as, if not more than, they need to be taught to write and analyze any specific genre in text” (37). From a very early age, language arts classes focus on students’ ability to understand, analyze, interpret, and create written texts, but very rarely do they introduce visual literacy skills.

Although written communication is still important in contemporary society, visual communication skills are just as vital to an individual's education. "The visual is not always basic knowledge for students...Reading and writing are basic skills that are taught at a young age and fostered throughout a student's education. Conversely, visual instruction is most often subordinated to reading and writing instruction" (Portewig 33). Although some educators may see the importance of visual literacy skills, state and national educational standards often determine the direction of classroom curriculums. Because Common Core standards and most individual state standards emphasize students' competency in verbal language skills alone, teachers must direct the majority of their classroom instruction toward preparing their students to pass standardized tests based on verbal literacy standards. Therefore, students receive little to no formal instruction or guidance in critical visual literacy skills.

Textual language and written communication still remain vital aspects of our culture, but they are far from the only (or even the dominant) mode of communication. Because we exist in a visually saturated world and our daily communication is rife with visuals, we must consider the role that images play in our society when examining definitions of contemporary literacies. By separating literacy into various types, we can focus on describing visual literacy as separate from verbal literacy. John Debes coined the term "visual literacy" in 1969 during the First National Conference on Visual Literacy (Guzzetti 665). Serafini describes the early definitions of visual literacy from the 1960s and 1970s as "focused on the ability to decode, interpret, create, question, challenge, and evaluate texts that communicate with visual images as well as words, and the ability to use images in a creative and appropriate form to express particular meanings" (21). Although Debes and his contemporaries were largely responsible for igniting serious discussion of visual literacy within the academic community, their definition of visual literacy

was still largely dependent upon textual elements. Even after the academic community began to address visual literacy as an actual type of literacy, many critics still viewed visual elements as incapable of communicating completely separate from textual elements.

Some critics incorrectly define visual literacy as a form of multimodality and as synonymous with “multiliteracies.” Serafini defines visual literacy as “the process of generating meanings in transaction with multimodal ensembles, including written text, visual images, and design elements, from a variety of perspectives to meet the requirements of particular social contexts” (23). Serafini assumes that multimodal ensembles must contain textual elements in order for them to communicate meaning. Although interpreting and creating multimodal ensembles definitely requires visual literacy skills, visual literacy is separate from multimodal literacy in that images are capable of communicating and expressing ideas without assistance from other modes of communication.

Following Debes’ introduction of visual literacy as a worthwhile aspect of the academic community, many other critics have proposed alternate definitions and introduced new components of visual literacy. Maria Avgerinou notes that “[v]isual literacy refers to a group of largely acquired abilities, that is, the abilities to understand (read), and to use (write) images, as well as to think and learn in terms of images” (29). Metros defines it as “the ability to decode and interpret (make meaning from) visual messages and also to be able to encode and compose meaningful visual communications” (103). On a similar note, Portewig states that visual literacy is “the faculty of visual thinking, analyzing, and communicating. Its instruction seeks to develop in students the cognitive process of developing visuals as well as an understanding of the context and elements that form the visual message” (40). Pettersson and Forlag argue that visual literacy is “[t]he learned ability to interpret visual messages accurately and also to create such messages”

(302). Dr. Anne Bamford offers an extensive definition of visual literacy in her article “The Visual Literacy White Paper” commissioned by Adobe Systems:

Visual literacy involves developing the set of skills needed to be able to interpret the content of visual images, examine social impact of those images and to discuss purpose, audience, and ownership. It includes the ability to visualize internally, communicate visually, and read and interpret visual images. Visual literacy also involves making judgements of the accuracy, validity and worth of images. A visually literate person is able to discriminate and make sense of visual objects and images, create visuals, comprehend and appreciate the visuals created by others, and visualize objects in their mind’s eye. To be an effective communicator in today’s world, a person needs to be able to interpret, create, and select images to convey a range of meanings. (1)

Although definitions of visual literacy continue to fluctuate and expand, most critics agree that visual literacy parallels textual literacy in that it requires a person to not only understand the primary function of a visual image (functional literacy), but also to interpret, analyze, evaluate, and compose visual messages (critical literacy).

Students as young as twelve often know how to film and upload YouTube videos, Instagram photos, use a SnapChat filter, navigate their way through various video games, and become highly knowledgeable users of smartphones and tablets. Although students often appear to understand visual images, their knowledge is typically limited to only lower order thinking skills. Lynna Ausburn and Floyd Ausburn claim that superficiality of students’ current visual literacy skills “suggests that the higher order visual literacy skills do not develop unless they are identified and taught” (qtd. in Bamford 5). Children do not learn to read and write by looking at the pages as their parents read to them, and they do not learn to read music or play an instrument

by listening to the radio. Likewise, students' mere exposure to images does not inevitably lead to visual literacy. Students are able to learn basic visual literacy skills on their own outside of the classroom, but in order to become truly literate members of society capable of higher order visual thinking, teachers must train their students in critical visual literacy skills.

Unfortunately, students in contemporary America tend to learn more visual literacy skills from technology outside of the classroom than they learn from their actual language arts and English teachers. Luke notes that “[c]ritical educational theorists have been arguing for the need to reconceptualize traditional concepts of literacy and teaching and learning relations in light of technologically mediated access to and relationship with knowledge” (398). Albers and Harste also state the current educational challenge as they comment on the role of technology in current literacy instruction:

New technologies are supporting literate social practices while altering as well as making less necessary or valuable older literate social practices (like spelling correctly, reading books, and writing personal letters to distant family members and friends).

Instructionally, the issue becomes, how do we build on the literacies which today's students bring with them to the classroom? How do we put in place a new set of social practices so as to support students being critically literate when it comes to their involvement with the arts, multimodality, and the new literacies? (7)

Albers and Harste suggest more than just a slight adjustment in our current literacy curriculum. They argue that we need to “create a space in the English language arts classroom to not only redefine literacy but also make it more relevant to more students than ever before” (Albers and Harste 8). Because literacy is inherently connected to culture, its definition fundamentally changes along with cultural shifts, including the present technological shift. If the definition of

literacy within the academic community does not change along with the shifting cultural definitions of literacy, the language arts classroom will eventually become irrelevant and ineffective. Daley compares our present literacy situation within the academic community to education in Padua, Italy around the year 1300. She says, “Inside the stone walls of that great university they lecture in Latin, but the people walking on the streets beneath their windows, including their own students, speak Italian” (Daley 34). Eventually, professors stopped lecturing in Latin, and the vernacular of the city streets infiltrated the thick walls that surrounded academia in Padua. The shift from Latin to Italian in lectures in Padua reveals that despite their initial reluctance, educators eventually realized the necessity of adapting educational practices to cultural shifts. Culture is vital aspect of education and literacy instruction, and American language arts educators must adapt their curriculums to coincide with an increasingly visual culture.

Instead of clinging to traditional written literacies as the only form of communication worthy of academic instruction, educators must embrace the visual vernacular as a legitimate cultural element and a vital aspect of contemporary literacy. According to Daley, “No longer can students be considered truly educated by mastering reading and writing alone. The ability to negotiate through life by combining words with pictures with audio and video to express thoughts will be the mark of the educated student” (qtd. in Yancey 305). If American educators continue to deny the importance of visual communication in the lives of our students, American English classrooms will become as irrelevant as universities lecturing in Latin.

Chapter 3: “The English Classroom: Not Another Brick in the Wall”

An English teacher’s aim should be more than just for students to read and experience a Shakespearian tragedy, answer reading comprehension questions about a short story, or write a well-developed five-paragraph essay. Although these examples all make important contributions to the English curriculum, they function more as means to an end rather than an end in themselves. English teachers seek to use these tools as a way to teach students to be critical thinkers, to understand the use of language in the world around them, and to properly use language in order to communicate effectively. Christopher Wagner says that “we don’t teach Shakespeare only to prepare students to read Elizabethan drama; we teach Shakespeare because we believe it prepares students to be competent and confident readers, critical thinkers, and reflective human beings capable of making connections between literature and life” (8). Although I argue for the inclusion of visual literacy instruction in American language arts classrooms, I do not suggest that we dismiss traditional textual literacies as vital tools in the English classroom, and I do not recommend that we completely replace traditional literacies with visual literacy. Traditional print literature still occupies an essential space in English curriculum. However, English teachers need to implement the study instruction of visual literacy as a branch of literature that is just as critical to a student’s education as traditional print literacy.

In 1996, the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) worked together with thousands of educators and researchers to create *The Standards for the English Language Arts*, a document recognized by educators across the country as an appropriate list of objectives for American English and language arts classrooms. In this document, the IRA and the NCTE state, “Our shared purpose is to ensure that all students are knowledgeable and proficient users of language so that they may succeed in

school, participate in our democracy as informed citizens, find challenging and rewarding work, appreciate and contribute to our culture, and pursue their own goals and interests as independent learners throughout their lives” (v). Early in Chapter One of *The Standards for the English Language Arts*, they define the English language arts as “reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and visually representing...[these standards describe] what all students in K-12 schools should know and be able to do with language, in all its forms” (1). The following are the twelve standards that the IRA and NCTE identify as essential learning objectives for the English language arts classroom:

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many genres to build an understanding of many dimensions of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features.
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.
8. Students use a variety of technological and informational resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information to create and communicate knowledge.
9. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.
10. Students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum.
11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, critical members of a variety of literacy communities.
12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

The IRA and NCTE clearly state that these standards are numbered for convenience purposes only, and educators should not view them as a learning hierarchy or as listed in order of importance. These standards all intertwine with one another, and educators should view them as a whole unit describing the aim of contemporary English language arts classrooms.

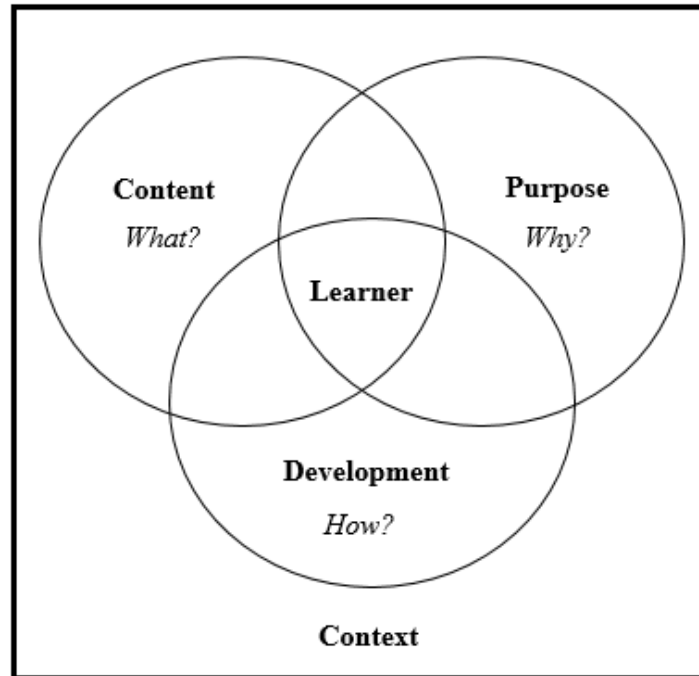
Although educators almost universally recognize the validity of the IRA and NCTE standards, many educators tend to ignore the “viewing and visually representing” components. The IRA and NCTE did not create a particular standard that emphasizes visual literacy skills separately from traditional literacy skills because they intended for all twelve standards to apply equally to print and non-print materials. However, the standards clearly advocate for contemporary language arts curriculums to include instruction in visual literacy skills:

Being literate in contemporary society means being active, critical, and creative users not only of print and spoken language but also of the visual language of film and television, commercial and political advertising, photography, and more... Visual communication is part of the fabric of contemporary life. Although many parents and teachers worry that television, film, and video have displaced reading and encouraged students to be passive, unreflective, and uninvolved, we cannot erase visual texts from modern life even if we want to. We must therefore challenge students to analyze critically the texts they view and to integrate their visual knowledge with their knowledge of other forms of language. By studying how visual texts work, students learn to employ visual media as another powerful means of communication. (IRA and NCTE 5)

The IRA and the NCTE recognize the prominence and importance of visual communication in contemporary society and argue that the language arts classroom should include visual language instruction.

The IRA and the NCTE identify four dimensions of literacy and language learning that inform the educational standards included in *The Standards for the English Language Arts*.

These four dimensions are: content, purpose, development, and context (9).



According to the IRA and the NCTE, “[T]he content dimension elaborates on *what* students should learn in the English language arts; the purpose dimension articulates *why* students use the language arts; and the development dimension focuses on *how* students grow as language users” (10). The dimension of context is unique in that it encompasses and directly influences the other three dimensions. Because language and literacies are inherently social constructions, the context of a linguistic situation impacts all other aspects of the literacy experience. While each dimension is an aspect of a particular perspective of literacy and can be examined independently, each dimension also overlaps with all the others. The IRA and NCTE standards focus primarily on the content dimension of language learning, but the other dimensions remain present in their discussion of the standards because the *what*, *why*, and *how* questions concerning literacy are all interrelated. We cannot isolate or study one dimension independently from the other three.

Although the IRA and NCTE standards do not seek to provide a specific list of works or a defined literary canon, they do seek to offer a broad description of the content that students

should learn in English language arts classrooms. The IRA and NCTE claim that “[a]ll students need to know about and work with a broad range of texts, spoken and visual as well as written. They must develop a repertoire of processes or strategies for creating, interpreting, and analyzing texts. And they need to know about the underlying systems and structures of language” (11). Most importantly, the standards assert that students need to experience and interact with a wide variety of texts such as novels, short stories, dramas, poems, speeches, letters, biographies, academic journals, literary magazines, textbooks, newspaper articles, blogs, films, television programs, radio broadcasts, online videos, print and video advertisements, photographs, and many others (11). According the IRA and NCTE standards, students must read widely and deeply from a variety of genres and time periods in order to ultimately understand and enjoy texts. “In addition to knowledge of texts and text features, students need to learn an array of processes and strategies for comprehending and producing texts...[and they need to study] the systems and structures of language conventions, including grammar, punctuation, and spelling” (IRA and NCTE 11-12). These standards propose that in American English classrooms, students should experience a wide variety of “texts,” gain general knowledge about the way visual and verbal language works in the world, and learn how to understand both print and non-print communication.

The IRA and NCTE standards identify the ability to use visual and verbal languages for a variety of purposes as another key component and dimension of the language arts classroom. They cite four language purposes that educators should include in English language arts education. According to the IRA and NCTE, students should be able to use language “for obtaining and communicating information, for literary response and expression, for learning and reflection, and for problem solving and application” (12). Using language to *obtain and*

communicate information is probably the most foundational aspect of language use; although the information in different language situations varies in complexity and volume, the most basic function of any language is for communication. Students can also use language as a means for *literary response and expression*. The IRA and NCTE reference “literary language” broadly, including both textual and visual literary language in a single term. They state that “[l]iterary response and expression are aesthetic acts involving complex interactions of emotion and intellect. The acts of responding to, interpreting, and creating literary texts enable us to participate in other lives and worlds beyond our own and to reflect on who we are” (12). Just as the IRA and NCTE view aesthetics education as an essential aspect to students’ education, Albers and Harste state, “Aesthetics education, then, is not a frill but an intentional undertaking that can enable learners to notice the noticeable, become appreciative and reflective, and understand the role of the arts in making life meaningful” (9). English language arts teachers should expose students to both traditional text-based literary expression and visual literary expression. In addition to communication and literary expression, students can also use language for *learning and reflection* (13). Students use language in the classroom to reinforce or demonstrate their learning. When we use language for learning and reflection, we communicate ideas, concepts, and emotions to others as well as to ourselves. Although teachers typically choose verbal language as the avenue for students to demonstrate their learning, visual language can demonstrate learning as well. The IRA and NCTE list *problem solving and application* as the final purpose of language use that teachers should include in the English classroom. Students use language on a daily basis to identify and solve problems and to navigate various social situations. “Students need to be able to use language to pose significant questions, to become informed, to obtain and communicate information, and to think critically and creatively. Purposeful language

use demands all of these capacities” (IRA and NCTE 13). Students should learn to use both verbal and visual languages for all of these purposes in the English classroom because they will continue to use language in these ways throughout the rest of their lives.

The third dimension of language learning that the IRA and NCTE cite in *The Standards for the English Language Arts* is language development. They acknowledge that language competencies develop over time, and students’ language skills will continue to progress throughout their lives. However, they also cite certain criteria that describe specifically *how* students should be able to use language. They claim that students should “read” and “write” both verbal and visual texts clearly, strategically, critically, and creatively. *Clearly* in that students should use language with precision and accuracy. *Strategically* in that students should “use a wide range of strategies (including predicting, hypothesizing, estimating, drafting, synthesizing, and identifying words and their meanings) to interpret and create various types of texts” (IRA and NCTE 15). *Critically* in that students should think about and respond to texts by making connections to other texts and to the world. And *creatively* in that students should move beyond traditional formulas and language conventions to explore the copious nuances and complexities of language. According the IRA and NCTE standards, if students successfully learn to use language in these four ways (clearly, strategically, critically, and creatively), they will be competent and successful language users.

In addition to identifying specific standards and dimensions for language use in the English language arts, the IRA and NCTE also identify common beliefs among educators about the purpose of English classrooms. According to *The Standards for the English Language Arts*, teachers generally agree that [1] language arts classrooms should prepare students for the diverse literacy demands that they will encounter in the world after graduation; [2] literacy skills are

important in and of themselves, but learning in all other subjects depends on students' literacy proficiency; and [3] students learn literacy skills best through culturally relevant and meaningful activities (6). These common assumptions among educators across the county align with the ideology behind IRA and NCTE standards. In agreement with *The Standards for the English Language Arts*' stated purpose of English classrooms, Donna Joan Lund proposed that the ultimate aim of English teachers was to achieve "language proficiency, media literacy, and student self-realization" (78). Although educators generally agree about the overall purpose of English classrooms, their implementation of the individual standards into instructional practices and the process of realizing this ultimate objective often differs dramatically.

While some educators actively incorporate visual literacy skills into their curriculums, many teachers either do not see visual language proficiency as an important element of literacy or are unaware of how to effectively integrate it into their classroom instruction. In reference to teachers' hesitancy to include films in literature curriculums, Richard Fehlman states, "Their reluctance might be caused by questions about the legitimacy of film as a curriculum resource, uncertainty about film terminology and technique, perceived difficulty in incorporating film into the established curriculum, or fears of censorship problems (84). Many educators struggle to prepare students for the high demands of standardized tests, so they hesitate to incorporate visual literacy skills into an already overflowing curriculum. According to Flood and Lapp, "[Teachers] have irrational loyalty to reading and writing, the expected communicative arts of school. The best reason many teachers can give for not allowing more visual arts in class is the fear that the time spent with such media forms will be taken away from the communicative arts" (343). Many English teachers cringe at the mention of visual literature in their classrooms. George even says that "[v]isual studies have been perceived as a threat to language and literature instruction" (15).

Teachers view their students' love of film and television as a threat to the lost love of reading. They see visual entertainment and communication mediums as poor substitutes for more traditional written forms of entertainment. Ultimately, they see visual communication as fundamentally inferior to textual communication. Avinger states, "Just as math and science teachers viewed calculators in the classroom with suspicion in the 1970s, so today some educators associate the use of film and videotape with diminished literacy and declining standards in general—a 'watering down' of the curriculum" (2). Teachers fear that if they begin to include elements of visual culture, they will be stooping to the literacy level of their students instead of challenging them to become "educated" individuals.

However, this fear of the visual confirms that many educators are visually illiterate themselves because they have not learned how to properly incorporate visual literacy skills into their classroom curriculums. Without training and instruction in visual literacy skills, a person might think that images communicate with less accuracy and less sophistication than text or that images merely support textual communication. But a visually literate individual understands that "images cannot render everything that words do, at least not as words do. There are, nevertheless, cinematic techniques that cannot be employed or substituted in novels" (Tecucianu 254). To further emphasize that visuals often convey a thought or a feeling in a way that words cannot, Suzanne Stokes points to Toscanini, an Italian conductor. She says that during a rehearsal, Toscanini could not successfully communicate the way that he wanted the orchestra to play a certain passage. After several attempts to communicate through words, Toscanini removed a silk handkerchief from his pocket and tossed it into the air. The orchestra musicians watched the handkerchief float and descend gracefully until it landed on the floor. Following his visual demonstration, Toscanini reportedly said, "There...play it like that" and the orchestra understood

what he meant (10). Not only do students need to learn how to read visuals, but teachers also need to learn to teach visually. If the teachers that resist the inclusion of visual literacy in language arts instruction truly understood the nature of visual communication, they would know that visual language is not a threat to verbal communication; visual language enables us to communicate in ways that textual language alone cannot accomplish. Students need both visual and verbal language proficiencies to navigate twenty-first century society because, although they may overlap, each system of language possesses techniques and abilities that the other lacks.

Another common reason that teachers neglect to teach visual literacy skills is that they misunderstand how to effectively incorporate visuals into their instruction. Teachers often view visual literacy as a requirement that their principals force them to integrate into their daily lesson plans. They tend to believe that they have met the visual literacy requirement if their lesson plan includes a PowerPoint presentation with colorful headings and pictures, a movie based on a book that was already studied in class, a *School House Rock* video to teach grammar concepts, or an assignment in which students create a poster to serve as a visual aid in a book presentation. Because many teachers view visual literacy as mere ornamentation or embellishment to traditional literacy, they commonly view it just as one more requirement that school administrators enforce to make their jobs more difficult. Metros notes that “[b]y dismissing imagery as mere decoration, [teachers] have upheld the sanctity of print for academic discourse” (105). Because many teachers think that visuals serve only as a way to make text more interesting or to reinforce what the text has already stated, they do not understand the importance of teaching students the necessary skills needed to become visually literate members of society outside of the classroom. If English and language arts educators ultimately strive to educate students and to promote “literate” individuals that thrive in a culture outside of the four

classroom walls, English curriculums must continuously adapt to a changing and increasingly visual culture.

Even the recently adopted *Common Core State Standards* (CCSS) neglect to pay significant attention to visual literacy instruction. The standards include visual language skills only as they are intimately connected to textual skills. For example, one standard says that students should “add drawings or other visual displays to descriptions as desired to provide additional detail” (23). Another standard states that students should “make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest” (50). Yet another standard reinforces that CCSS regard visuals as only useful when students use them to emphasize or clarify text: “[Students should] create engaging audio recordings of stories or poems that demonstrate fluid reading at an understandable pace; add visual displays when appropriate to emphasize or enhance certain facts or details” (24). Although these standards attempt to incorporate visual instruction into language arts classroom curriculums, they address the visual as only embellishment or ornamentation to text, not as a separate, meaningful communication system. Students’ analysis of a film in relation to a written text represents the most significant visual literacy skill addressed in Common Core: “[Students should] analyze the extent to which a filmed or live production of a story or drama stays faithful to or departs from the text or script, evaluating the choices made by the director or actors” (37). Although connecting visual language to textual language remains an important visual literacy skill, students must see visual communication as valuable and effective outside of its connection to text. *Common Core State Standards* address visual language as ornamentation for verbal presentations and as a form of textual adaptation, but they fail to address the complexity and

depth of visual language and communication.

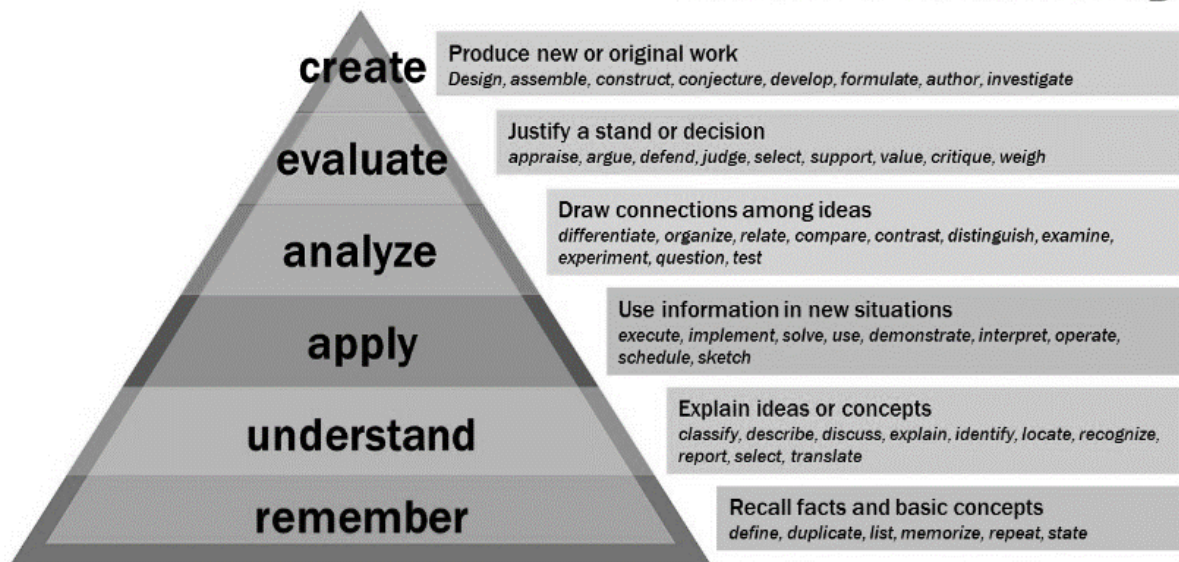
Many English teachers neglect to include visual literacy instruction in their curriculums, yet they believe that they successfully reach all the objectives defined by the IRA and NCTE. Because the IRA and NCTE intended for all the standards to apply equally to both print and non-print texts, teachers often operate under the false assumption that they address all of their students' literacy needs when they actually disregard an essential aspect of twenty-first century literacy. In order to empirically verify and correct the present gap in language instruction, we must identify a set of standards that exclusively applies to visual literacy skills as separate from traditional literacy skills. Although the IRA and NCTE standards serve as excellent guidelines and almost universally accepted standards for English curriculums, they attempt to address print and non-print literacy skills simultaneously, leaving educators in charge of organizing classroom instruction to equally address both aspects of literacy.

The IRA and NCTE standards provide adequate objectives for visual literacy instruction; however, the decision to combine print and non-print literacy skills fails to hold educators accountable for neglecting visual literacy instruction. Although both the IRA and NCTE *Standards for the English Language Arts* and the *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts* address visual literacy skills to some extent, the standardized tests associated with these standards remain entirely text-centered. These standards may suggest the inclusion of visual literacy skills in classroom curriculums, but they fail to follow through with any form of assessment of those skills. Because many school systems push teachers to achieve climbing standardized test scores, teachers often regard visual literacy skills as secondary to traditional literacy skills due to the textual nature of the standardized tests. If a time comes when visual literacy skills become common elements in language arts curriculums across the country and

teachers effectively balance visual and traditional literacy instruction, we may then be able to combine these two literacies into a single set of standards. But until that time, as long as educators continue to ignore visual literacy skills in their language arts curriculums, we must designate a set of standards exclusively for visual language instruction in order to ensure that students receive adequate training to become visually literate individuals.

Bloom's revised taxonomy for the cognitive domain provides the foundation for my proposed set of visual literacy objectives in the English language arts. As Chapter Two describes, all forms of literacy operate on a continuum from complete illiteracy to sophisticated fluency. Richard Emanuel and Siu Challons-Lipton describe the visual literacy continuum as consistent with Bloom's taxonomy of learning. They claim that "[g]enerally, visual literacy is initially demonstrated at the basic levels of recognition and understanding—recognizing an image, telling what a symbol means, indicating the name of a painting and/or its artist. As people become more skilled at analyzing and interpreting the meaning of visuals, they are maturing toward visual fluency" (10). Therefore, Bloom's taxonomy could serve as a scale to measure a person's degree of proficiency on the continuum of visual literacy. Although the original version of Bloom's taxonomy was published in 1956, a revised version, published in 2001, was based on research and studies conducted in the 1990s (Luebke and Lorie 6). Most contemporary educators are familiar with the revised version. In fact, many teachers already use this hierarchy of cognitive skills as an outline to structure their classroom curriculums. They use the taxonomy as a blueprint to create lesson plans that build on one another and require increasingly more sophisticated thinking from their students.

Bloom's Taxonomy



Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching

Bloom's taxonomy begins with lower order thinking skills and progresses into higher order thinking skills. Any appropriate list of standards for visual language proficiency in the English language arts should rely heavily on the revised version of Bloom's taxonomy.

Students do not need to exhibit complete mastery of the entire field of visual language in order to be considered visually literate. However, the task of identifying specific objectives for visual language learners can be daunting due to the vast number of skills available for students to learn. The task of articulating visual language proficiencies becomes less intimidating when we view language learning through the lens of Bloom's designated lower and higher order thinking skills. Indeed, the goals that many researchers and educators list as objectives for visual language learning closely align with Bloom's taxonomy. For example, Metros recommends that educators use the following list of visual language proficiencies as a guide to teach visual literacy skills:

- Comprehend a visual image's subject matter
- Understand the political and cultural context in which an image exists

- Identify historical significance, style and production techniques
- Evaluate the aesthetic merit of the work in terms of use, function, and audience
- Grasp the affective impact of a visual
- Choose or create visuals appropriate to the task at hand. (107)

Metros provides a valuable and applicable list of visual literacy objectives for language arts educators, but the following list, inspired by a combination of Avgerinou's eleven visual literacy objectives (29-30), the IRA and NCTE's *Standards for the English Language Arts*, and the revised version of Bloom's taxonomy of learning provides a more detailed and complete set of visual language competencies:

1. **Knowledge of Visual Vocabulary:** The knowledge of the basic components of visual language (i.e., dot, line, shape, area, space, texture, light, color, motion).
2. **Knowledge of Visual Grammar:** The knowledge of visual conventions, and their socially agreed meanings within the western culture.
3. **Visual Understanding:** The ability to identify and describe visual vocabulary and grammar in a given visual stimuli.
4. **Visual Interpretation:** The ability to interpret the function and intended meaning of visual conventions used in a given visual stimuli.
5. **Visual Analysis:** The ability to perceive differences and similarities between two or more visual stimuli and their meanings, to link verbal messages and their visual representations (and vice versa), and to determine the way that visual stimuli relate to the world.
6. **Visual Evaluation:** The ability to apply critical thinking skills and make judgements about the effectiveness and aesthetic merit of visual stimuli as well as the ability to

provide appropriate support for such judgements.

7. **Visual Design and Construction:** The ability to construct meaning and communicate information through various forms of visual stimuli.

By proposing this list of visual objectives for the English language arts classroom, I am not suggesting that visual literacy can be completely defined and organized into a concise set of standards. But in order to ensure that educators understand the depth of instruction and the level of thinking required for their students to be visually literate individuals, we must establish a list of skills needed to reach a satisfactory level of visual literacy.

Although a person does not become visually literate by acquiring a set of skills or learning a list of vocabulary words, certain skills and an understanding of specific terms build a foundation for creating and interpreting visual meaning. Bloom's levels of learning are typically depicted as a pyramid because the skills build on one another. Therefore, the base of the pyramid represents the most foundational level of learning. In visual literacy instruction, the knowledge of visual language and grammar connects to the *memory* level of Bloom's pyramid. Emanuel and Challons-Lipton claim that "educators have a special and urgent challenge to transform lazy looking into visual proficiency. An essential part of that transformation is knowing how to look. Visual proficiency requires a visual language, an appropriate vocabulary to help express one's understandings" (18). The vocabularies and grammars of basic visual design, photography, and cinematography provide students with the knowledge necessary for any serious visual literacy discussion. These specialized "grammars" are just as critical to visual meaning as nouns, verbs, periods, paragraphs, allusions, and metaphors are to textual meaning. For example, students must know the definitions and the conventions associated with visual proximity, lighting techniques,

juxtaposition, framing, types of cinematic shots, etc. The knowledge of visual grammar does not make a person visually literate just as the knowledge of grammar concepts and the ability to sing the alphabet does not make a person textually literate. However, students must begin with this basic knowledge of visual vocabulary and grammatical conventions in order to analyze, critique, and create meaning in visual images; therefore, the first step toward visual literacy is instruction in visual grammar and vocabulary.

After students become competent in their knowledge of visual language vocabulary and grammar, they should begin to move beyond the foundational tier of *memory* and into more meaningful levels of learning. Unlike the rote learning in the first level of Bloom's taxonomy, the other levels provide "students with the knowledge and cognitive processes they need for successful problem solving" (Anderson et al. 65). After students demonstrate that they have a basic knowledge of visual language terms, teachers should build on that knowledge and move into the *understanding* tier of Bloom's revised taxonomy. In this level of learning, "students understand when they build connections between the 'new' knowledge to be gained and the prior knowledge. More specifically, the incoming knowledge is integrated with existing schemas and cognitive frameworks" (Anderson et al. 70). At this stage, students should use the definitions of visual language and grammar terms to identify those elements in various visual stimuli. For example, once a student has mastered this stage of visual learning, he or she should be able to identify if a photograph was taken from a low or a high vantage point or if a particular scene in a movie was shot as a close-up or a wide shot.

The next stage in Bloom's revised taxonomy is *application*. At this stage of learning, students should apply what they learned in the previous two tiers. "The *apply* category consists of two cognitive processes: executing—when the task is an exercise (familiar)—and

implementing—when the task is a problem (unfamiliar)” (Anderson et al. 77). Because many artists within western culture use visual conventions in consistent ways, students often need only to apply previously learned visual grammar conventions in order to accurately interpret the meaning of an image. However, because visual grammar is always adapting and evolving, new visual grammars surface every day. At this stage in the visual language learning process, students should learn to recognize the way that artists typically use visual grammars and conventions to convey meaning (exercises/familiar), and they should also learn to apply their knowledge of visual grammar to cases when artists utilize innovative visual strategies to create new uses for visual grammars (problems/unfamiliar). For example, Chapter One discusses some common ways that artists typically use color to convey meaning. If a visual artist uses the color red to convey a feeling of power or the color black to convey an intimidating tone in an image, he uses that visual grammar in a conventional way, and students should be able to recognize his intended meaning in choosing these colors. However, if an artist chooses to use the color black to express a theme of safety or serenity, he uses that color in a non-conventional way. Students should combine the skill of determining the mood in an image with their knowledge of color conventions to determine the innovative way that the artist uses the color black.

After the level of *application*, Bloom’s revised taxonomy moves to the level of *analysis*. At this level of learning, students should learn to compare and contrast visuals in relation to visual grammar components and intended meanings. Students should also learn to link verbal and visual representations and draw connections between visuals and the world around them. “Although learning to *analyze* may be viewed as an end in itself, it is probably more defensible educationally to consider *analysis* as an extension of *understanding* or as a prelude to *evaluating* or *creating*” (Anderson et al. 79). The process of analyzing an image involves breaking the

image down into its various parts and determining how the parts relate to one another, to the overall structure of the image, and to the world (Anderson et al. 79). For example, at this stage in the learning process, a student might learn to look at the elements of a particular scene in a film, then compare that scene to other scenes in that same film, to the film as a whole, to scenes from other films, or to the larger context of the film.

Evaluation is the next level of Bloom's revised taxonomy. "*Evaluate* is defined as making judgements based on criteria and standards. The criteria most often used are quality, effectiveness, efficiency, and consistency" (Anderson et al. 83). In order to evaluate an image, students should learn to look at the overall purpose of the visual. They should then learn to answer questions such as the following: Does this image effectively achieve its purpose? How does it achieve its purpose? What is the aesthetic merit of this image in terms of the quality related to its intended purpose? At this stage of the learning process, students should learn to be active critical viewers of visuals instead of passive, lazy "lookers." For example, at this stage in the learning process, a teacher might ask her students to evaluate a visual advertisement from a magazine. Students should first determine the purpose of the advertisement and state whether or not the image was effective in achieving that purpose. They should then provide sufficient support for that claim by examining the effectiveness of the visual components within the advertisement (i.e., color, proximity, scale, size, textual elements, etc.).

The final tier of Bloom's revised taxonomy represents the highest level of learning: *creation*. According to Anderson and the other editors of *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing*, "*Create* involves putting elements together to form a coherent or functional whole...*Create*, as used here...although it includes objectives that call for unique production, also refers to objectives calling for production that all students can and will do" (84). By stating

that students will “create” visuals, I am by no means suggesting that educators must teach their students to be artistically sophisticated photographers, painters, or filmmakers. Just as traditional literacy instruction does not insist that students learn to write as well as Charlotte Bronte, Charles Dickens, or F. Scott Fitzgerald, visual literacy instruction does not require students to take photographs worthy of publication in *National Geographic*, paint a Van Gogh replica, or film an award-winning documentary. However, students do need to demonstrate proficiency in the basic skills required to create visual images and communicate effectively using visual language. For example, at this final stage in the learning process, students should be able to demonstrate that they can turn an argumentative essay into a visual argument. Students should choose a specific form of visual representation to best fit a particular argument. Then they should create a visual representation of the argument that is specifically catered to their individual artistic abilities and visual language proficiency.

Instructional approaches should not be limited to a strict set of objective standards, but the social and cultural context of student learning should inform and direct the realization of educational standards within individual classrooms. Education should always be student-centered, and teachers should continuously evaluate and adjust their teaching styles, tools, methods, and curriculum to best fit the needs of the students and the condition of the culture. Thomas Newkirk notes that teachers should seek to work with, not against, the cultural tools that students bring to the classroom (64). These cultural tools are different today than they were ten years ago, and they will be even more diverse ten years from now. Students today engage daily with both verbal and visual communication, but the time that they spend with visual “literature” is far greater than the time that they spend with print literature. We must not lose touch with reality and become “priests of a dead culture” by refusing to acknowledge the amount of time

that students spend with visual literature or not adjusting our classrooms to reflect the literacy needs of an increasingly visual culture (Jacobs 160). Educators should not view visual literacy as an extra requirement to force into an already overflowing curriculum, an “embellishment” to text, a gateway to higher learning, or a way to make students interested in “real” literature.

Visual language, literature, and communication are here to stay. By establishing a set of visual literacy standards as separate from textual literacy standards for the English language arts classroom, we provide criteria for educators to evaluate their students’ learning and inform their own instructional practices. Visual language learning parallels verbal language learning as they both follow the cognitive process depicted in Bloom’s revised taxonomy, but teachers must be intentional in teaching visual language skills as related to, but distinct from verbal language skills. Therefore, their curriculums should demonstrate a balance between verbal and visual literacy instruction. Text-based communication remains a vital aspect of the English classroom, and educators must not abandon traditional literacy instruction. However, English classrooms must respond to the communication shift in the current culture and work to educate students on how to be involved in a multiliterate society instead of allowing students to educate themselves on how to function in a visually-based culture.

Chapter 4: “The Culture Classroom: Practical Ways to Incorporate Visual Literacy Instruction in English Language Arts Curriculums”

Although many schools have attempted to adapt teaching strategies to accommodate a multiliterate generation, many of them only require teachers to daily utilize technology in the classroom, provide students with a specified amount of computer time per week, or create projects and assignments that allow students to use digital images. Teachers often utilize visuals and digital media to “embellish” their lectures or presentations, to “keep students interested” in the (admittedly uninteresting) material, or to show connections between the material and the students’ lives. However, this form of pedagogical adaptation is often a vain attempt to make the curriculum interesting and relevant to students. Although teachers are beginning to see the necessity of a shift in visual instruction, they are not adequately preparing students to effectively engage with a visually-saturated world. Christopher Wagner points out that “we teach literacy and thinking skills that we assume will extend beyond the classroom ... [but] why aren’t we more explicitly teaching students how to transfer literacy skills?” (8). Instead of assuming that students already know how to “read” images and film, educators must teach them how to be critically literate in visual languages. Teachers should be seeking to prepare their students to interact and live in a multiliterate world instead of trying to camouflage old teaching styles and methods so that they appear “relevant” and “exciting” in a digitally engulfed and visually-based society.

I am not suggesting that traditional literacy skills and pedagogical methods do not serve an important purpose in contemporary language arts curriculums. Instruction in reading and writing written texts are vital skills for students to learn, and English curriculums must continue to teach students how to effectively communicate using written and spoken language. I am,

however, proposing that English language arts curriculums need to adapt a more balanced approach between verbal and visual literacy skills. My purpose in this chapter aligns with Brumberger's purpose in his article, "Making the Strange Familiar: A Pedagogical Exploration of Visual Thinking." He states, "I am suggesting approaches for diminishing the divide between word and image, better balancing verbal and visual modes in the classroom, and, in turn, better preparing our students for the multimodal communication tasks of the workplace" (Brumberger 397-98). Students are native image-viewers, but they are not able to be image-readers without instruction and training on how to critically "read" images. In order to better prepare students to work, communicate, and live in a visually rich world, English language arts curriculums must include extensive instruction in both verbal and visual languages.

Melanie Shoffner and the other writers of "Multiliteracies in the Secondary English Classroom: Becoming Literate in the 21st Century" describe a case study of two different English teachers (Scott and Helen) and the difference between their approaches to visual literacy instruction. The primary difference between these two educators' treatment of visual literacy instruction was that Scott merely *exposed* students to visual literacy skills, while Helen allowed students to actively *engage* in communication using visual languages:

Scott frequently addressed visual and technological literacy through his use of media as text but he relied on students' traditional literacy skills to show their understanding of those texts. With this approach, the students in Scott's class were exposed to new literacies but not *participating* in new literacies... While Helen used new literacies to develop students' traditional literacy, Scott used traditional literacy to engage students with new literacies. (Shoffner et al. 82)

Scott ultimately believes that both verbal and visual "texts" are "read" using the same set of

literacy skills. He believes that “reading” an image is essentially the same as the act of applying traditional literacy skills to a non-traditional medium: “He did not choose to use media because his students struggled with traditional print texts; rather, his incorporation of media rested on his belief in the transferability of his students’ literate practices” (Shoffner et al. 83). Although both visual and verbal language learning generally follow the same basic process, the skills required to read an image are not the same skills that are required to read a novel. Some literacy skills overlap between words and images and can easily translate between mediums, but many skills are distinct to visual or verbal language. Students’ initial exposure to images that relies on existing literacy skills, such as Scott’s visual literacy instruction, is an important aspect in visual language learning, but students must also receive training in visual literacy skills that function outside of traditional verbal proficiencies.

Both Scott and Helen view visual literacy as an important element in the English classroom, but Scott exposes students to visual language without climbing the rest of Bloom’s taxonomy to ensure critical visual literacy. On the other hand, Helen begins her instruction in the middle of Bloom’s taxonomy without first establishing a strong visual foundation. Both teachers address critical aspects of visual language learning, but both are also training students in only a portion of the visual language learning process. In order to properly teach visual literacy skills, teachers should begin with Scott’s level of exposure to visual images and gradually build new literacy skills until students are able to efficiently *participate* in visual communication.

Although elementary language arts curriculums should include basic visual literacy skills, the activities listed in this chapter are not suggestions for visual language instruction in elementary English classrooms. The following activities and practical implementations of visual literacy instruction are specifically catered toward secondary and general studies college English

curriculums. These activities and projects are loosely arranged in an order that follows the progression of visual language learning in Bloom's taxonomy. However, most levels of learning in any language are never accomplished independently, so many of the suggested activities and projects contain components within multiple levels of Bloom's revised taxonomy.

Exposure

The first level of visual language learning actually begins before the bottom tier of Bloom's taxonomy. *Exposure* to images as visual "literature" introduces students to visual language before they enter the *remembering/knowledge* level of learning. Students experience exposure to images on a daily basis during their normal routines of browsing the internet or watching television, but they do not normally view images as visual language or modes of visual communication. Therefore, educators should begin visual literacy instruction by first exposing students to images that showcase visual language as a powerful means of communication.

Carrie Nethery suggests beginning visual literacy instruction by looking at paintings such as *The Red Studio* by Henri Matisse, *The Hunt Ball* by Julius Stewart, *Merced River* by Albert Bierstadt, *Government Bureau* by George Tooker, *Nighthawks* by Edward Hopper, *Echo of a Scream* by David Alfaro Siqueiros, or *Malers Im Atelier* by Johannes Vermeer (21). She suggests to ask students questions such as:

1. Who and what exactly are in this picture?
2. Where are they?
3. What are they doing?
4. What type of clothes are they wearing?
5. What time of day is it?
6. What is the weather like?

By asking these basic questions of observation, students are forced to look closely at an image in order to determine exactly what the image portrays. Although Nethery suggests this activity as a way to look at paintings, students can answer these same questions in reference to photographs or film scenes. This activity is not quite at the *remember* stage of visual language learning, but it exposes students to visual literature and forces them to closely examine it.

Dr. Anne Bamford suggests an activity that could be useful in highlighting the connection between words and images while also demonstrating stereotypes or commonalities among images. She suggests that students create visual dictionaries for each letter of the alphabet. She states, “For each letter choose stereotypical images and unusual (non-stereotypical) images. Find images in magazines, newspapers, brochures or online. Encourage children to gather non-stereotypical images using digital photography” (Bamford 6). This activity exposes students to images while allowing them to differentiate between stereotypical and non-stereotypical images. Teachers could also use this activity for students to choose images for each letter of the alphabet that relate to a certain theme or book studied in class. It also does not require students to use any expensive technology. Stacks of magazines and newspapers provide one of the simplest and cheapest banks or “databases” of visual images to use in the classroom, especially if teachers are located in low-budget school districts. This image dictionary activity integrates verbal and visual literacies and allows students to use a familiar verbal foundation to begin visual language exploration.

Another educator recommends using photographs or film clips as journal prompts for students. He suggests using films to prompt students to discuss a certain theme or idea portrayed in the film (Waddell 344). For example, asking students to write a response in their journals to the racism and prejudice ideologies portrayed in *The Help* or *The Perfect Game*, or even

Fruitvale Station in college courses (due to explicit content). By asking students to “read” a film or a photograph and then respond verbally, educators ask them to combine visual and verbal literacy skills. Using images as writing prompts for students is not a new concept in the education world. Lucille Schultz points out that images were common in writing textbooks as early as the nineteenth century:

[These texts] rely heavily on illustrations as a teaching tool...fairly detailed and complex illustrations were used abundantly in many of the lesser known mid-19th century first books of composition; in addition to common objects, they depicted scenes from home life, school life, and work life, and the illustrations served as writing prompts for young writers who were asked to describe what they saw in the picture. In these books, the illustrations were not simply embellishment or ornament, they were an integral part of the book’s instructional practice. (qtd. in George 20)

Although students are mostly using verbal language skills to respond to images by writing in a journal with words, this activity exposes them to visuals as vehicles for meaning.

Students’ exposure to images as a way to communicate meaning is the most basic step in visual language learning, but it is a vital introduction to the significance of visual communication. When teachers skip over this step in the process, students often do not initially grasp the role of images in communicating information or ideas. By exposing them to images that contain accessible meaning without extensive training in visual language, students grasp the basic principle of communicating with visual language. This stage in the learning process allows students to understand the rationale behind visual language instruction. The following sections contain activities that closely follow the progression of Bloom’s revised taxonomy and seek to guide students through the visual language learning process.

Know and Remember

The vocabulary and grammar of visual design, photography, and cinematography are important elements in the *knowledge/remember* stage of language learning. Many students may recognize or already know the meaning of some of the visual language terms. However, establishing a visual language toolbox early in the learning process is essential to providing students with the knowledge and tools they will need to respond critically and meaningfully to visual images. According to the website *Film Education*, “Students of English language and literature learn how to read texts actively, how to interpret and respond at the level of whole text, grammatical unit and individual word. In the same way, in order to more fully appreciate, analyze and indeed criticize film, it is necessary to have an understanding of the units it is constructed from” (“Reading Moving Image”). An appropriate knowledge of a critical vocabulary provides an essential foundation for visual literacy. *Film Education* asserts that with this critical vocabulary in place, “the possibilities for creative response and critical interpretation are thrown wide open” (“Reading Moving Image”). The *remember* tier of Bloom’s taxonomy focuses exclusively on foundational knowledge of visual language terms, but this knowledge makes the rest of the tiers of visual language learning possible.

For example, the visual category of film has its own specialized vocabulary terms. Some critics also suggest that educators should introduce students to the specific roles of various film crew personnel since a single individual is not responsible for all of the artistic decisions within a film (Avinger 6). By learning about the role of directors, assistant directors (ADs), writers, producers, directors of photography (DPs), actors, extras, grips, gaffers, sound operators, foley artists, property masters, production designers, editors, etc. in the production of films, students become more aware of who is creating certain visual messages. While a novel is typically the

result of a single author's imagination, a film is a compilation of multiple creative minds seeking to achieve a single message. Therefore, knowing the roles of each member on a film crew provides students with the knowledge to more accurately discuss visual language within a film.

The most traditional and consistent method to teach students a new visual vocabulary and grammar is to test and quiz them about the basic definitions of visual language terms such as color, size, scale, and position, as well as the cultural conventions associated with these terms. Students should also learn the basic definitions and functions of photographic and cinematic language such as the frame, aperture, shutter speed, and vantage point, as well as the various types of shots, cuts, and camera movements. Although this method still relies on traditional literacy skills, it allows students to learn a new language through the comfort of a familiar language. Just as foreign language teachers cling to students' native language to provide a basis for the new language, English language arts teachers should use verbal language to introduce students to the vocabulary and grammar of visual language.

Understand

The second level of Bloom's taxonomy requires students to not only *know* the terms and conventions of visual language, but to also *understand* them. At this stage in the learning process, students should be able to identify and describe the way elements of visual vocabulary and grammar appear in a various visual stimuli. Although this stage is similar to the *remembering* stage, it takes visual vocabulary a step further than just knowing the terms and definitions. Not only do students need to be able to identify the meaning of visual vocabulary and grammar terms, but they also need to be able to identify these elements of visual communication within visual images. For example, Fortuna asked her students to identify various elements of visual communication within movie posters. She used the site:

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Movie_posters to show her students examples of visually powerful posters. After looking at several different movie posters during class, Fortuna asked her students what elements of visual vocabulary they noticed in the posters. They responded with, “‘lighting,’ ‘script,’ ‘camera angles,’ ‘ratings,’ ‘explosions,’ ‘stunt doubles,’ ‘choreography,’ ‘animation,’ ‘location,’ ‘sets,’ ‘producers,’ ‘cinematography,’ and many others” (Fortuna 16). By identifying these elements of film within movie posters, students demonstrate that they have advanced from the *exposure* level of learning, where they simply observe the content of an image, to *remembering* and *understanding* elements of visual language within images.

Apply and Interpret

In addition to identifying visual language elements within images and films, students also need to be able to identify what purpose these elements serve within a specific visual image. Not only should students be able to describe the lighting technique in a movie poster, but they also need to be able to articulate what the filmmakers are visually communicating through the lighting. For example, many critics consider *Citizen Kane* the first film that effectively utilized lighting to convey meaning. Near the beginning of the film, following a news reel about the death of Charles Foster Kane, the film shows a group of people viewing and critiquing the news reel. Orson Welles chose to use light and shadow to convey meaning and focus the audience’s attention on a specific aspect of the scene. John Anton claims, “By using a very strong backlight, Welles put these characters in shadow. All we could see was their silhouettes and the outline of the hands moving. Painting with light helped Welles to tell the audience not to focus on these reporters and who they are. The focus here did not change from Charles Foster Kane to the reporters with the end of the newsreel but stayed on Kane” (qtd. in Khairy). By using shadow to

draw the audience's attention away from the reporters themselves, Welles kept the focus of this scene on Kane as if to say that the reporters as characters are unimportant to the story, they are only significant in relation to Charles Foster Kane. Students should be able to identify and explain the way that Welles utilized the communicative power of lighting in this film.

The same concept of applying students' knowledge of visual conventions to images is true for all of the visual grammar elements of visual design, photography, and cinematography. At this stage in the visual language learning process, teachers should show their students numerous visual images and ask them to identify how the elements of visual language and grammar function within each particular image. For example, students should be able to identify the type of focus and vantage point in a photograph, and they should be able to articulate how those artistic choices effect the meaning of the image. They should also be able to watch a film and identify how the type of shots, the lighting choices, and the camera movements contribute to the meaning or the message of the film. Students should be able to identify the elements of visual language and express the way they create meaning within the image. According to Jacobs, "[T]he film as an artifact is both the medium of communication and the medium of meaning-making... [students demonstrate visual literacy] not only through their ability to read these texts, but in their ability to examine how filmmakers have attempted to create meaning through visuals" (161). Essentially, students should be able to *apply* their *knowledge* and *understanding* of visual language vocabulary and grammar in order to interpret meaning contained within images.

Analyze

One key aspect in literary analysis is for the student to think about the purpose of a text—how and why it was written. The process and aim of visual analysis is very similar to literary

analysis even though students utilize different skills for each type of analysis. According to Avinger, “The comprehension of film as text [is] a process similar in many ways to the analysis of literature. This connection is both increasingly easy and increasingly important for composition teachers to establish because of the prevalence of video technology in today’s culture” (1). Although students may understand the purpose of visual analysis if they have experience in analyzing literature, teachers must still train them how to apply analysis skills to visual stimuli.

The largest difference between *interpreting* an image and *analyzing* an image is that as students begin to analyze images, they begin to determine the way images relate to other images and to the world around them. When analyzing images, students should ultimately seek to answer the question, “How and why was this visual created?” This process requires knowledge of visual vocabulary, grammar, rhetoric and semantics. Bamford defines visual semantics as “the way images relate more broadly to issues in the world to gain meaning” (4). Portewig describes instruction using visual rhetoric as “an instruction model that teaches students to recognize the context in which images are designed and figured as well as the ideologies and cultural values they represent. Students should also understand the ethos that images project” (39). Although visual semantics and visual rhetoric are very similar, rhetoric goes beyond simply analyzing the way an image represents an ideology and emphasizes the way an image argues from a specific stance on an issue. Bamford lists some questions that educators could ask students to introduce them to visual semantics:

1. Who created the image?
2. At what point of history and in what context was the image created?
3. Who commissioned the image?

4. For what purpose was the image created?
5. In what context is the image being seen?
6. Who is the intended audience of the image?
7. In what form(s) of media will the image be seen?
8. What has been omitted, altered, or included in an image?
9. What does the image say about our history?
10. What does the image communicate about our individual or national identity?
11. What does the image say about society?
12. What does the image say about an event?
13. What aspects of culture is an image communicating? (4)

By answering these questions, students begin the process of visual analysis. These questions cause students to think about the history of an image and the way it is situated in the world. The questions can be applied to many different types of visual stimuli including photographs, paintings, and films. According to George, “Visuals (be they paintings, films, comic books, or television narratives) were to be studied in the same way as literary texts, as subjects of close analysis—a use of the visual that continues throughout the history of writing instruction” (George 17). In order to know how visual language functions within images, students must be able to make connections between the visual language within the image itself and the world of the image creator. Practice in exploring visual semantics causes students to consider the importance of analyzing visual language in relation to the world in which the image originated.

Some images do not have known creators, but students should still be able to connect these images to the world, even without a creator. Greeting cards often do not include artists’ signatures or names on the cards. Bamford suggests that teachers can use greeting cards as

elements of visual literature and practice connecting images without creators to the world. She asserts that students should be able to analyze greeting cards by looking at the text types, the text's connection to the image, the visual design conventions displayed in the image, and the overall "feel" created. She also suggests using food packaging as objects of visual analysis (Bamford 6). By choosing images that do not typically list creators, students look deeper at the way the image connects to society as a whole instead of solely the artist's expression.

Although analyzing images in relation to their creators and the society in which they were created is an important element of visual literacy, visual analysis may also include a student's *interpretation* of the visual grammar contained within the image itself—exploring *how* the image was created. For example, in order to properly analyze a film, students must examine both the original audience and the issues within society during that time period, but they must also look at the visual grammar conventions and the way the filmmakers laced the film with subtle visual messages. Building on students' visual language *knowledge, understanding, and interpretation* skills, visual *analysis* combines all of the previous levels of visual language learning on Bloom's revised taxonomy and challenges students to think about the way an image is situated in the world.

Educators often combine visual analysis with even higher levels of Bloom's revised taxonomy. For example, some composition teachers ask students to create their own visual arguments and then to write analysis essays about their visual creations. Ernster explains that he asks students to "write an essay analyzing their visual arguments, paying close attention to how the four basic principles of design—contrast, repetition, alignment, and proximity—typography, color, shape, line and form contributed to the visual's rhetorical power" (386). He goes on to say, "I always make it a point to emphasize that if students did not give critical thought and reflection

to how they would make use of these important elements and principles before they actually started crafting the visual arguments, they would experience a good deal of difficulty writing an analysis of it” (Ernster 388). By asking students to write an analysis paper about their own visual arguments, teachers ensure that students think critically about their own artistic decisions and visual representations in order to provide content for their essays.

Jacobs suggests a similar analysis essay following a documentary film project that he uses in his class: “By engaging in such articulation and being self-reflective and critical about the process, students can thus learn to more actively engage in their worlds” (170). In the analysis essay assignment, Ernster expects students “to explain how they manipulated the principles and elements of design in the visual so it would appeal to their target audience...[and] to thoughtfully write about which of Aristotle’s modes of appeal is most predominant in the visual and how the visual’s various elements of design convey that logos, ethos, or pathos” (390). Visual rhetoric is an important element of visual language and communication. Students should be able to identify and describe the way that image creators utilize visual grammar to communicate a specific idea, but they should also be able to recognize and analyze visual rhetoric used in a visual argument.

Students have extensive experience working with written stories such as novels, short stories, and even dramas. Because students are accustomed to analyzing narrative forms of communication, a visual narrative is an effective place for educators to begin teaching students to analyze images. Therefore, “film, as an enormously widespread and popular cultural medium—if frequently an under-analyzed one—is an ideal context for exploring and developing visual literacy” (Pegrum 145-46). Although some educators use film during the beginning stages of language learning, the usefulness of film and its place in the literature classroom becomes strikingly clear at the *analysis* stage of language learning.

Film is a large aspect of popular entertainment and culture in contemporary society, and it is an excellent resource for language arts teachers to both engage and train students to use visual literacy skills. William Costanzo lists four arguments for the use of film in teaching writing:

(1) The basic steps of filmmaking can serve as a working model of the composing process... (2)...An understanding of the visual code which enables us to “read” a movie can help to clarify the conventions of English diction, syntax, punctuation, and usage. (3) Many of the rhetorical principles of film composition (for organizing inchoate experience into meaningful sequence, for achieving a suitable style, for selling a product or an idea) can be applied directly to specific writing tasks. (4) When students’ notions of composition are widened to include these more familiar, visual forms, the writing class seems less remote. (qtd. in George 24)

Costanzo views film as a tool for teachers to use to cultivate and enhance students’ verbal literacy skills. However, he later admits that film is not merely a tool for language arts instructors, but a vital aspect of the contemporary English classroom. He states, “If I once regarded film study as the path to better writing, I now see film and writing as equal partners traveling along the same road...it now appears that the act of writing involves more visual thinking than we recognized in traditional composition classes” (Constanzo qtd. in George 24). Film has become an integral aspect of contemporary society, and English language arts teachers cannot ignore its importance nor its connection to the literary arts. One critic describes that because film is a cultural element in students’ daily lives outside of school, teachers should utilize this rich and abundant resource in their curriculums:

It is illogical, however, to treat media narratives as though they are completely unrelated

to school literacy. TV shows are, after all, usually written. They are built on scripts that include characterization, plot, dialogue, and often humor—the very elements that we want our students to include in the stories they write. And these media narratives often speak to children’s fantasies of power, exploration, and conflict... For schools to effectively teach literacy, they should work with, not against, the cultural tools that students bring to school. (Newkirk 64)

Visual literacy instruction is an essential element in the language arts classroom because of its centrality within contemporary culture. Some educational standards remain consistent over time, but many objectives develop and change with a shifting culture. Teachers should use film in literature classes not only as a cultural tool to develop traditional literacy skills, but also as a valuable resource for visual literacy instruction.

During the early stages of visual language learning, students’ *knowledge, understanding* and *interpretation* of cinematic vocabulary and grammar elements establish the basis for the higher level visual language skills of film *analysis, evaluation, and creation*. Analyzing a film is a very similar process to analyzing a novel. Both novels and films are narrative art forms and students can analyze many of the same narrative elements in both mediums (plot, character, setting, conflict, etc.). However, a film and a novel following the same plotline and narrative structure are not identical. The website *Film Education* suggests that a valuable form of film analysis is analyzing the difference between a novel and its film adaptation:

Despite its debt to other forms and especially the novel, film tells its story with its own grammar, its own syntax. Camera movement, camera position, framing, lighting, sound, and editing are some of the main vocabulary by which a director or screenwriter may express a narrative. A film of a novel therefore is far from being a mechanical copy of the

source - it is rather a transposition or translation from one set of conventions for representing the world to another. (“Film and English”)

When analyzing a film as an adaptation of a novel, students must examine specifically what is gained and what is lost by portraying the narrative through a visual medium. In some cases, very little is lost in translation; however, in other cases, the story is completely different simply due to the nature of visual language.

Students can apply visual analysis skills to many different types of images and visual stimuli, but the individual elements that students analyze are often very similar in all modes of visual analysis. Bamford proposes the follow chart as a list of questions educators may find helpful in training their students to critically analyze images:

<p>Issues</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What issues are being shown in the image? - How is the way the issue is shown in the image similar to or different from how you see this issue in the world? - What might this image mean to someone who sees it? - What is the message of this image?
<p>Information</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Where has the information in the image come from? - What information has been included and what information has been left out? - What proportion of the image could be inaccurate? - What information presented is factual/manipulated/framed? - What is the relationship between the image and any text? - What impact does the size of images within the picture have?
<p>Who</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What people are depicted in the image (even if there are not actual people)? - Whose culture or experiences are

	being shown? - Who created the image and for what purpose? - Who is the intended audience for the image? - Whose point of view does the image take?
Persuasion	- Why has a certain media been chosen? - Why was a particular image chosen? - Why was the image arranged that way? - Is the information contained in the image factual? - What devices have been used to get the message across to the viewer? - How has the message been affected by what has been left out or is not shown?
Assumptions	- What attitudes are assumed? - Whose voice is heard? - Whose voice is not heard? - What experiences or points of view are assumed?

These questions are mere starting points for visual analysis projects, but students will be more likely to focus on the correct aspects of images if teachers provide a few questions in the prompt to add a degree of direction to the assignment. Although students may be familiar with textual analysis and they may possess a foundational knowledge of visual conventions, many of them will see visual analysis as a daunting and impossible task if teachers do not provide specific questions to aid and direct the project. Visual analysis certainly overlaps with the previous levels of language learning, and it will continue to influence the stages of *evaluation* and *creation*.

Evaluation

While some individuals may see analysis and evaluation as interchangeable terms, they are two very different processes. When students analyze images, they break the images down

into composite parts and discuss the way each part works to communicate a particular idea or mood. When students evaluate images, they still break the images down and look at the way each part works to communicate, but they are also making a value judgement about how well the image achieved its goal or how clearly it communicated its message. Visual evaluation is much more about an image's degree of effectiveness and merit as a work of art. One essential aspect of an educated and "cultured" individual is his or her ability to assign value judgements to various types of objects based on their artistic qualities. George notes that "taste and critical judgement are learned habits of mind...The English teacher's job, then, is to foster 'taste and critical judgement,' two qualities that lift the schooled above the unschooled" (17). English teachers actively cultivate students' ability to evaluate literary texts, and they often assume that if students can master the skills needed to evaluate a work of literature, then they will be able to evaluate other aspects of art and popular culture just as well. However, "taste and critical judgement" extend beyond praising Virginia Woolf and condemning Stephenie Meyer; educators must train students to critically judge visual stimuli as well.

Students should be able to identify when an image is furthering an ideological agenda such as a magazine advertisement telling them to buy a product or a billboard urging them to believe in a certain cultural norm or worldview. These are forms of visual arguments, and students should not only be able to analyze them, but also to critique and evaluate them. George claims that although many composition classrooms have included advertisement analysis since the 1940s due to "the post-World War II emphasis on propaganda and semantics...that practice did not always or consistently include careful consideration of how images, layout, or graphics actually communicated meaning" (21). The visual conventions and components of advertisements are vital to their effectiveness and value; therefore, students should learn to evaluate the total

effectiveness and merit of magazine advertisements, television commercials, and billboards by examining both their textual and visual aspects.

The *Coursebook* that Carolyn Towles and Ramona Myers provide for their first year composition students, includes a description of the Visual Evaluation Essay that students will write in English 101. This description states, “Learning to analyze the [textual] content and visual images on an advertisement in order to evaluate the ‘hidden’ message or the advertisement and the effectiveness / ineffectiveness of its delivery can help us so that we are not unduly influenced by a funny or visually attractive advertisement” (59). Students need to know how to analyze and evaluate advertisements in order to form their own opinions about an issue or a product, free from the manipulating influence of advertising tactics. When analyzing advertisements, students should determine the company’s target audience and then analyze the way the advertisements use visual conventions to reach the audience. Some advertisements are very effective in reaching a specific audience, and others are not. Advertisements in magazines, on television, or on billboards often utilize similar visual conventions, but students should also evaluate the way the specific visual medium contributes to the advertisement’s purpose. At the conclusion of an advertisement evaluation project, students should be able to examine the way visual conventions function in various advertisements and evaluate their overall degree of effectiveness.

Another project that teachers can use to foster students’ visual evaluation skills is a film review essay. Avinger says, “Teaching film review as a writing project in composition courses is a way to increase student motivation while fostering the development of two important critical thinking skills—analysis and evaluation” (1-2). An advertisement evaluation essay combines visual analysis and evaluation skills; therefore, a film review essay would also require students to

use multiple visual skills. Before beginning a film review project, it may be helpful to teachers to expose students to professional film reviews so that they understand the purpose of film evaluation. Just as visual *analysis* projects require educators to provide specific guidelines to give direction to students' writing, visual *evaluation* projects also require teachers to establish questions for students to answer their essays. Avinger provides the following list of sample questions to direct students' film review essays:

1. Are the actors physically appropriate for their roles?
2. Are the events of the story arranged in a meaningful sequence? Are flashbacks, dreams, and cross-cutting (if present) handled effectively?
3. Are lighting, photography, and camera angles effective?
4. What is the film's theme, and how effectively is it developed?
5. Are any of the actors or sequences especially memorable? Why? (6)

If teachers do not provide specific directions for writing a film review, many students will not know what aspects of a film to focus on in their writing. Avinger says that specific questions about various aspects of the film "direct the students away from the initial unfocused impression ("I liked it") toward a reasoned assessment based on analysis and evaluation... Most importantly, I stress that, whatever else their review does, it must state a conclusion about the quality of the film" (8). It might also be helpful if teachers allow students to verbally discuss the strengths and weaknesses of a film before writing a formal film review. Teachers can also use an informal discussion during class to caution students against confusing characters with the actors in a film and to remind them of the different roles of film crew members in making artistic decisions so that students use the correct terms when discussing various aspects of the film. Although students combine visual analysis and evaluation skills in a film review essay, the evaluation

aspect is crucial for students to move beyond making connections to films and begin making critical judgements. “By evaluating films in this way, students progress from passive experience to active critical appraisal—a skill that can be applied to literature as well as other areas of life” (Avinger 10). Visual *evaluation* projects combine all of the previous levels of language learning into a single project and force students to use critical thinking skills to determine the artistic merit and effectiveness of images.

Create

Creation is the highest level of learning according to Bloom’s revised taxonomy. Therefore, when students have learned to create visual messages, or “compose” with visual language, they will have reached competency in all levels of visual language learning, and therefore, possess some degree of visual literacy. According to Portewig, “Students must understand more than the visual elements—they must know how to effectively develop and design visual messages using the breadth of their visual toolbox” (41). Students must demonstrate their ability to both receive and send visual messages in order for them to be visually literate individuals. Educators must not assume that students’ ability to recite the definitions of visual language terms, identify and interpret meaning within photographs, draw connections between images and current events, analyze visual arguments, and evaluate films necessarily demonstrates that they can also *create* visual messages. Brumberger notes that “teaching students how to analyze visual designs does not necessarily help them to develop the visual thinking skills necessary for creating visual messages, and as Crowe and Laseau argued, both of these aspects of visual thinking must be developed for visual literacy to occur” (391). Therefore, teachers must build on students’ *knowledge, understanding, application, analysis,* and *evaluation* of images in order to train them how to also *create* meaning by using visual language.

Many of the stages involved in the visual creation process are important for both verbal and visual composition. Yancey demonstrates the parallels between visual and verbal composition when she defines “composition” as “the thoughtful gathering, construction, or reconstruction of a literate act in any given media” (315). Because teachers are already familiar with the verbal composition process, they can apply much of that knowledge to the visual creation process. Lund even compares the struggles that students face during the visual composition process to the struggles of writers: “As they struggle to tell a story with a camera, students learn to manipulate the same devices as fiction writers—they must construct a logical plot, including exposition, climax, and denouement; they must demonstrate character by devising action and conversation; they must attend to elements of setting and mood, perhaps using music and sound to enhance the desired effect” (79). Although many educators may not be experienced or even familiar with visual composition, by relating each stage of the process to writing composition, they can guide students through the necessary steps to creating a coherent, effective, and well-developed visual creation.

One way that some educators incorporate visual creation into their curriculums is through video projects. However, many of them do not just require students to create a project using a video camera, they also require them to “prewrite” about their projects to determine their specific purpose and audience. Lund states, “Students must write out a clear objective for their video project, including the specific effect they intend to have on an identified audience... Students may be asked to write a one- or two-page ‘treatment’ or statement of their vision of the product they want to produce” (79). By requiring students to submit a written rationale or “vision statement” for their video projects, teachers effectively combine verbal and visual literacies and cause students to think critically about their visual creations even before they begin working on

them. Just as students usually brainstorm or create an outline before writing an academic essay, they also need to prewrite before beginning their visual projects. Lund provides a few sample visual projects that resemble the four modes of discourse: narration, description, exposition, and argumentation. He lists five video projects as suggestions for language arts curriculums:

1. Morning News: meetings, scores, awards, announcements, weather, local news, profiles, interviews, lunch menus.
2. Public Service Announcements: Buy a Yearbook, Don't Drink and Drive, Buy a Ticket to the Dance
3. How-to Demonstrations: Cooking with Class, Doing the Macarena, Programing VCR
4. Documentaries: Oral History, Interviews, How Glass is Blown
5. Narratives: Original scripts or stories in class (Lund 79)

Many English teachers are familiar with the four modes of discourse because they use them as a foundation for their writing and composition curriculums. Therefore, they should be able to apply their knowledge of those modes of discourse to a visual form of communication.

Although some teachers ask all students to create the same type of visual project, some teachers also allow the students to determine what type of visual media best suits their purpose. For example, George asks her students to create a “visual argument about Africa and its people” following their study of Hochschild’s *King Leopold’s Ghost* (33). She states that “the form, medium, and aim of the argument was up to the students... Those less comfortable with ‘artwork’ chose to create charts, diagrams, or maps. Those ...more comfortable with digital design and Web technologies worked with Photoshop to make digital ‘paintings’ or set up Websites devoted to the course” (George 28). George allowed students to choose what type of visual project to create, but she provided the following list of suggestions for her students:

1. Make a new cover for one of the books you have read—*Tarzan* or *King Leopold's Ghost* or *Through the Dark Continent* or *Heart of Darkness* or *Travels in West Africa*.
2. Draw a map that conveys an idea of the changing nature of Africa after Leopold—changing populations, exports of raw materials vs. imports, changing political boundaries, changing transportation systems, etc.
3. Design a chart or visually powerful table to convey one or more of these changes
4. Create a Web page (just the opening page for now) that introduces readers to the issues you think are important.
5. Make a flyer.
6. Create a collage of photos and maps you find that help you convey an argument.
7. Make a painting.
8. Draw a diagram.

By providing many different options for students' visual arguments, George allows students to cater their projects to their specific talents and interests, thus causing them to take ownership of their work. When teachers allow students to determine the form of their visual arguments, it is also an excellent way for them to explore the strengths and weaknesses of various types of visual forms. However, students will probably need to create visual projects based on strict guidelines and instructions before they are capable of determining which visual form best suits their purpose. George offers many suggestions of various forms for students' visual arguments, but if she would have selected only one visual form for all of her students, she would have been able to provide extensive guidance and instruction on how to effectively create an argument in that specific form. There are some advantages to allowing students to choose the form of their visual projects, but there are also many advantages to choosing a particular visual form and training

students to create visual arguments using that specific form.

Another form of visual creation involves photography. Morgan and Tegano suggest that “[j]ust as speakers search for the right word, teachers who use photography as a language of inquiry search for the right angle or how close the camera comes to the children or scene being photographed in order to convey a particular message” (qtd. in Wiseman et al. 542). Although the narrative component of films results in their relationship to novels and short stories, photographs also require students to use visual conventions to display meaning. Therefore, teachers can use photography as a way for students to create visual statements or arguments. Wiseman describes three different photography projects incorporated in the LTP (literacy through photography) curriculum:

Project	Description	Product Example
Self Portraits: “The Best Part of Me”	Students reflected on their physical abilities and photographed their “best parts”	Ella took a picture of herself at the hairdresser because she loves doing that with her mom. She’s proud of how her hair looks like her mom’s hair.
African Proverbs	Students created photographs of their understanding of African proverbs, which often feature a moral or life lesson	Two students selected “the early bird catches the worm” and wrote, acted, and photographed one of them waking up early and keeping his job while the other one slept in and lost his job
Community Photographs	Students captured an aspect of their community (outside of school) that was important to them	Rebecca took a picture of her family’s house and how it represented different aspects of her family’s life

Students can create photographs that represent arguments, concepts, quotes, novels, poems, or even themselves. Although a photograph is a single image, it requires extensive planning and

thought about the type of angle, type of lighting, specific framing, and actual content of the photograph. Creating a photograph that communicates a particular message effectively sometimes takes just as much effort as a video project.

Students can also participate in visual creation by creating a collage or a slideshow of photographs from websites containing Creative Commons photographs such as *Flickr*, *Pixabay*, *Unsplash*, *Pexels*, *Wikicommons*, and *Britannica Image Quest*. Although students do not technically create the photographs for this project, they will need to be discerning and purposeful about their image choices, and they will be creating a new “visual” by compiling all of the photographs to convey a particular message or argument. For example, one critic describes a project where students create collages that represent “certain phenomena [or stereotypes] portrayed in the media: teachers, men, women, nature, ‘the city,’ the elderly, crime, adolescents, ‘vacations,’ schools, love, religion, sex, sports, etc.” (Doering et al. 55-56). Students could even create two separate collages—one that portrays society’s stereotype of a particular people group or concept, and one that portrays reality outside of that stereotype.

Creating visual messages and arguments using visual language is not an easy task for many students. Although most contemporary students are exposed to visual stimuli and visual arguments on a daily basis, many of them never stop to contemplate or examine how companies or artists create a visual argument. Teachers must begin to cultivate students’ visual literacies by first exposing them to visual language as a means of communication and then gradually teaching them the visual language skills associated with each tier of Bloom’s revised taxonomy until they are able to actively participate in visual communication by creating their own visual messages. Educators must not assume students’ competency at any level of visual language learning, and they must provide explicit instruction and guidance in each level of skills in order to train

students as visually literate members of society.

Assessment

One of the reasons that many teachers are reluctant to include visual projects in their curriculums is because they do not know how to effectively assess such projects. “Although grading a test or a paper is second nature to most educators, evaluating a Web site, a YouTube video, or a podcast is not” (Metros 107). However, there are several helpful tools and resources available to teachers to assist them in assessing visually-based projects. For example, websites such as *RubiStar* and *Annenberg Learner* allow teachers to create rubrics from scratch based on individualized criteria catered to their own classrooms. Lund even suggests that teachers can collaborate with students in order to create the rubric for a visual project based on what the class has learned about visual language (80). A few critics have also created sample rubrics for visual projects that teachers can use as guides to create their own customized rubrics, or they can even use these rubrics without changing them if the criteria are appropriate for the project’s objective. The following are a few sample rubrics for visual projects created by Susan Metros (108), Stephen Arthurson and Helen Cozmescu (17), and Carolyn Towles and Ramona Myers (137):

Dimension	0–2 points	3–5 points	6–8 points
	Inadequate ←		→ Exceptional
<p>Concept originality: Ability to define problems, explore various possibilities, and develop unique solutions</p>	<p>Concept provides little or no evidence of new thought, inventiveness or creativity.</p>	<p>Concept supports design task; demonstrates some new thought, inventiveness, or creativity.</p>	<p>Concept effectively addresses the design task and extends others' approaches in inventive ways; may show significant evidence of originality and inventiveness.</p>
<p>Aesthetic quality: Sensitivity to the principles of design and successful fulfillment of project criteria</p>	<p>Visuals are either too simplistic or cluttered and busy. Graphic effects fail to support the message and hamper communication of content; graphics are gratuitous. Concept fails to support design task.</p>	<p>Visual elements relate to content. Visual design criteria (balance, contrast, proportion, harmony, etc.) expressed. Graphical elements reinforce content and are functional.</p>	<p>Skillful handling of design elements creates unique and effective style. Visual elements and content reinforce each other. Design strategy supports message. Overall, an effective and functionally sound design.</p>
<p>Presentation: Display of technical skill, ability to follow directions, craftsmanship</p>	<p>Presentation shows poor craftsmanship given available technologies. For multimedia, no attempt to manipulate timing, flow, or transitions, for effect. Production errors not addressed. Project fails to address assignment production criteria.</p>	<p>Acceptable craftsmanship. No obvious, easily correctable errors. For multimedia projects, elementary efforts to control timing, flow, or transitions. Project fulfills assignment criteria.</p>	<p>Presentation shows clear effort to achieve high production values and to use production techniques to enhance product. Craftsmanship or presentation may approach professional quality. Project goes beyond assignment criteria.</p>
<p>Professionalism: Ability to present work on time, interact with instructor, staff, classmates, subject matter experts, and other stakeholders in a professional manner</p>	<p>Project shows multiple instances of inappropriate communication with stakeholders, clients, team members, or professor; self-presentation detrimental to project success; or a substantial number of deadlines missed or project incomplete.</p>	<p>Project is completed and communications are basic but effective; deadlines met, but often rushed, self-presentation acceptable; adequately acquires support and resources required to achieve goals.</p>	<p>Project shows effective verbal and written communications, and excellent demeanor and self-presentation; all project deadlines met; acquires more than adequate support and resources to required achieve goals.</p>
<p>Sources/citations: Depending on the nature of the project, authors may need to correctly cite project sources.</p>	<p>One or more resources are not cited; multiple citation errors.</p>	<p>All resources are cited; some citation errors or formatting inconsistencies.</p>	<p>Resources are well researched and thoroughly and correctly cited.</p>
<p>Accessibility: All projects should be authored in accordance with the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C; www.w3.org) or local campus accessibility guidelines</p>	<p>Project is not accessible and shows no consideration of accessibility concerns.</p>	<p>Project shows errors and inconsistencies in labeling; fully annotated but technical difficulties (for example, displaying alt text).</p>	<p>Product is completely compliant according to universal design standards, the law, and campus guidelines and policies.</p>

Area of Visual Literacy	Learning Focus	Language	Questions to guide thinking and discussion
Artistic elements	Visual texts are highly constructed. The elements of art are used by the creator to position viewers in certain ways. Children need to develop an understanding of the conventions used in visual texts and examine how choices in the use of techniques affect meaning. Similarly, there is the need for the examination of symbols and their contribution to meaning making. Analysing these elements and how they relate to each other breaks the text into parts to study the communication of the whole visual work.	Colour, shade, medium, lines, vectors, positioning, layout, font, style, forefront, background, artist, illustrator	Where in the picture does your eye focus? What has the artist done to draw attention to the area? Why? What are the dominant colours and why has the artist chosen them? What can you say about the artist's use of line/shade/positioning? How does the art affect the mood of the text? Does the artistic technique appeal to you? Why/why not? What is the 'story' of the image?
Themes	Themes in art and literature can be described to children as the 'big idea'. They are the underlying ideas presented in an image. Inferential thinking is necessary as themes are often subtle.	Theme, interpret, idea, infer, inference	What is the 'big idea' in this text? Does the theme of the illustrations help to convey the theme of the text? What has the artist done to highlight this idea? Can you create another image or work of art that reflects a similar theme?
Context	Texts are socially constructed and positioned. Examining the creator and the place and time the text was created provides some insight into culture, background and purpose. Students need the historical, socio-cultural and biographical background to help them critically judge a text. Children need to begin to see the role of the person constructing the text and how the text influences themselves and others. Critical reading of images is an aspect of comprehension.	Author's background, audience, purpose	Who is the creator of this text and when was it created? Why was this text created and for whom? What was the world like during the time and place the text is set in? Would there be any differences if this text was created today by a different person?
Intertextuality	The ability to connect new viewing experiences to previous experiences assists comprehension. These connections may be to other images and texts, people or media. Deeper comprehension of texts can occur when children compare and contrast texts. Higher order thinking skills such as analysis and synthesis from Bloom's taxonomy need to be employed.	Similarities, differences, compare, classify, contrast	What are the similarities between this text and others you have read? Do you believe the author/illustrator were inspired by other texts? Compare the themes in this text with other texts created by the illustrator. Are there similarities? Compare the characters, events or themes to other images or texts. Compare different versions of the same image.
Connection of text to viewers own life	As Piaget stated, children build new knowledge upon what they already know. Making connections to one's own life and experiences aids knowledge building. Comprehension is reinforced when students have the opportunity to discuss their interpretations of a text with others. Students develop stronger and more persuasive interpretations as they share them in group situations.	Similarities, differences, compare, describe, identify, interpret	What part of your life does the text remind you of? Compare the characters or events with your own experiences. Share your interpretation of the text with others. Does it change when you have heard the opinions of others?
Relationship between written and visual text	Many texts viewed in Primary schools are a combination of written and visual texts. The relationship may be a simple one where pictures and words tell the same story. It may be one where each mode, written and visual, provides different information that adds to the overall story. It may be a paradoxical relationship where one mode is giving opposite information to the other. That is, both modes are working to tell a different story.	Text, font, layout, support, contrast, opposite, justify, explain, contradiction	Share your interpretation of the text with others. What information do we receive only from the text? What information do we receive only from the illustrations? Are there contradictions between what information the written and visual texts are offering?
Aesthetic or personal response	Reading/viewing is a personal as well as social experience. Students need a forum to discuss their own response based on personal choice or preference. Children need to see that their responses are valued and that they have the responsibility to make judgments as they read. This area also encourages metacognition. Students share what they have learnt and how they have learnt it. They offer their opinions and discuss why they have been formed. The importance of the reader/viewer is stressed as children are exposed to multiple interpretations.	Likes, dislikes, preferences, justify, judge, support, prove, evaluate, criticise	What elements of the text did you find effective and why? What elements of the text appealed to you and why? What would you have done differently if you had created the image? What questions do you still have about the text? What can you do to find more information? What learning did you engage in and how did it happen?

	CATEGORY	DEFICIENT (0-10)	COMPETENT / FAIR (11-15)	GOOD / EXCELLENT (16-20)
Written Paper	CONTENT - Abstract _____	Major points are not addressed. The abstract may be missing essentials or extremely short, or it may lack a solid focus or clarity.	Major points are addressed but clarity or support is limited. The abstract may be too short.	The overview of the argument, including the claim and its support, is clear with a detailed explanation of the proposed solution in 200 to 300 words.
	CONTENT - Rationale _____	The rationale may be missing essentials or extremely short, or it may lack a solid focus or clarity.	The rationale is addressed but clarity or support is limited regarding why the student chose this particular part of the argument to illustrate.	This 150-word section clearly explains why this particular part of the argument is the best to use in a visual format.
	CONTENT – Visual Defense _____	The defenses may be missing essentials or extremely short, or they may lack a solid focus or clarity.	The defenses are addressed but clarity or support is limited regarding the “message” of each picture or group of pictures. Not all page styles are used.	These 50- to 125-word paragraphs explain how each page of images effectively argue the point. The “message” of each page is specific and is linked to the student’s overall argument. A variety of page styles are used.
		0-1	2-3	4-5
	SPELLING/ GRAMMAR/ DICTION _____	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o The writing contains many grammatical, punctuation, and / or spelling errors o Language use is largely inaccurate / inappropriate o The writing’s tone is ineffective and / or inappropriate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o The writing contains some grammatical, punctuation, and / or spelling errors o Language is unclear, awkward or inappropriate in parts o The writing’s tone is generally appropriate and moderately effective 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o The writing reflects grammatical, punctuation, and spelling standards o Language is accurate, appropriate, and effective o Writing’s tone is appropriate and highly effective
FORMATTING/ CITATIONS _____	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Many basic MLA conventions are incorrect o Citations are missing for an entire source or more on the Works Cited page 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Some basic MLA conventions are incorrect o Some citations are missing information and/or are not in proper format on the WC 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o All basic MLA conventions are followed o Visuals are cited properly on the Works Cited page, which is in proper format 	
Visuals		0-3	4-7	8-10
	VISUALS _____	Images are inappropriate and/or do not contribute to the topic at hand. Minimal page styles are used.	Images may be “grainy” or may not fit the context of the conversation. Not all page styles are represented.	Images are attractive and of good quality using the required page styles. Each one contributes to the specific or overall topic/content of the presentation. Colors and sizes are appropriate.
	TEXTUAL CHOICES	Text is inappropriately written or incorporated.	Text is mostly appropriately written and incorporated.	Headings, paragraphs, and/or captions are appropriately written and incorporated.
PREWRITING		0-5	6-7	8-10
	WORKSHEET _____	0-59% of assigned work completed	60-79% of assigned work completed	80-100% of assigned work completed

Rather than associating an increasingly visual culture with rising illiteracy and declining educational standards, teachers should approach visual language instruction as an opportunity to teach students the transferability of critical thinking, composition, and communication skills to areas of life outside of the language arts classroom. Because visual communication has deeply infiltrated our contemporary culture, formal visual literacy instruction within English language arts curriculums has become essential to students' literacy education. Although many critics and educators have written articles about visual literacy and its role in the classroom, many of them still cling to traditional literacies as the primary "text" in an English classroom and seek to incorporate visual literature only as an additional and a less important "text." However, teachers should view the visually-based twenty-first century culture as a way to engage their students while not sacrificing standards or learning objectives. Visual language learning is a process that evolves over time and requires specific instruction and guidance along the way. English language arts teachers must realize the importance of visual literacy and actively train their students to become truly literate members of our visually-immersed society.

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