

Articles

Teaching Visual Rhetoric as a Close Reading Strategy

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In FYW, instructors want students to understand how reading texts in particular ways affects how and what they learn and, in turn, how and what they might communicate to their own readers. Because students tend to come to FYW predisposed to notice more visual aspects (e.g., headings, bulleted lists) than verbal aspects (e.g., verbal subordinators, cohesive ties) of texts, instructors are challenged to generate among students conscious awareness of their reading practices, including awareness of the kinds of practices called for by different reading situations. This article explores how visual rhetoric taught as a close reading strategy can help diverse groups of students become more adaptable readers of the visual continuum of texts. The performance-oriented genre of the assignment prompt is offered as an example that makes visible what students may not notice in a text. I argue that introducing students to the core principles of visual rhetoric is one productive way to help students read non-visual texts in more visual ways. Students who understand how visual and verbal cues exert rhetorical control will be more empowered readers of others' texts and designers of their own texts, in FYW and beyond.

In my first-year writing (FYW) course, I have found that students are often intimidated by prose-heavy assignment prompts that rely on verbal rather than visual cues to guide reading. When I ask students to respond to a prompt designed to discourage skimming and scanning, many students struggle to successfully carry out the objectives, tasks, and expectations of the assignment. Some students even struggle to identify what the assignment is asking them to do. For example, when I first assigned students to engage in a note-taking assignment on Annie Dillard's essay, "Seeing," many of them did not address each of the three journal entry tasks. When asked why, the students generally replied, "We didn't know we were supposed to." My prompt read as follows:

When you're done reading and taking notes, review your notes and your style of taking notes, as well as any markings you've made on the text. In the form of a journal entry on a separate page from your notes, jot down your current sense of what Dillard seems to be say-

ing. Then, on that same page, formulate one or two questions you believe will be fruitful for you and your classmates to pursue in your future work with Dillard’s text. Finally, jot down a sentence or two describing how you took notes and the consequences this way of taking notes seems to have had on your understanding of Dillard’s essay so far.

Upon glancing at this paragraph, it is not visually explicit that the students are being asked to perform three tasks. To “see” the tasks, students must engage in a close reading of the text—they must be able to distinguish description from instruction and main-level tasks (write a journal entry) from sub-level tasks (what to address in the entry). Granted, some students might have performed a hasty reading of the assignment prompt without revisiting it to verify that they had fulfilled the requirements. Other students, however, might have revisited the prompt but failed to see one or two of the sub-tasks. It is possible, too, that some students understood what they were being asked to do when we discussed the assignment in class but did not mark the text in such a way that helped them to readily see these tasks when it came time to complete them. Although the paragraph is not difficult to understand and does not demand much interpretive effort, it does little to aid in accessibility, comprehension, and recollection of information, which might be a better explanation for at least some students’ oversights.

Applying a few visual design elements to the paragraph would have helped students to see the three sub-tasks:

Journal Entry

When you’re done reading and taking notes, review your notes and your style of taking notes, as well as any markings you’ve made on the text. In the form of a journal entry on a separate page from your notes, jot down the following:

1. your current sense of what Dillard seems to be saying,
2. one or two questions you believe will be fruitful for you and your classmates to pursue in your future work with Dillard’s text, and
3. one or two sentences describing how you took notes and the consequences this way of taking notes seems to have had on your understanding of Dillard’s essay so far.

The next time I taught this note-taking assignment, I reorganized the text, emphasized the three specific journal entry tasks, and deleted some semantic cues (e.g., “then,” “finally”) and repetitious instructions (e.g., “on that same

page”). As predicted, most students addressed each assigned task. One could certainly conclude from this experiment that visual cues help students “see” what they are supposed to do and thus aid students in completing assignment requirements. Students are, after all, more prepared to read this kind of text. Research on information and document design has long shown that visual cues increase readers’ ability to find the information they need and to understand and act on that information (see, e.g., Carliner; Kostelnick and Roberts; Redish; Schriver).

But do visual cues in assignment prompts work against the close reading practices we want students to develop in FYW? In other words, do visual cues position students as passive readers? What are the possible uses and limitations of applying visual cues to prompts? These are important questions for teachers engaged in literacy instruction, yet they are questions that neither composition research nor centers for teaching and learning have examined in any comprehensive way.

The genre of the assignment prompt has received some attention in composition scholarship. Irene Clark, for example, advocates for a genre approach to analyzing prompts. This approach can help novice college students learn to identify the implicit assumptions embedded in a prompt and can increase students’ awareness of what constitutes an acceptable response to an assignment. Anis Bawarshi, too, promotes a genre approach. He examines the prompt as a site of invention that “organizes and generates the discursive and ideological conditions which students take up and recontextualize as they write their essays” (144); he argues for a genre-based writing pedagogy focused on teaching students “how to identify and analyze genred positions of articulation” (146), including positions afforded by classroom genres such as the writing prompt. While Clark and Bawarshi make strong cases for a genre approach to analyzing writing prompts, this approach is limited in that it focuses on the content within a prompt, not the visual display of that content or how that display guides the reader.

Discussions of the visual design of assignment prompts are surprisingly hard to find. A database or Internet search for “assignment prompt design” and variations of these key terms, for example, turns up an array of teaching resources that provide guidelines for content (e.g., clearly stated objectives and assessment criteria) but make no mention of strategies for designing that content. Most of us have probably seen, too, the full continuum of assignment prompt designs represented on the faculty copier in our departments—from prompts that use no or minimal visual cues to ones that use an array of visual cues such as bold headings, bulleted lists, and tables to guide the reading act.

The lack of discussion of assignment prompt design raises an important question about the purpose of the assignment prompt in FYW. Is it a descriptive

document primarily aimed to encourage inquiry and flexible response? Or, is it a functional document primarily aimed to inform and instruct? Clark refers to the assignment prompt as a “performance-oriented text genre, the purpose of which is to generate particular understanding and action that will ultimately lead to a subsequent genre—the college essay.” The prompt, she asserts, is not simply a list of instructions; rather, it is an invitation that requests a response or performance appropriate to a particular situation, audience, and motive. In this sense, the writing prompt serves both a descriptive and functional purpose. As composition instructors concerned with cultivating literate beings in the world, we want to design our prompts in such a way that they open up, not limit or dictate through visual or verbal cues, what students might say in response. At the same time, we want our students to be able to readily locate and understand what they are being asked to do.

Given these assignment goals in FYW and given the need for more scholarship that examines the uses and limitations of designing assignments in one way versus another, I explore in this article how visual and verbal cues guide how students read, understand, and respond to prompts. My goal in doing so is not to advocate for a particular assignment design or for better designed assignment prompts; rather, my goal is to show how the assignment prompts we create, whichever end of the visual spectrum they may fall, ask students to perform particular kinds of reading (to explore this spectrum, I focus on prompts delivered as written texts, as opposed to audio, video, or multimodal web texts). I argue for more explicit instruction on how to read non-visual texts in visual ways, and I suggest that introducing students to the core principles of visual rhetoric is one productive way that we can do this. Visual rhetoric is defined here as the rhetorical display of meanings through the integration of visual and verbal cues. Understanding how visual rhetoric works increases students’ awareness of the ways in which visual and verbal cues communicate an assignment and possibilities for response. It increases students’ ability to make useful sense of assignment prompts and other performance-oriented texts (e.g., syllabi, job ads, correspondence, calls for proposals) and to think critically about what they might gain, or lose, by responding to these texts in one way compared to another. Teaching visual rhetoric as a tool for performing text comprehension, much like teaching rhetorical reading strategies and strategies such as reading with and against the grain, is one way that composition instructors can help students become more empowered readers of both visual and non-visual texts.

In this article, I first review literature on reading goals in FYW and student reading practices, highlighting students’ tendency to notice visual aspects of texts (e.g., headings identifying sections, graphics, pull quotes) and to decide what is important or not based on a quick glance over the page or screen. I

then call for teaching students how visual and verbal cues guide how we read and experience texts, and I proceed to review literature on visual rhetoric, exploring the different kinds of reading that visual rhetorics elicit. I end with a description of two activities that instructors can use to teach visual rhetoric as a tool for performing text comprehension.

First-Year Reading Goals and Student Reading Practices

In FYW, we want students to understand what it means to use reading and writing for inquiry, learning, thinking, and communicating. This is a primary learning outcome articulated in the 2008 amendment to the WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition. To achieve this outcome, we often give students difficult texts to read, texts that must be interpreted, questioned, and closely examined if useful sense is to be made of them. We then ask students to respond, often through a variety of scaffolded, learning-centered writing tasks, such as note taking, journaling, essay drafting and revising, and reflective writing. As has been explained by a number of composition scholars, such as Linda Adler-Kassner and Heidi Estrem (“Critical Thinking”), David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky, and Doug Downs, a primary goal of asking students to read difficult texts is to help them come to understand reading and writing as interdependent, recursive acts. We want them to experience first hand how reading texts in particular ways affects how and what they learn and, in turn, how and what they communicate to their own readers.

But most students enter FYW with reading practices not conducive to the interpretive, knowledge-generating work they will be asked to perform throughout their college careers. Reporting results of an observational study, Lisa Bosley notes that new college students “often read at the surface level; if they do not ‘get it’ they give up rather than engage in the difficulty of the task” (286). She attributes this surface-level reading practice to a lack of instruction at the high-school level on how to read actively and to question author assumptions and intentions along the way. Daniel Keller, in *Chasing Literacy*, also acknowledges a lack of instruction, but he suggests that students’ reading practices have been largely shaped by a contemporary literacy that has as defining features “speed and competition for attention” (3). To increase students’ success as readers in different literacy contexts (e.g., educational, social, technological) that call for reading strategies varying in speed and depth, Keller argues for teaching students how to examine a reading situation and select an appropriate speed and level of attention with which to read.

I have observed in my own teaching that students are well practiced in reading what Stephen Bernhardt calls “visually informative texts,” or texts that encourage skimming and scanning through visual cues (“Seeing”). My students are usually quick to notice information or meaning made readily apparent

through visual cues, such as spacing, headings, and sequential lists. They are less practiced in reading what Bernhardt calls “non-visually informative texts,” or texts that rely on verbal cues (e.g., conjunctive ties, transitional phrases) to communicate meaning and thus require close, linear readings. Gunther Kress points to socialization as one explanation for these reading practices. He suggests that a reader’s decision on how a text is to be read is based on “the reader’s socialization into a particular media environment, and the valuations of media. . . and modes. . . in that media landscape” (164). Consider, for example, the majority of textbooks today, where color, sidebars, graphics, and other visual communication modes compete on the page for the reader’s attention. The more textbooks are digitized, the more students are encouraged to interact with these modes, which are often linked to other visual modes both internal and external to the book. Arguably, a consequence of more engagement with visual modes has been less engagement with the alphabetic text that frames, supports, and explains these modes.

Our students have grown up in a media-rich, intensely visual culture that continually bombards them with digital texts demanding attention. From emails to advertisements to Web pages to video tutorials, students have learned to quickly sift through these texts to find information important to them. These visually informative, often multimodal texts invite readers to skim and scan and to construct meaning based on the reading path they have either chosen or been led to follow. As noted by both Doug Downs and Carmen Luke, students who have been socialized in the era of the screen are far less accustomed to reading the non-visually informative, alphabetic texts that prevail in academic contexts. Alphabetic texts provide a clear path that readers must follow to construct meaning; readers are expected to “start at the top of the left column, read across, then down, across, and so on” (Kress 157-58). Kress cautions us not to assume that those socialized in the era of the screen will read non-visually informative texts the same way as those socialized in the era of the page: “what appears to be the same text,” he asserts, “calls forth different strategies of reading, and gives rise to different readings of what are in reality different texts” (165). Those socialized to read more visual texts, according to Kress, will read the page in a layered way—first recognizing the “blocks” or units of meaning, then reading “at that next level ‘down’ in terms of the elements which exist in that block, at that level, in that modal realization” (159). These readers will tend to follow a non-linear reading path regardless of the nature and kind of text with which they are interacting.

Our students, then, are not passive readers; they are readers predisposed to notice visual aspects of texts and to decide what is important or not based on a quick glance over the page or screen. This might explain my own students’ tendency not to notice or see assignment tasks and expectations that I thought

were otherwise clear. Given this predisposition and the speed with which reading platforms are changing and diversifying, we cannot neglect reading as a deliberate act. It is our challenge as instructors to generate conscious awareness among students of their reading practices, including awareness of the kinds of practices called for by different reading situations.

One way that FYW instructors have sought to generate this awareness is by assigning texts that demand closer, more active kinds of reading than students are used to doing—texts that call for questioning, analysis, interpretation, and response. Another way we might do this, I suggest, is by providing students more opportunities to analyze on a metacognitive level how they tend to read visual and non-visual texts, and what the uses and limitations of these reading practices might be given students' goals for reading and their responsibilities to particular texts. In providing such opportunities, as detailed below, we can help students develop a kind of reading adaptability that allows them to quickly assess a reading situation and select a reading path appropriate to that situation. This approach aligns well with Keller's call for educators to help "students gain versatile, dexterous approaches to both reading and writing so they are prepared to navigate a wide range of ever-changing literacy contexts" (9).

A FYW course that emphasizes how reading works fits well within the Writing about Writing (WAW) approach to teaching composition. In this approach, which has gained significant momentum in composition studies, students learn not only how to write but also how writing works; they learn how people use writing and how problems related to writing and reading can be solved (Downs and Wardle, "Teaching about Writing" 558). Helping students develop a meta-awareness of their own reading practices and the uses and limitations of those practices in different reading situations supports two key goals of the WAW approach: empowerment and transfer. As Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle note, "knowledge about how texts work is empowering rather than limiting" ("Re-Imagining" 133), and meta-awareness and self-reflection encourage transfer of learning from one context to another ("Teaching about Writing" 577). It stands to reason, then, that students who understand how visual and verbal cues exert rhetorical control will be more empowered readers of others' texts and designers of their own texts, in FYW and beyond.

Visual Rhetoric and the Visual Continuum of Texts

In the field of composition, visual rhetoric is defined generally as the study of how we process, communicate, and produce meaning through visual modes such as photographs, webtexts, graphics, and animations (see Helmers and Hill). These modes can operate independently or synergistically in a shared space, and they are often accompanied by alphabetic text that frames and helps clarify the meaning intended. Current discussions of visual rhetoric are

often folded into discussions of multimodal and new media composition, where visual modes tend to be associated with the image and contrasted with alphabetic text. In *Writer/Designer*, for example, Kristin Arola, Jennifer Sheppard, and Cheryl Ball describe multimodal texts in terms of the five modes of communication articulated by the New London Group (a team of ten researchers who examine and theorize new literacies). These modes include linguistic, visual, aural, spatial, and gestural. The linguistic mode “refers to the use of language,” while the visual “refers to the use of images and other characteristics that readers see” (Arola, Sheppard, Ball 5-6). Layout, a characteristic of the visual mode, focuses on the physical arrangement of text and image. Like Arola, Sheppard, and Ball, Daniel Anderson et al. describe multimodal texts as those that draw on different modes, such as text, images, and sound, to create meaning. Interestingly, they found in their survey of multimodal composing practices in composition curricula that the majority of teachers shared a common understanding of multimodal texts but primarily focused their teaching on text/image integrations (78-79).

One result of associating visual rhetoric with the image has been a text/image binary where text is treated as a separate mode understood to follow a logic different from that of the image. Kress explores this logic at length in *Literacy in the New Media Age*, suggesting that the logic of writing is temporal and sequential, whereas the logic of the image is spatial and simultaneous (20). To process writing or text, one must read along a particular path, connecting what comes before to what comes after. According to Kress, “much of the meaning of the text and of its parts derives from the arrangements of syntax”; the image or visual mode, on the other hand, conveys its meaning through “the spatial relations of the depicted elements” (20). In this view, readers process meaning conveyed through alphabetic text at the micro level (words and sentences), whereas they process meaning conveyed through the image at a gestalt, or macro, level (text blocks and text/image juxtapositions).

What tends to be lost in current discussions of visual rhetoric is a recognition that alphabetic texts fall on a visual continuum, with some texts relying primarily on verbal cues to convey their meaning and others relying primarily on visual cues to do so. The text/image binary tends to promote a view of text as a non-visual mode constructed in relation to the more visual modes; the term “multimodal” arguably serves to promote this view, as evident in Pamela Takayoshi and Cynthia Selfe’s definition of multimodal compositions—those that “exceed the alphabetic and may include still and moving images, animations, color, words, music and sound” (1). A number of scholars have problematized the text/image binary that often underlies discussions of multimodal composition and that underplays text as a visual mode (Goggin; Hocks and Kendrick; Prior; Wysocki “Impossibly Distinct” and “With Eyes”).

Anne Wysocki, for example, argues that the visual arrangement of words carries argumentative weight and “encourages different kinds of meaning making” (“With Eyes” 186) and that the word/image binary fails to acknowledge the visual presentation of content as assertion (“Impossibly Distinct” 210). Notably, recent work on comics has pushed critiques of the text/image binary even further, challenging us to think of text not only as a visual mode but also as an aural, spatial, and gestural mode (see, e.g., Humphrey and Carvajal; Sealey-Morris). The point I wish to emphasize here is that in folding discussions of visual rhetoric into discussions of multimodal composition, we have tended to overlook the different ways in which visual displays of text exert rhetorical control. Our focus on distinguishing one mode from the other has come at the cost of examining how modes converge and overlap.

Visual rhetoric scholarship in the late 1980s and early 1990s focused a great deal on text as a visual mode. Both Charles Kostelnick and Stephen Bernhardt, for example, operate on a definition of visual rhetoric as the design of texts that display their meanings through the integration of visual and verbal cues (Bernhardt, “Seeing” and “The Shape”; Kostelnick, “A Systematic”; “The Rhetoric”; and “Visual Rhetoric”). Visual cues include typographical choices, such as typeface and type size; graphical choices, such as bullets and headings; and page layout choices, such as lists and hanging indents. Visual cues also include less explicit visual choices, such as paragraph indents and dashes to set off parenthetical thoughts (Kostelnick, “Visual Rhetoric”). These choices, notes Kostelnick, make a difference “in readers’ attitude toward a document, in how readers process its information, and in which information they value” (“Visual Rhetoric” 77). Bernhardt’s continuum for understanding how we process texts describes how visual choices make a difference (“Seeing”). He argues that all texts require visual apprehension. Whereas non-visually informative texts provide readers limited visual cues for identifying organizational structure and logical relations (e.g., paragraph indentation, margins, sentence punctuation), visually informative texts provide readers with a schematic representation of the divisions and hierarchies that organize the text (“Seeing” 66). In visually informative texts, levels of subordination are indicated by variation in typeface, type size, or heading placement; in non-visually informative texts, levels of subordination are indicated through verbal subordinators or cohesive ties (73), or verbal cues.

The note-taking assignment discussed earlier serves as a good example of how non-visually informative texts indicate levels of subordination. For the assignment, students had to first identify that they were being asked to write a journal entry. They then had to determine what they were being asked to put in that entry. The sub-tasks were the actual instructions, subordinate to

the main task—to form a journal entry. Here is the fourth paragraph of the assignment prompt:

When you're done reading and taking notes, review your notes and your style of taking notes, as well as any markings you've made on the text. In the form of a journal entry on a separate page from your notes, jot down your current sense of what Dillard seems to be saying. Then, on that same page, formulate one or two questions you believe will be fruitful for you and your classmates to pursue in your future work with Dillard's text.

In examining the first sentence, the subordinate clause—“*When* you're done reading and taking notes”—suggests that what follows is a task dependent on completion of the first. In the second sentence, the prepositional phrase (also subordinate)—“In the form of a journal entry. . .”—is more difficult to understand since it reads less as a command. Rather, it functions to help students understand how to format the task that follows—“jot down your current sense of what Dillard seems to be saying.” If students skip over informative subordinate clauses or phrases, they will likely misread or fail to read what they are actually being asked to do. I can assume that the majority of my students, in reading the second sentence of the journal entry passage, skipped over the subordinate phrase, not counting it as part of the assertion. Admitting that they did not know they were supposed to “form a journal entry” suggests that they were not practiced in reading levels of subordination indicated through verbal (not visual) subordinators.

To perform a useful reading of a non-visually informative assignment prompt, such as the one presented above, students must search for levels of subordination. For them to identify main and sub-level journal entry tasks, they must impose an organization on the text that allows them to identify the number of assigned tasks, how these tasks are related, which language is informational and which is instructional, and what, in general, is considered important. In this kind of text, readers cannot readily see levels of subordination; instead, they must enact a close reading that enables them to extract and make sense of these levels. This type of reading should not be treated as a given by instructors; we should teach students strategies for how to read prompts and how to see non-visually informative prompts in more visual ways.

In the late 1990s, Mike Markel expanded on Bernhardt's continuum of visually and non-visually informative texts. He describes non-visually informative, word-based texts as *transparent*, because we must “look through the words to see a writer's ideas beneath the page” (374). Alternatively, he describes visually informative, multimedia documents as *opaque*, because we tend to

read their surfaces, “interpreting the cues provided by layout, typography, and graphics as we create the meaning of the text” (374). Drawing on his study of students’ abilities to perceive and understand basic elements of visual rhetoric, Markel offers a useful, pedagogical suggestion for composition instructors. He argues that teaching basic design features, such as headings, typographical emphasis, numbered and bulleted lists, and horizontal and vertical white space, might “improve a person’s ability to understand designed text” (380). Kostelnick, too, encourages instructors to generate in students an awareness of rhetorical consequences of visual cues—of how they reveal “certain aspects of the message while embedding others” and impel “readers to value selected pieces of information and to acquiesce to logical and hierarchical connections that make them cohere visually” (“A Systematic” 42). Markel’s findings and Kostelnick’s description of rhetorical consequences support my assertion that asking students to study visually informative assignment prompts—the visual cues employed, how they function and why, and the roles these cues ask readers to carry out—may help students see non-visually informative prompts and other transparent texts in more visual ways. With its focus on metacognition, this activity may also help students learn to impose their own hierarchies of information and subordinate and coordinate relations on texts that otherwise demand linear reading paths.

When we design visually informative assignment prompts, we are guiding students to read the prompts in particular ways. We may be persuading them to value some tasks and expectations over others and, through imposing levels of subordination, limiting what might otherwise be creative readings and interpretations of the prompt—interpretations that may lead to more interesting or even appropriate responses to the prompt. This is not to say that writing instructors should avoid creating visually informative assignment prompts, which can go a long way in helping struggling students, particularly English language learners and those with learning disabilities, understand and respond to prompts. Rather, this is to say that assignment prompts can be designed in myriad ways, and different designs present rich opportunities for students to critically examine how and why they read and respond to particular prompts the way that they do.

Teaching Visual Rhetoric as a Tool for Performing Comprehension

One way we might help diverse groups of students become more adaptable readers of the visual continuum of texts is to teach visual rhetoric as a close reading strategy—as a tool for performing text comprehension. As a performance-oriented text genre, the assignment prompt is a readily accessible and appropriate example for visual analysis. First, students are generally motivated to perform well on assignments, and they genuinely want to understand

assignment expectations and requirements (motivation is key to learning transfer). Second, students will encounter throughout their academic career assignment prompts that fall on both ends of the visual continuum, many of them badly designed and written.

Below, I describe two in-class activities that introduce visual rhetoric as a tool for performing text comprehension. The broad goal of these activities is to get students thinking about (1) how particular visual designs guide their approaches to reading and interpreting assignments, (2) what interpretations and understandings of assignments might be lost and gained when visual cues are applied in particular ways, and (3) how they might usefully mark up prose-heavy assignment prompts so as to better see how they are being asked to think about and carry out an assignment. These activities help students come to understand that all texts employ some kind of visual rhetoric, that all texts are informative but in different ways, and that non-visually informative texts ask them to carry out roles different from visually informative texts. With their focus on inductive learning, the activities are intentionally designed to encourage knowledge transfer; the goal is for students to come to understand, through their own analysis of examples and participation in discussions, what visual rhetoric is and how it influences the way they perceive and process information. Students will ideally be able to apply their new reading awareness and skills to the assignment prompts and texts that they encounter in other contexts, both academic and professional. I recommend completing these activities early in the term so that students have opportunities to apply what they have learned throughout the course.

Activity 1: Analyzing and Responding to Visually and Non-Visually Informative Assignment Prompts

Select a major writing assignment and design the assignment prompt in three different ways. One version should rely primarily on verbal cues to communicate meaning, one on visual cues, and one on a hybrid of verbal and visual cues. Thus, the three versions should span the visual continuum of texts. The content of each prompt should remain unchanged (same text and organization of text), with the main difference being how the content is visually communicated. Figures 1, 2, and 3 are examples of an assignment prompt that I have used for this activity (I include only the first half of the prompt here to save space).¹

Dillard uses examples, analogies, and figurative language to explore the interplay between perception and nature and to take us to one of her central themes: “It’s all a matter of keeping [our] eyes open” (141). Clearly, Dillard writes as one who “sees,” as someone with considerable experience seeing in the different ways she describes: seeing as constructing an “artificial obvious,” seeing as a “matter of verbalization,” seeing as “analyzing and prying,” and seeing as “letting go.”

While you may not have practice or experience “seeing” in the particular ways Dillard has, you do have experience as a “see-er”: most recently, as one who has attempted to “see” and understand Dillard’s essay from different viewpoints as a reader (and re-reader). And you have experience with reflecting on your reading, especially your reading (and rereading) of Dillard. This puts you in an admirable position to respond to Dillard’s essay about seeing. For this assignment, write an essay in which you explain what you take Dillard to be saying about seeing, and how you, as someone with considerable experience in reading as a way of “seeing,” respond to what she says. In addition, explain why you respond the way that you do.

In writing this essay, you can draw on the essay you wrote for Assignment #4. But you should also draw on your experience in reading Dillard’s essay, as well as your previous experience as a reader, to explain how you have come to think about seeing (or reading as “seeing”) in the way you do and respond to Dillard’s ideas as you do. Use the notes you took when reading and rereading Dillard, and the earlier essays you drafted, as evidence to illustrate different ways of seeing (or reading or interpreting as “seeing”), the effects those ways of seeing have had on you as a reader, and what your experience of the effects of those ways of seeing leads you to say in response to Dillard’s essay. You can also refer to your understanding of your peers’ ways of “seeing” Dillard, as evidenced by small group and class discussions of notes, essay drafts, and Dillard’s essay itself.

In short, you should think of writing this essay as a revision of your earlier work in the sense of a re-seeing in light of subsequent reading experience and reflection. You will thus need to change what you’ve said to take into account what you’ve learned in considering the entirety of your experience to date with Dillard’s essay and other interpretations that have been suggested.

Fig. 1. Non-visually Informative Assignment Prompt (Verbal Cues Emphasis).

Assignment Context

Dillard uses examples, analogies, and figurative language to explore the interplay between perception and nature and to take us to one of her central themes: “It’s all a matter of keeping [our] eyes open” (141). Clearly, Dillard writes as one who “sees,” as someone with considerable experience seeing in the different ways she describes: constructing an “artificial obvious,” seeing as a “matter of verbalization,” seeing as “analyzing and prying,” and seeing as “letting go.”

While you may not have practice or experience “seeing” in the particular ways Dillard has, you do have experience as a “see-er”: most recently, as one who has attempted to “see” and understand Dillard’s essay from different viewpoints as reader (and re-reader). And you have experience with reflecting on your reading, especially your reading (and rereading) of Dillard. This puts you in an admirable position to respond to Dillard’s essay about seeing.

First Task—Read Ramage, Bean and Johnson

Read and take notes on what John Ramage, John Bean, and June Johnson have to say about drafting and revising in “Understanding How Experts Compose and Revise,” *Allyn & Bacon Guide to Writing Custom Edition*, pp. 479-89 (these notes are due Thursday, February 12).

Second Task—Write an Essay

For this assignment, write an essay in which you explain

- what you take Dillard to be saying about seeing
- how you, as someone with some considerable experience in reading as a way of “seeing,” respond to what she says
- why you respond to what she says the way that you do
- how you’ve come to think about seeing in the way you do

Distinguishing Assignment 5 from Assignment 4

- You can draw on the essay you wrote for Assignment # 4. But *you should also draw on your experience in reading Dillard’s essay*, as well as your previous experience as a reader, to successfully complete the second task—to explain how and why you respond to what she says the way that you do and how you have come to think about seeing (or reading as “seeing”) in the way you do.
- You should think of writing this essay as a revision of your earlier work in the sense of a re-seeing in light of subsequent reading experience and reflection. You will thus need to *change what you’ve said* to take into account what you’ve learned in considering the entirety of your experience to date with Dillard’s essay and other interpretations that have been suggested.

Fig. 2. Visually Informative Assignment Prompt (Visual Cues Emphasis)

Dillard uses examples, analogies, and figurative language to explore the interplay between perception and nature and to take us to one of her central themes: “It’s all a matter of keeping [our] eyes open” (141). Clearly, Dillard writes as one who “sees,” as someone with considerable experience seeing in the different ways she describes: constructing an “artificial obvious,” seeing as a “matter of verbalization,” seeing as “analyzing and prying,” and seeing as “letting go.” While you may not have practice or experience “seeing” in the particular ways Dillard has, you do have experience as a “see-er”: most recently, as one who has attempted to “see” and understand Dillard’s essay from different viewpoints as reader (and re-reader).

Task

First, read and take notes on what John Ramage, John Bean, and June Johnson have to say about drafting and revising in “Understanding How Experts Compose and Revise,” *Allyn & Bacon Guide to Writing Custom Edition*, pp. 479-89 (these notes are due Thursday, February 12). Then, write an essay in which you explain (1) what you take Dillard to be saying about seeing, (2) how and why you, as someone with some considerable experience in reading as a way of “seeing,” respond to what she says, and (3) how you’ve come to think about seeing in the way you do.

Drawing on Assignment 2, 3, & 4

In writing this essay, you can draw on the essay you wrote for Assignment # 4. But you should also draw on your experience in reading Dillard’s essay (Assignments 2, 3, & 4), as well as your previous experience as a reader, to explain how you respond to what she says and why you respond the way that you do, as well as how you have come to think about seeing (or reading as “seeing”) in the way you do. You might also refer to your understanding of your peers’ ways of “seeing” Dillard, as evidenced by small group and class discussions of notes, essay drafts, and Dillard’s essay itself.

In short, you should think of writing this essay as a revision of your earlier work in the sense of a *re-seeing in light of subsequent reading experience and reflection*, as well as other interpretations that have been suggested. You will thus need to change what you’ve said to take into account what you’ve learned in considering the entirety of your experience to date with Dillard’s essay and other interpretations that have been suggested.

Fig. 3. Visually Informative Assignment Prompt (Hybrid of Visual and Verbal Cues)

Plan to conduct this activity during the class period during which you introduce the writing assignment. To begin the activity, divide the class into groups of three or four. Then, hand out the non-visually informative version of the assignment prompt without letting on that there are other versions.

Ask each group to carefully read through the prompt and respond to the following questions:

- How did you read this assignment prompt? Why?
- How did the design of this prompt guide or influence your approach to reading?
- What is this assignment asking you to do? Mark up the prompt in a way that helps you understand and interpret what the assignment is asking you to do.
- If you could, how might you redesign this assignment prompt? Why?

After groups have had time to read and respond to the questions, facilitate a brief full-class discussion in which you ask groups to share their responses. You might also ask them to comment on aspects of the assignment prompt that were difficult to follow or understand and why.

Next, hand out the second and third versions of the prompt. As before, ask each group to carefully read both versions and respond to the following questions:

- How did the design of each prompt guide or influence your approach to reading? In other words, how did visual cues such as headings and numbered and bulleted lists change your approach to reading each version? Why might they have changed your approach?
- What do you feel is gained or lost in your reading (or understanding) of the visually informative assignment prompts as compared to the non-visually informative one?
- Which version would you prefer to write a response to? Why?

After groups have had time to read and respond to the questions, facilitate a large group discussion in which you again ask groups to share their responses. Then, give students two hypotheticals: (1) if you were given only the non-visually informative version, how might you approach responding to the assignment? (2) If you were given only the most visually informative version, how might you approach responding to the assignment? You might follow this discussion by asking students if visual cues aid in more useful readings.

Conclude this activity by officially assigning the assignment. Give students the option to respond to the assignment version of their choice. Some will opt to respond to the non-visually informative assignment while others will opt to respond to the more visually informative versions. Ideally, this will be a take-home assignment, one that gives students an opportunity to individually reflect on what the assignment is asking them to do and how they might approach it. In my experience offering students the option to respond to the prompt of their choice, I have received at least two very different batches of

essays. There is the batch that makes creative and at times sophisticated arguments, some of them less compelling than others, but most at least unique. This batch, not surprisingly, includes both complete and incomplete responses (some tasks not completed). And then there's the batch that opens with a framing paragraph followed by a checklist—each paragraph dutifully responding to each bulleted question or numbered task on the prompt. What the first batch lacks in completeness and structure, the second batch lacks in originality and sophistication. This phenomenon, nevertheless, is great fodder for discussion, particularly when a second draft is assigned. I have also found discussions that follow a peer-review session quite interesting; I ask students after they have reviewed at least two different essay drafts if they could tell to which assignment prompt their peer responded.

In a subsequent class, you might conduct a follow-up activity in which you introduce Bernhardt's table, "Visual Organization of Written Texts" ("Seeing," 78), and ask students to apply concepts from the table to each version of the assignment prompt. Table 1, a modified version of the table that was original published in *CCC*, describes rhetorical features that distinguish non-visually from visually informative texts.

For this follow-up activity, begin by reviewing Table 1 with the class and explaining new or confusing concepts (e.g., subordinate relations, intensifiers, conjunctive ties). Then, divide the class into groups and ask each group to identify at least two examples of rhetorical control from each version of the prompt. For instance, students might note how bold headings are used for emphasis in the visually informative prompt whereas conjunctive ties are used for emphasis in the non-visually informative prompt. After groups have completed this task, discuss their findings as a large group, ideally projecting the different versions of the prompt on a large screen. As students begin to examine how rhetorical control is achieved in the different versions of the assignment prompt, they should begin to see how the non-visually informative prompt was transformed into each of the more visually informative prompts. They should also begin to understand how and why imposing and reading visual cues on a text are interpretive acts.

Table 1: Visual Organization of Written Texts

Non-visually Informative	Rhetorical Control	Visually Informative
Homogenous surface offers little possibility of conveying information; dense, indistinguished block of print; formidable appearance assumes willing reader	<i>Visual Gestalt</i>	Varied surface offers aesthetic possibilities; can attract or repel reader through the shape of the text
Progressive: each section leads smoothly to the next; projects reader forward through discourse-level previewing and backwards through reviewing	<i>Development</i>	Localized: each section is its own locale with its own pattern of development; arrests reader's attention
Integrated: indentations give some indication of boundaries, but sections frequently contain several paragraphs and sometimes divisions occur within paragraphs; reader must read or scan linearly to find divisions	<i>Partitioning</i>	Iconic: spacing, headings reveal explicit, highly visible divisions; reader can jump around, process the text in a non-linear fashion, access information easily, read selectively
Emphasis controlled semantically through intensifiers, conjunctive ties; some emphasis achieved by placement of information in initial or final slots in sentences and paragraphs	<i>Emphasis</i>	Controlled by visual stress of layout, type size, spacing, headings
Controlled semantically within linear sequence of paragraphs and sentences	<i>Subordinate Relations</i>	Signaled through type size, headings, indenting
Controlled semantically within linear sequence of paragraphs and sentences	<i>Coordinate Relations</i>	Signaled through listing structures, expanded sentences, parallel structures, enumerated or iconically signaled by spacing or bullets
Liberal use of cohesive ties, especially conjunctives and deictics; frequent interparagraph ties or transitional phrases	<i>Linking/ Transitional Relations</i>	Linkage controlled visually; little or no use of semantic ties between sentences and sections; reliance on enumerative sequences

Source: Adapted with permission from Stephen Bernhardt's "Seeing the Text." *College Composition and Communication* 37 (1986: 78).

Activity 2: Redesigning an Assignment Prompt

This activity asks students to experiment with imposing a visual organization on a non-visually informative assignment prompt. Like the first activity, students examine the uses and limitations of different visual designs and the kinds of readings different designs call for and why. This activity also gives students an opportunity to develop fluency with the features of page layout (e.g., lists, headers and footers, headings, borders) in desktop publishing or word processing programs.

Begin the activity by introducing the core principles of visual rhetoric (such as Robin Williams' principles of contrast, repetition, alignment, and proximity) to give students a framework for talking about different functions of visual rhetoric (such as to increase readability and direct reader attention). Then, as a large group, examine examples of visually informative texts and generate a list of visual cues and their rhetorical functions; assign someone to document the cues and their functions on the board. For example, a student might point out that boldface is used in a particular text to emphasize main topics or that bullets are used to distinguish important items to remember.

When the class is satisfied with the list, divide the class into groups of three or four. Ask students to open an electronic copy of a non-visually informative assignment that you have prepared (students will need access to a computer or tablet). Task each group with redesigning the prompt so to increase readers' ability to find, understand, recollect, and respond to important information. Groups should draw on the list of visual cues in making decisions about which to employ.

When they are done, ask each group to present and justify their redesigns to the class. Then, give students some time to compare the different redesigns and think about the role each redesign asks them to carry out as readers. Encourage students to examine the uses and limitations of each design—what has been left out? What kinds of interpretation does a particular design allow for and how are those interpretations similar or different from those of the original?

Discussing the students' multiple interpretations of the assignment prompt, as revealed through each group's redesign, should help students better understand how they might visually deconstruct non-visually informative assignment prompts as well as other performance-oriented texts in useful, responsible ways.

Conclusion

Much empirical research supports the use of visual cues to help readers find, understand, and use information relevant to achieving their particular goals (see, e.g., Bernhardt, "The Shape"; Kimball and Hawkins; Markel; Redish; Schriver). We might conclude, then, that applying visual cues to assignment

prompts is one effective way to help students identify, understand, and carry out assignment objectives, tasks, and expectations. Doing so also likely reduces students' intimidation of assignments and increases their motivation to successfully complete them. But what kinds of readers are we asking students to be when we design prompts that do the work of comprehension for them? What kinds of responses can we expect when visual cues make assertions as to which aspects of a text students should value?

Learning transfer research, such as work by Doug Brent, and David Perkins and Gavriel Saloman, suggests that the best way to help students develop the kind of rhetorical acumen and reading adaptability advocated here is through activities that promote metacognition and mindful abstraction. Metacognition and mindful abstraction support a key goal of the WAW approach to composition and of the FYW course in general: that is, the transfer of reading and writing knowledge acquired in the FYW course to other general education and discipline-specific courses. Learning transfer is generally understood as the ability to use the knowledge and skills acquired in one context to solve problems in another context (for more specific definitions, see Brent; Marton; Perkins and Saloman; Wardle). Elizabeth Wardle and Doug Brent each argue for thinking of transfer in terms of transformation; we want to see evidence of students both adapting their knowledge and skills "to meet the needs of a new activity system" (Wardle 69) and drawing on a wide repertoire of strategies to solve new problems in new environments (Brent 404). The visual rhetoric activities discussed here support transformation of reading knowledge and skills through their focus on meta-awareness of one's own reading processes and the impact of visual and verbal cues on those processes; they also support transformation through their focus on mindful abstraction of visual design principles and design strategies (students analyze prompts designed in different ways, deduce design principles, respond to different prompt designs, reflect on how those designs shaped their responses, and draw on new knowledge to redesign existing prompts).

Visual rhetoric taught as a tool for performing text comprehension integrates well not only with lessons focused on the rhetorical situation, rhetorical analysis, and rhetorical reading strategies but also with lessons focused on active or close reading strategies. As a close reading strategy, visual rhetoric encourages students to ask questions about audience, purpose, context, and genre and invite discussions about assignment prompts in other classes and how these prompts are designed (or not) for their intended audiences: students. This reading strategy also promotes genre awareness in that it increases students' understanding of where different genres, from a critical essay to a grant proposal to a resume, fit on the visual continuum. In asking questions such as "What are the readers' goals?" and "How does the author want the reader

to experience the text?” students become more aware of the different ways in which genre conventions and visual design choices are shaped by rhetorical considerations and the norms of particular social systems. In addition, this strategy further support students’ ability to see stages of thought and hierarchies in their own writing; students ideally will be able to apply their knowledge of visual rhetoric to writing activities such as reverse outlining, where they label sections, transitions, main points, and sub-points in an effort to better see their structural framework and assess its effectiveness.

This article contributes to ongoing work in the field in reading pedagogy and visual and multimodal processing. Some have noted the need for a more robust reading pedagogy in composition and more attention on reading strategies (see, e.g., Adler-Kassner and Estrem, “Reading Practices”; Bosley; Downs; Horning; Keller). Others have noted the need for more direct instruction on the production of visual texts, as it increases students’ understanding of how visual rhetoric works (see Bernhardt, “Seeing”; Shin and Cimasko; Westbrook). Dong-shin Shin and Tony Cimasko, in particular, note that students who struggle in using language benefit from learning how to use non-verbal modes to communicate meaning (377). Visual rhetoric taught as a close reading strategy can aid in genre transference in that students are better able to understand and respond to the different performance-oriented genres that they will encounter in academic and non-academic contexts. This strategy can also raise students’ awareness that their information experiences are always designed. Whether they are interacting with information in a museum, a mobile application, or a course syllabus, they are being guided—through visual and verbal cues, interactive elements, and other signposts—to experience and comprehend information in a particular way. When students are aware of how they are being guided to experience and comprehend information, they are better positioned to critique and, in many cases, actively shape or reshape the information designs that they encounter.

Note

1. This particular assignment, which focuses on Annie Dillard’s “Seeing,” is adapted from an assignment that Bruce Horner developed in 2003 for the beginning composition program at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. The assignment prompt reflects the philosophy of the composition program at the time, which focused on reading and writing as recursive, interdependent processes.

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