

Graphic art cannot be totally separated from literary art, nor vice versa. They encroach on each other.

—ARNOLD BENNETT

chapter

1

Seeing Writing in a Visual World

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I do not recall any professor with whom I studied while pursuing the Ph.D. in composition discussing composition from any perspective other than that of the production of written texts. The focus of these discussions was always the construction of writing: not art, not music, not mathematics and other symbol systems. The anecdotal evidence about their training we have gathered from colleagues in the field of writing suggests that these omissions are the norm. What can be perceived as a type of academic myopia is not unique to the composition community. Witnessing the same thing in her discipline, Janet Olson, an art educator and the author of *Envisioning Writing: Toward an Integration of Drawing and Writing* (1992), suggests one of many viable explanations for this academic provincialism when she laments that “With each step of specialization teachers become more limited in their understanding of other subjects and their relation to the teachers’ own areas of expertise. Their understanding of students’ educational development also suffers, since their observation and judgment are informed by a narrow frame of reference, both in terms of time spent with students and in terms of their disciplinary expertise” (148).

Such a restricted field of vision should not be surprising, however. In fact, as we note throughout this book, discussions of the similarities between the composing processes in the arts and in other disciplines are relatively few and far between. Even rarer are attempts to translate these similarities to provide teachers and students with additional

and alternative strategies for entering into the complex problem-solving activity of creating and crafting written texts. Having studied and collaborated with artists who work in many mediums, we believe the linkages that connect the composing processes they manipulate to create their work seem absurdly obvious (Hobson 1990).

Thankfully, we do not make this argument in complete isolation. R. Baird Shuman and Denny Wolfe, for instance, summarize the thesis of their NCTE monograph, *Teaching English Through the Arts* (1990), in the following way:

Our point here is that writing is like all the other arts in this regard: all are composing activities and therefore require invention. Just as composition in speaking and writing has to do with ordering words, so composition in music has to do with ordering sound, and drawing or painting has to do with ordering objects in space, and so on. All forms of composition assist in the process of clarifying and ordering thought and feeling, in creating and understanding concepts—in short, in learning. All of us hope that our students will learn to think critically and creatively. But to do so, they must have practice. Involving students in the arts both ensures that practice and expands its variety. (7)

Likewise, Olson (1992) writes that “Since children are both visual and verbal learners, and since both images and words are effective and compatible tools for communication, it seems obvious that the two should never be separated. Unfortunately, the traditional understanding of the visual image has been far too narrow and greatly misunderstood by most language-arts teachers” (45). Taking a narrower focus than that of either Shuman and Wolfe or Olson, Catherine Golden (1986), in “Composition: Writing and the Visual Arts,” explores correlations between the composing processes used by painters and those used by writers: “I think there are useful parallels between the genesis of a painting and that of a written manuscript. The artist’s first simple sketch seems to function like a writer’s verbal map or outline, similarly capturing the central theme of the composition: the initial vision. Early sketches or studies for a painting are like drafts for a written composition. Both show a way of progressing from initial vision to completed composition” (60).

Along with Shuman and Wolfe, Olson, and Golden, and others, we adhere to this statement: “*Writing’s ‘composing process’ is closely related to the operational processes that fuel successful creation in other areas.*” For us, this is just common sense. Karen Ernst (1994) explains and justifies her long-standing efforts to use writing to improve elementary students’ art, and art to improve their writing, in her description of the educational environment she strives to create. It is one in

which “pictures as well as language would be part of the continuum of forming—that is, meaning making” (8). This integrated understanding of how students can and do use multiple media to help them make meaning out of their surrounding world, however, garners scant attention within the written composition community, particularly at levels directly affecting secondary and postsecondary instruction. Coupled with our professional obligation to teach students to write more successfully (that is, to create academic prose), this oversight helps maintain a chasm between the site-specific, nitty-gritty truths about composing we have learned from experience and the more abstract musings and teachings of the academic community.

Writing Is a Visual Art

Writing developed as a *visual* means of communication (Coulmas 1988; Harris 1986; Jean 1992; Olson 1992; Shuman and Wolfe 1990), and a long, continuing history of close incorporation of visual elements in many different text forms has been maintained. Illustrated manuscripts, calligraphy, and tapestries are but a few of the art forms in which distinctions between word and form are blurred to the point of meaninglessness. In discussing calligraphy, Olson (1992) reminds us that “The calligraphic (meaning ‘words written by hand’) form of these characters is itself a legitimate and widely appreciated visual art form. Calligraphy incorporates all the elements of a painting—line, shape, texture, unity, balance, rhythm, proportion—all within its own unique form of composition” (131).

Given this history, the distance between the visual and the verbal forms of information practiced in verbal-based classrooms is highly artificial. Focusing on the linkages between the composing processes employed in the arts as well as on their similar histories, Shuman and Wolfe (1990) draw what they see as “two pertinent conclusions”:

- Early composition that was used as a means of preserving and transmitting ideas and information through the ages took the forms of *singing* and *drawings*.
- Early alphabetic writing was an art form that may have had less to do with composing the content of what was to be communicated than with the art form itself.

“Obviously,” they conclude, “connections between language and the arts have roots deep in antiquity” (2). Olson too finds these connections worth exploring. Discussing the development of writing, she notes that the “Greeks chose to represent each spoken sound with a

symbol (or letter). But what is most important about this transition is that all of these writing forms and systems were originally picture drawings. Because phonetical representation was viewed as an important advancement, the significant role the picture played in this achievement often went unnoticed. Just as speech developed out of the imitation of sound, writing developed out of the imitation of forms of real objects or beings. At the beginning of all writing stands the picture" (130).

Given the current interest in stressing interdisciplinary approaches within educational activity at all levels, primary through postsecondary, the present is a particularly opportune moment to attempt many of the instructional approaches presented and implied in the following pages. As is readily evident from the projects described, for instance, by Joe Trimmer (see Chapter 2) and Joan Mullin (see Chapter 7), the cross-disciplinary synergy that results from integrating the visual and the verbal in our teaching can be quite invigorating. What is not as foregrounded in these particular discussions, however, are other benefits that we believe are as important, if not more important in helping students develop the critical and communicative abilities they need to function in our visually intensive culture. Richard Putney's discussion (Chapter 6) shows that initiatives such as these also create active learning environments in which integrated activities are geared to developing synthetic critical thinking and communication skills.

Consider the following statement:

The artistic antecedent of writing, then, is drawing; the artistic antecedents of literature are songs, oral stories, improvisations, and other informal means of "acting out." Given these artistic antecedents and their history stretching through eons, it seems clear that the collective unconscious of human beings is rooted in artistic archetypes. . . . English teachers who are aware of these archetypes and who find ways to tie their teaching to them will likely open learning possibilities for students that might otherwise remain closed. (Shuman and Wolfe 1990, 8)

Question: If the connections between visual and verbal learning exist, the current educational environment is open to such integrative innovation, and this integration brings with it a host of other, linked benefits, *how* can teachers of written composition integrate these arts into their teaching when they are not masters of these other artistic media?

Answer: Easily, at least when and if we admit our amateur status in these areas and approach them as colearners with our students, since by doing so we reduce our performance anxiety and increase

the chances that this exploration may be enjoyable; establish links with people whose proficiencies lie in these other arts and use them as resources.

Potential results:

Useful:	Employing the practices in this book increases the variety of activities that can prompt student writing
More useful:	Using visually based activities encourages the participation of students who are visual learners
Most useful:	Integrating the arts into the writing class can help many students learn how to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ discover ideas ▪ organize information ▪ overcome writer's block

Realizing these potentials within traditional writing courses and within traditional, discipline-based curricula, however, requires work, a willingness to take risks, and, most important, a desire to make new discoveries about our students' abilities and our own.

Shifting Teachers' Paradigms

In leading faculty development workshops that explore the relationships between and the transferability of the composing processes employed in writing and in the visual arts, I frequently ask participants to begin with the following task (see Chapter 8 for the complete workshop script). In order to fully appreciate its effectiveness, please complete Activity 1 before you continue reading.

Writing teachers in particular often find this task difficult at first because we tend to think verbally not visually; link metaphor to language, not to shapes and tones; use pen and pencil to generate words, not lines; and experience high levels of anxiety and insecurity when faced with unfamiliar tasks.

Activity 1

TASK: Draw a representation of the most difficult student you have ever taught.

TIME: 5 minutes

TIPS: Sketch quickly
Trust your instincts
Relax (no one else has to see your drawing)

GOAL: Try to draw so that two days from now you can recognize the result as student X.

Because of the brief time allowed to complete this task, the drawings are usually not particularly well developed—stick figures and amoebalike entities abound. In most cases, the picture is not recognizable to anyone but the artist, but given the subjectivity of the act of representation, a high level of idiosyncrasy is to be expected. Drawings such as the one in Figure 1-1 are the norm.

In addition, the artists encounter a marked level of initial frustration, which is quickly followed by the realization that it will be impossible for them to complete the activity to their own aesthetic satisfaction. Comments such as the following are also common:

"I don't know what you want."

"I don't have sufficient time to draw well."

"Why are we drawing? I thought this was a workshop about teaching writing."

"My drawing doesn't look like anything anyone else could recognize."

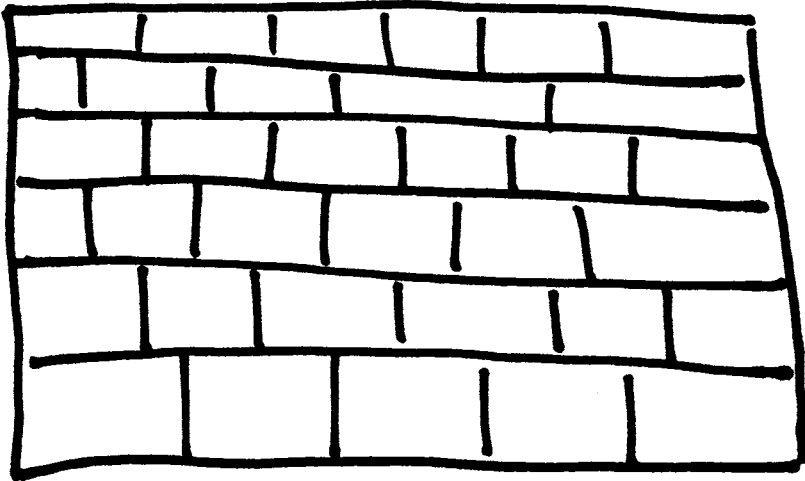
"I've never been any good at drawing."

Usual Participant Assumptions

I introduce this risky activity at workshops because it brings into high relief a number of assumptions about writing and its relationship to the arts. These assumptions often include such beliefs (frequently tacitly held) as the following:

- For drawings to be valuable, they must be good (that is, aesthetically pleasing).
- Successful artistic production is a mysterious process accessible to only a select few.

Figure 1-1
“My most difficult student”



- Artistic production in the plastic and graphic arts is distinctly different (and, less academically viable) than verbal production. As such, it
 - doesn't intersect with language arts instruction in important ways
 - offers few opportunities for helping a broad range of students develop successful written composing processes
 - opens writing instruction to the perception that it is methodologically soft

These perceptions are understandable for a number of reasons. The romantic tradition in Western culture has elevated artistic production—activities outside the day-to-day, vocationally linked manipulation of print, metals, paints, video, music, and so on—to a realm reserved for a talented elite. It is hardly surprising that few people, other than those who consider themselves adept at these media, are aware of the processes used by practitioners in creating their work. This lack of awareness, among other things, disinclines us to see similarities in the composing processes that help to energize these artistic endeavors.

There is a long-standing, deeply ingrained suspicion in the United States toward high culture as somehow anti-egalitarian and

even undemocratic. Art forms frequently associated with and used as markers of social class (for example, opera, classical music, painting, sculpture, and literature) simultaneously attract and repel the American psyche. The art museum is one venue in which this phenomenon is undeniable: people feel obligated to undertake a pilgrimage there but experience a sense of alienation once they arrive. The American ambivalence toward art is easily witnessed in everything from screwball comedies to cartoons to jokes told on the job. Both of these perceptions—art is the domain of a talented few; art marks and maintains social status—reveal just how tightly our culture holds to a utilitarian view. The role of *artistic expression in our everyday lives is very small*.

At the same time, the emphasis of American secondary and post-secondary education is decidedly vocational. Curricula are crafted and assessed according to whether or not graduates get jobs upon completing their course of study. Although there is continual brouhaha among the general populace over the need for students to engage in a learning process that will serve them for years and stimulate them to become lifelong learners, the vast majority of classroom practices focus on vocational utility: “Does what goes on in the classroom have a direct, one-to-one correlation to activities found in the workplace?” This is a very real and very powerful controlling question. Because the links between verbal and rhetorical fluency and visual acumen have not been consistently championed, classroom instruction that attempts not only to demonstrate this link but also to engage students in its exploration are viewed with suspicion.

An essential, although often ignored, part of the vocational focus of American education arises from the culture’s faith in the promise of the scientific model to supply irrefutable answers to all problems and to prescribe definite courses of redemptive or remedial action in order to alleviate these problems. In this educational model, one methodically isolates, identifies, and categorizes the essential elements of everything from biological to linguistic systems in order to ascertain how these pieces constitute the whole system. While such an inquiry strategy is powerful, it tends to be myopic, ignoring some variables as too tangential to warrant further exploration.

This tendency to ignore those parts of the puzzle that may not make immediate and objective sense contributes, I believe, to the stranglehold that content-centered teaching (in its most limited sense) maintains on American education. What we hope to demonstrate in the following chapters is the strong, even essential, role that visual literacy plays in the development of students’ writing abilities. Our students need to develop the verbal-visual skills that will enable them to write with the rhetorical sophistication they need to succeed in the undeniably visual culture that has come charging to the forefront in

the closing decades of the twentieth century—and that shows no sign of retreating.

My Assumptions

Like the participants, I too enter the visual workshop with a set of preconceptions that help to determine the workshop's purpose and format. My decision to begin the workshop with the "draw student X" activity, for example, is based on several assumptions:

- The structure of most typical writing classes unwittingly privileges and by extension may exclude specific learning styles and personality profiles.
- Many students identified as "difficult" are so labeled less because of any behavioral or intellectual deficiencies than because they don't quite fit a typical or ideal student mold.

Olson's observations about the different strengths students bring to learning situations provide a link between these assumptions:

It is a well-documented fact that 15 percent or more of all children do not respond well to verbal instruction, and many more children have varying degrees of difficulty with it. A value chart could be used to visualize these many variations. If white represents visual learners and black represents verbal learners, it's easy to see how many variations of gray are possible within the two extremes. The children who respond poorly to verbal instruction may very well be the children who simply cannot or will not pay attention, who will not lead or participate in class discussions, who seem unable or unwilling to follow directions, and who are very likely to be classified as being daydreamers, discipline problems, learning disabled, or all of the above. (5–6)

I start with this drawing activity on purpose. It is, I believe, synonymous with many assignments we give our students to tackle in that it is abstract, it has no immediate link to the workshop topic, and it presents few criteria to serve as guides and anchors. Indeed, given the expectations and preconceptions participants bring with them, the activity doesn't make a whole lot of sense. Yet I present this task to teachers because it serves as a corollary to the position in which many of their students find themselves when they receive a writing assignment. I am convinced that many of the assignments and activities presented to students in composition classes give them very real challenges because these tasks take students away from their familiar ways of discovering, exploring, revising, and articulating their ideas.

Not only do we frustrate them, but we also ask them to take risks, and taking risks is not something they are eager to do, because they know the educational system does not usually reward risk takers. How then do we go about creating an environment in which students will take the risks necessary to draw on their visual literacy in their attempts to articulate their thinking through writing?

By exposing this baggage at the start, I believe it much more likely that teachers whose instructional responsibilities lie in the verbal territories of writing and literature will *see* the workshop's central point, that the composing process in writing is similar to the composing processes in the other arts and *leave* the workshop more willing to incorporate visually based activities in their writing courses. In other words, among other secondary agendas, the workshop has the important goal of beginning a discussion of the following statements:

- Typical writing classes simultaneously privilege some and exclude other available composition tools.
- Many writing classes consider invention and revision exclusively within a verbal framework.
- Many writing teachers assume that the majority of their students encounter and process reality exactly as they themselves do.
- These approaches stymie students' abilities.

Building a Bridge Between the Visual and the Verbal

True or False:

- _____ Writing classes do not hold most students enthralled.
- _____ Writing classes do not send most students into states of rapture.
- _____ Writing classes are often extremely frustrating experiences for students.

I doubt that many experienced English teachers would argue with these statements. One reason they ring true is that they are deeply rooted in contemporary student culture, which

- sees student-teacher relationships as adversarial
- approves a cool pose of indifference toward learning
- values students' egocentric determination of what in their education is important
- penalizes taking risks in front of peers

Less easily dismissed, however, are a number of important factors that can lead to potentially erroneous assumptions about levels of student motivation and ability.

In my own case, as a student I tended to doodle in my notebooks more than I took notes during class. This behavior bothered several of my teachers so much, they expressed concern about my study habits. One professor—my undergraduate advisor—even recommended that I enroll in a study skills course to learn how to take effective notes. These teachers were operating within a verbally determined conceptual framework. Within their paradigm of learning, note taking—the recording/transcribing of course content using words and/or shorthand notations—was a necessary component for success within the discipline. What these teachers did not understand was that as a learner, I am quite visually dependent. I learn best and am most comfortable when I can *see* relationships between ideas tangibly illustrated and *watch* task performances modeled.

When I attempted to perform as a dutiful English student by taking copious notes, I found that I focused less on the information being presented than on the act of taking notes. The net result was that while I had nice notes, I didn't really have the contextual framework I needed to make more complete sense out of them. When I returned to my notes to review course material, I just couldn't get the *feel* of them; I'd come away from reading them frustrated. For me, as a visual learner,

class notes (transcribed words) ≠ optimal learning

Part of the problem, I realized, was that while taking notes, my attention was centered on the page, not on the teacher and the class interaction. While doodling, however, my vision and hearing were focused almost exclusively on the teacher and the class discussion. The marks I made included key data from the day's activity (names, dates, key words), geometric forms with suggested linkages, and cartoonish images of teachers, classmates, and items in the room. This *mélange* of images provided me a rich palette of visual and mnemonic cues. Through them I could reenter the class environment and recall in fine detail much of what was said—and what was stressed—during lectures and discussions.

This type of learning experience is not completely idiosyncratic. Karen Ernst, for example, describes several such moments in *Picturing Learning: Artists and Writers in the Classroom* (1994). "My use of drawing and writing in my research journal was central to my observation of and communication with students," she writes. "Drawing was a way for me to take field notes and was an essential part of my teaching and research" (25):

Drawing Allen and Martin as they wrote in their artists notebooks focused my concentration, enabling me to be present for their work in the classroom, to record both the experience and the context. Words and pictures worked in partnership as tools to describe meaning. (31)

My writing and drawing worked as partners as I drew Brenda, robed in her green striped smock, working at her table on her painting. I focused on her painting, and that led me to interview her; her words filled the spaces around the drawing. For me, recording the words with the drawing captured the moment. (31)

Toby Gordon, in "Drawing My Selves Together: An Editor's Notebook" (Hubbard and Ernst 1996), echoes these experiences:

when I want it, I have room to roam. On the phone, in meetings, at conferences, I decorate, doodle, make the pages visually appealing. While talking with authors and colleagues, I let my pen go. My hand stays busy, and my listening becomes more active and acute. Their words, and my thinking about their words, fill up the pages. Faces, figures, and designs float in the margins. And later my words and images—as inaccurate as they may be—will bring me right back to the precise moment of a long-ago meeting, conversation, or conference. The tone of the moment lingers in the white space. I can't lose it now. And from there I can turn it around, play with it, hold it; I can recapture old feelings and generate new ideas. (153)

Put simply, there is no perfect, universal way to learn. In most writing classes, however, one could easily conclude otherwise: much of the interaction takes place exclusively in words. Teachers give students with assignments and content information orally, sometimes supplemented with printed materials, and students provide teachers with print-only texts. This situation stacks the learning deck—and, by extension, the assessment deck—in ways that enable select groups of students to succeed while other groups flounder. It can be argued that group membership is determined by students' learning styles, which, when mixed with a teacher's presentation style linked to his or her preferred ways of learning, create classroom environments in which a minority of students feel completely comfortable while a majority experience increasing levels of discomfort and dissonance.

The question of how learning styles influence and even determine how one learns is nothing new to the education literature. Inventories such as the Myers Briggs Type Inventory (MBTI) and Howard Gardner's (1983) multiple intelligences provide students and teachers with a descriptive apparatus for discussing and understanding how they best interact with the world. For classroom applications, however, these tools are often quite cumbersome. In addition to their

administration costs, they confront students with pages of questions that often require them to choose between options they employ with equal ease.

To overcome these limitations, Fleming and Mills (1992) created a thirteen-question survey (VARK inventory) to help students identify their own dominant learning style and to offer them study strategies designed to augment that style. The VARK inventory focuses on four learning styles:

- Visual (V): preference for graphical and symbolic ways of representing information
- Aural (A): preference for “heard” information
- Read/Write (R): preferences for information printed as words
- Kinesthetic (K): preference to the use of experience and practice (simulated or real) (140)

This inventory highlights the fact that students do not bring the same learning strategies and abilities to the classroom; rather, they exhibit markedly different preferences for interacting with new information and new concepts, employing more than the reading, writing, and listening skills traditionally valued by teachers. While the authors provide no information about how these styles are typically distributed across student populations, there are marked similarities between the students described in their discussions and the types of learners coming out of Olson’s (1992) classroom observations as an art teacher and teacher trainer. She argues that a class usually includes “four basic types of students, each type representing approximately 25 percent of the class”:

Type A. High visual and high verbal skills

Type B. High visual and low verbal skills

Type C. Low visual and high verbal skills

Type D. Low visual and low verbal skills

She describes each group and discusses how an integrated visual-verbal method of writing instruction benefits each. Type A students excel at all tasks and find the simultaneous use of visual and verbal skills challenging. Type B students “have great difficulty with the normal academic tasks that are basically verbal” and do not achieve high levels of academic success; however, “these are the students who benefit most from the visual-verbal method of writing and are most likely to show dramatic improvement.” Type C students get good grades and view visual activities as “a waste of time” yet can benefit from visually based instruction, because it stretches their preconceptions and offers

options they would not otherwise recognize. Type D students are those whose chances of academic success are remote but for whom drawing is more concrete and understandable than other forms of instruction (43–44).

When I look at a group of students in terms of how their learning styles might explain the levels of success they encounter in my writing classes, I experience mixed feelings of justification and self-indictment. On the one hand, I find it reassuring that the grade distribution that I have come to expect (not dissimilar to a bell curve) can be explained by Olson's approach to the abilities and talents students bring with them. I wonder if there is anything about writing I can teach the small group of students at the high end of the performance chart. Occasionally, I encounter students whose apparent lack of talent and ability makes me question what they are doing in my college-level writing classes. In the middle are the bulk of my students, who bring with them a range of talents and abilities that by the end of the semester, place them in the middle of the pack. I present students with an opportunity to learn more about writing; what they make of that opportunity is up to them.

On the other hand, discussions of students' performance that acknowledge the role of their learning styles and teachers' learning and presentation styles in students' performance give me pause. They keep me honest about the biases built into my own classes and encourage me to explore ways of integrating information-processing and problem-solving strategies from the visual arts. I am convinced that it levels the playing field while enabling most students to experience equally powerful and productive learning. The more I think about how I taught in the past, the more sure I am that the students who came out on top were those most like the stereotypical English or humanities major. That thought drives my current thinking; it is my albatross.

Conclusion

Students who learn best by listening or by reading stand the greatest chance of doing well in school. Yet every class also includes students like me, whose visual inclinations manifest themselves in an aversion to systematic note taking. These students sit in writing courses without appearing to follow the lesson as do their "more successful," verbally oriented peers. When teachers who hold tightly to the written word as the most powerful learning medium encounter doodlers and daydreamers, it is easy for them to reach the same logical conclusion my advisor did: *These students are goofing off.*

If the research on differences in learning styles and writing is as accurate as it is convincing (Jensen and DiTibberio 1989), there is a good chance that these “lollygagging” students may in fact be on task. Drawing allowed me to interact with the class activity and material with efficiency and confidence. By doodling, sketching, and drawing, not by taking copious notes, I was able to stay on top of my classes and learn quite a bit about language and literature. In other words, students who may not fit the usual good writer mold can be actively involved in an *invention* process, a *development* process, and extensive *revision* processes.

As Golden (1986) observes, “An analogy [can] be made between the genesis of a painting and the creation of a written text. No doubt the artist’s use of shapes, the musician’s use of notes, and the writer’s use of words are distinct. . . . Making allowances for the different symbol systems involved, composition is a concept commonly used in the visual arts and writing. The term signifies the similarities that abound between composing in both arts, especially if we consider not the artistic artifacts but the process by which the image emerges on the canvas or the words appear on the page” (60).

This raises a final important point: *writing derives from vision*. Current cognitive research is establishing links between sight and language (Gutin 1996), but the link already manifests itself intuitively in the language we use daily. We see the point; we speak in metaphors; we acknowledge insight. Ignoring the connections between the visual and verbal would mean ignoring years of research that emphasize their interdependencies in the learning process. It would also mean ignoring a rich pedagogical resource for writing and literature classrooms.

Acknowledging the connections between visual and verbal literacy is the first step. Enacting that understanding in the classroom follows logically, yet, as we know from our own experiences in making this perceptual transition, engaging a process of change is not easy. If nothing else, it requires talents we aren’t always completely certain we have. Our hope, however, is that you can begin to visualize the type of visual-verbal integration presented in the following pages, and incorporate similar activities into your own classroom instruction. We know the results will be rewarding.