

# Preface

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At the 1996 NCTE Board of Directors' meeting in Chicago, the following resolution passed by an overwhelming majority:

RESOLVED, that the National Council of Teachers of English through its publications, conferences, and affiliates support professional development and public awareness of the role that viewing and visually representing our world have as a form of literacy. (99)

The interesting part of the floor discussion before the vote was not whether the visual was important but whether "visual" should be paired with "literacy." A colleague proposed amending the resolution by dropping the word "literacy," although he admitted that perhaps he was being too traditional, and the ensuing barrage of comments indicated that he was. It soon became clear that many of our colleagues in secondary schools and colleges already incorporate elements of visual literacy in their writing and literature classes, that they know the importance of the visual in an increasingly computerized multimedia culture, and that they worry about whether they are adequately equipped to teach their students about the intersections between the visual and the verbal. They voted for the resolution because they wanted to make more explicit the need to address the visual and the need for more instructional resources. In this book we hope to address those concerns in concrete ways.

For years, many of us have used paintings, photographs, and other forms of illustrative material from particular historical periods to provide a specific context for our students. Some of us ask students to observe and write about a parking lot, a car, their bedroom, or an orange, all in an attempt to teach description, comparison/contrast, or process. Another still popular form of analysis calls for a textual reading of a magazine or TV advertisement in order to identify how the print and visual elements collaborate to produce a desired response (intellectual, emotional, visceral) in a specific audience. In other instances, we deconstruct the media to expose how discordant and oddly juxtaposed images often convey covert, subversive messages. A similar writing task involves analyzing a TV

show, a commercial, or a talk show. While these useful and entertaining activities are valuable in stimulating writing, more often than not they remain small pieces of a much larger syllabus or curriculum that focuses exclusively on the verbal, relegating the visual to second place. For this reason, we offer specific strategies and ways of thinking about the relationship(s) between the visual and verbal realms of communication that more fully recognize their connections, and we examine and use them in our writing—and, by extension, in every—classroom.

We base this book on three premises:

1. In the development of literacy, as in life experiences, image precedes language.
2. We live in an increasingly visual world.
3. Teaching practices can capitalize on visual pedagogical connections to improve learning.

Some of the chapters point to a small part of the ever-increasing, multi-disciplinary literature now available in the visual literacy area; but in general, we have chosen to present actual practices in language and visual learning, since these inspire further research specific to our own practices and disciplines. To emphasize the need to examine our disciplinary objective, the activities described also demonstrate how to adapt language and visual arts pedagogy across disciplines and how much we can learn from the practices of other disciplines. Since language learning is the key to all disciplinary meaning making, we have included two guest-written chapters, one describing how content leads writing, even in a writing classroom, and another showing how writing enlarges understanding of content. Both chapters rely on visual content, and both demonstrate how such content can motivate students' performance and their engagement.

The chapter activities lead students to the sources of their writing and language abilities (metaphors, mental images, problem-solving algorithms, culturally coded responses). These visual-verbal practices are also consistent with current domain research to allow students access to information in accordance with their dominant and preferred styles of learning. Students come to understand how to use the visual productively for their own benefit as well as to communicate within specific environments for specific purposes. While the visual activities meet student-specific objectives, the chapters also provide teachers across the curriculum and at many educational levels with strategies that employ visual-based pedagogy to connect classroom learning objectives with larger curricular learning objectives.

The book is meant to be used as a guide, a catalyst, and a prompt.

We suggest that you jot responses in the margins, on blank pages, or in your own journals, sketchbooks, or notebooks as we did in reading each other's chapters. We make our reactions explicit in the commentary following each chapter. In these supplementary sections, we wanted to exemplify how those specifically trained to apply writing techniques across the disciplines can transfer visual techniques to their classes and those of their colleagues. We invite you to do the same.

In Chapter 1, Eric Hobson establishes many of the themes that reappear throughout the text and expands on our major premises:

1. Writing and the arts (broadly defined) share much in their approaches to composing and manipulating the messages unique to their discourse communities.
2. Teachers of writing should adopt methods employed by teachers in other disciplines in order to expand their understanding of the kinds of communication contexts in which students must operate.
3. The affective dimension, represented in part by teachers' and students' personality preferences and predominant learning styles, plays a vital role in education processes.

In Chapter 2, Joe Trimmer takes a common activity in the English language arts classroom and turns it—and the structure of the class—on end. Who hasn't used a picture of a painting as a stimulus to writing? But how many of us have used postcards, the quintessential linking of picture and word, to engage students in a whole course of reading, writing, researching, and speaking? With its emphasis on collaboration and its student-centered pedagogy, this classroom-focused chapter shows how we can breathe new life into some of the visuals and writing practices we may already use.

If Trimmer's article moves students from the classroom to the museum, in Chapter 3, Pam Childers reverses the process. Again, it is not uncommon for teachers to turn to a museum or a similar resource for student learning, but what do you do once you have the students in the building? Not only does this chapter offer suggestions for actively engaging students in observing and writing, it goes further to focus on using art to motivate those who may be more visual (or metaphoric) than their verbal peers. Through her emphasis on student drawing and poetry, Childers shows that "All subject matter benefits from placing it within a visual and/or cultural context."

Chapter 4 moves from inside the museum and its art collections to a multipurpose discussion of the building itself. When she was team teaching a course in postmodern architecture, Joan Mullin

found that students tended to write boring, formulaic, unsupported papers about the buildings they were studying. Part of the problem was the difficulty of learning the vocabulary of architecture, but there was also the fact that students couldn't or wouldn't break away from their narrow views of how they thought a paper should look. She asked students to describe the *footprint* of two very different buildings (including a tour) and then had them compare these buildings to two different ways of structuring papers. Not only did students learn how to write, Mullin argues, they also learned the subject matter. The chapter further suggests, however, that this use of buildings transfers most successfully to writing classes where a physical tour helps students internalize the integration of written structure, organization, transition, audience, and content.

Moving away from the writing and art history class, Chapter 5 examines the use of visuals across the secondary and postsecondary curriculum. Building on her experience as a nationally recognized resource person for writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) programs, Pam Childers describes how a visual-verbal approach to writing can open doors and inform instruction in areas such as art, biology, history, mathematics, English as a second language (ESL), and English. The discussion for each subject area presents classroom-based activities and assignments designed to foster students' ability to use multi-sensory/visual-verbal approaches to problem-solving and writing.

Following on the writing perspective of earlier chapters, Richard Putney, our second guest author, shows in Chapter 6 how observing, creating visuals, and responding to them in writing can teach content in a history course or in any class where cultural contexts open a way into learning course material. His course on the monuments of Gettysburg values the iconography and sculpture of the late 1800s, but it also helps students to see how attitudes toward the Civil War, toward death, and toward monuments shape what we see—and how we interpret what we see—today.

Chapter 7 moves students a step closer to understanding how our communities and our times shape our knowledge and our interpretation of the world. In an attempt to capitalize on a personal preference for associating names with visual cues, Joan Mullin discovered a valuable way to motivate and involve students in their own and in other's construction of the world. Her method uses crayons, colored pens and pencils, wrapping paper, ribbon, glitter glue, and various other pieces of stuff that might seem more appropriate to an elementary school activity, but it was devised specifically for college students of all ages. Mullin's classroom practice allows students to access content by employing their various individual learning styles, teaches students about content, audience, and interpretation, and, finally, creates a

sense of community. It was recently (and successfully) tried with a high school class.

Finally, in Chapter 8 Eric Hobson leads readers through a faculty development workshop that explores the use of the visual in instruction. The exercises he presents transfer successfully to the classroom and will give students various options for navigating the often frustrating invention, development, and revision stages of writing. Readers can participate by jotting reactions and notes on a separate sheet of paper. They can also invite their colleagues to think about how these activities can stimulate learning in their classrooms.

In the materials that accompanied the NCTE resolution passed in Chicago, the resolution committee wrote that “Teachers and students need to expand their appreciation of how people gather and share their information. Teachers should guide students in constructing meaning through creating and viewing nonprint texts.” We fervently believe that this also applies to us. As the resolution committee eloquently stated, “To participate in a global society, we continue extending our ways of communicating. Viewing and visually representing (defined in the NCTE/IRA Standards for English Language Arts) are a part of our growing consciousness of how people gather and share information.” We invite readers to share ideas with us and with colleagues, because we hope to continue making hands-on activities like these available as we face our increasingly visual future together.