Seeing is Believing

Summary

You’ve heard that a picture is worth a thousand words, but which words? What are the images we see daily – in magazines, on billboards, on TV – really trying to tell us? Pictures and other visual elements can pack a lot of rhetorical punch, enhancing verbal arguments or making arguments of their own. This lesson gives students some tools for unpacking visual rhetoric in advertising and politics.

Objectives

In this activity students will:

- Identify the visual arguments made by advertising images.
- Notice visual allusions and determine their significance.
- Be aware of the appearance of text as well as its content.
- Evaluate visual rhetoric in ads from the 2008 presidential campaign.

Background

We think of rhetoric, the study of argumentation, as having to do with words — writing, debates, oratory. When someone’s all words, we dismiss their “empty rhetoric.” But you can make an argument without ever opening your mouth. Visual rhetoric is the study of how images communicate messages. Advertisers and politicians, in particular, make use of visual rhetoric, carefully choosing images, colors, fonts and design to get their points across.

You can introduce the idea of visual communication to your class by talking about physical presentation. Would they wear the same thing to a job interview that they wear to a party? What do they think if someone has pink hair or multiple piercings? What would they think if you, the teacher, were wearing flip-flops, or if one of their peers were wearing a tuxedo? Examples like this can get students thinking about the nonverbal messages they send and take in.

Materials

1. Student handout #1, Cigarette Ads.
2. Student handout #2, Obama Fonts.
3. Steven Heller blog post, “To the Letter Born.”
4. Internet access to show McCain-Palin ad and Obama-Biden ad.

Procedure

Print a color copy of student handout #1. Students can also look at the handout online if they have Internet access. A black-and-white copy will make the assignment more difficult. Only one copy is necessary, since each group of students will examine one page of the handout.
Set up a classroom computer so you’ll be able to show the political ads in Exercise #3.

Print enough copies of student handout #2 for each student or group to have one. (This can also be in color, but it’s not necessary.)

Print enough copies of the Heller blog post for each student. This can also be assigned as homework prior to class.

**Exercises**

**Exercise #1 – Advertising Images**

*To the teacher: Cigarette ads are rich in visual rhetoric. The ads in the student handout have been chosen because they represent common tropes from cigarette advertising. Your students will most likely find that the visual images prompt them to think of certain characteristics in connection with each brand: Parliament = wealth, worldliness and exoticism; Newport = fun and successful social interactions; Marlboro = masculinity; Lucky Strike = coolness; Kent = class and status; and Eve = femininity.*

Break students into six groups. Assign each group one page of cigarette advertisements from student handout #1. Have students look closely at the visual (not textual!) information in these ads, and consider the following questions about each:

- Do people appear in the ad?
  - What do the people look like? (age, race, gender, etc.)
  - How are they dressed?
  - What are they doing?
- What is the setting for the ad?
  - Is it indoors or outdoors?
  - What can you see in the background?
- What objects appear in the ad?
- What colors are used in the ad?
  - Bright or muted?
  - Warm or cool?
- Are there other design elements that catch your eye?

Ask students to consider, in their groups, what the people, places, objects and design elements appearing in the ads might represent. Based on this visual information, have them identify what the ads say about the following questions:

- What kind of person smokes this brand of cigarette?
- How will this cigarette make you feel?
- What will this cigarette add to your life?

Have each group present their brand’s ads to the class, explaining the visual rhetoric at work in each set of advertisements.
As a class, discuss:

- Why make these claims with pictures instead of words?
- How convincing do you think these ads are? Would they be more or less convincing if the claims were made verbally?

**Exercise #2 – Beyond Pictures**

*To the teacher: Of course we know that text can convey an argument, but fonts and layout can make a visual argument even before you read the words. The visual rhetoric of text can be crucial for marketing and political advertising.*

Have students read the post “To the Letter Born” from the New York Times’ campaign blog.

Pass out copies of student handout #2, Obama Fonts. For each alternate poster, have students consider:

- How does this font differ from Gotham?
- What message does the poster send? What would you think of a candidate who used this font?

Have students discuss their conclusions as a class.

**Exercise #3 – Visual Politics**

*To the teacher: This exercise allows students to synthesize lessons from the previous exercises and apply them to images they might have encountered during the 2008 presidential campaign.*

Show students the McCain-Palin ad “Mum” and the Obama-Biden ad “What Kind,” with the sound off. For each ad, discuss how visual rhetoric comes into play. Some questions to lead discussion:

- What pictures or videos does the ad use to show each candidate? What are they doing? What facial expressions are they making? How does that affect how you view them?
- What people appear in the ad, besides the candidates? What do they look like? What are they doing? Why did the campaign choose to show these people?
- What colors are used for each candidate? What effect does that have?
- What backgrounds does the ad use? What associations do you have with those backgrounds?

After discussion, play the ads through with sound. Ask students to describe how being able to hear each ad changes their interpretation.

**Optional Activity**
Have students examine ads from the “Vintage Cigarette Ads” Flickr pool. After they’ve browsed the ads, discuss how the images differ from modern cigarette ads. From the images alone, ignoring the text, can they determine changes in the cultural attitude toward smoking? Can they determine changes in what people value? How do vintage ads express the qualities they discussed in the earlier cigarette ad exercise – wealth, femininity, masculinity, coolness? How does this differ from modern representation of these qualities?

About the Author

Jessica Henig earned her BA in history of science from Smith College and her MA in English from the University of Maryland. While at Maryland, she taught digital literature and rhetorical writing. Prior to joining the Annenberg Public Policy Center in May 2007, she worked for the National Academies Press. She has also worked for the National Institutes of Health and as a freelance researcher and editor.

Correlation to National Standards

National Social Studies Standards

I. Culture Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of culture and cultural diversity.

IV. Individual Development and Identity Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of individual development and identity.

V. Individuals, Groups, and Institutions Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of interactions among individuals, groups, and institutions.

VI. Power, Authority, and Governance Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of how people create and change structures of power, authority, and governance.

Essential Skills for Social Studies

Acquiring Information

A. Reading Skills

1. Comprehension

2. Vocabulary

B. Study Skills
1. Find Information

2. Arrange Information in Usable Forms

C. Reference & Information-Search Skills

2. Special References

D. Technical Skills Unique to Electronic Devices

Organizing & Using Information

A. Thinking Skills

1. Classify Information

2. Interpret Information

3. Analyze Information

4. Summarize Information

5. Synthesize Information

6. Evaluate Information

B. Decision-Making Skills

C. Metacognitive Skills

Interpersonal Relationships & Social Participation

A. Personal Skills

C. Social and Political Participation Skills

Democratic Beliefs and Values

B. Freedoms of the Individual

C. Responsibilities of the Individual

National Educational Technology Standards
Profiles for Technology Literate Students

Performance Indicators

All students should have opportunities to demonstrate the following performances.

2. Make informed choices among technology systems, resources, and services.

7. Routinely and efficiently use online information resources to meet needs for collaboration, research, publication, communication, and productivity.

8. Select and apply technology tools for research, information analysis, problem solving, and decision making in content learning.

Information Literacy Standards

Information Literacy

Standard 1 accesses information efficiently and effectively.

Standard 2 evaluates information critically and competently.

Standard 3 uses information accurately and creatively.

Social Responsibility

Standard 7 recognizes the importance of information to a democratic society.

Standard 8 practices ethical behavior in regard to information and information technology.

Standard 9 participates effectively in groups to pursue and generate information.

English Language Arts Standards

Standard 1 Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary work.

Standard 3 Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies,
and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

**Standard 5** Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

**Standard 12** Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).