

# Reading the Visuals in the Middle Years

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# Introduction

*Reading the Visuals in the Middle Years* is written for teachers of students in Years 5 to 9. It provides teachers with strategies for developing students' understanding of viewing and visual texts. This book reflects the view that teaching viewing in the middle years does not require extensive reliance on a video or DVD player. Many important viewing concepts and skills can be taught by asking students to think about the uses of visual language in the world around them and through the use of still images.

The book is divided into five sections.

Section 1 develops students' awareness of the fact that there is a visual language, much of which they understand implicitly and use every day to communicate and interpret. This section allows students to explore the nature of visual language and the ways in which they make meaning through visual language.

Section 2 allows students to examine various aspects of body language. It extends students' understanding of visual language and the way in which it pervades social interaction. Experience has shown body language to be an engaging area of study for students in the middle years as it allows students to explore visual language in an accessible context.

Section 3 deals with the relationship between visual language and attitudes and values. It highlights the way in which conventions of visual language reflect and influence ways of thinking.

Section 4 develops students' understanding of some of the technical elements of visual texts, such as framing and composition.

Section 5 allows students to explore and critically examine the conventions of specific types of visual text.

Each section is divided into a number of units. Each unit consists of:

- key concepts
- teacher notes (Teaching the visuals)
- student activities (Now try this).

In many units the student activities include a reproducible student activity sheet.

The key concepts are a shorthand summary of the key understandings that form the focus of a unit. Teachers might find it useful to display the key concepts at the beginning of a unit and to draw attention to them throughout and at the end of a unit.

The teacher notes provide an explanation of concepts and skills and suggestions for explaining these to students.

The sections and units are generally presented in order of increasing difficulty. It is assumed that teachers will select units relevant to their students' levels of development and interest.

## Exploring visual language

The activities in this section allow students to:

- explore the widespread use of visual language and symbols in everyday life
- develop an awareness of the difference between the outward form of a symbol and its socially generated meaning
- understand that the meanings of symbols are a matter of convention.



# 1.1 Symbols and conventions

## KEY CONCEPTS

- Symbols are things that stand for or represent something else.
- The meanings of symbols are a matter of convention.

## Teaching the visuals

- Human beings communicate through the use of symbols.
- Symbols are things that stand for or represent something else.
- Oral language is an example of a symbol system, whereby particular sounds are used to stand for particular objects, actions or ideas. Written language is another symbol system. Human beings also communicate using visual symbols.
- When we interpret symbols in visual images we do so using particular meaning systems, just as we do when interpreting written language. For example, if we see a man giving a woman a red rose and infer that the man is in love with the woman, we have used the meaning system: red rose equals love.
- Creators of visual texts draw on the visual meaning systems they are familiar with to produce a visual text and viewers use the meaning system they are familiar with to interpret the text.
- These meaning systems are socially created, having been developed over time by societies. We learn the conventions of visual symbolism from our society, often unconsciously, as we grow up. Many of these conventions are so widely shared that they have come to seem natural, rather than simply conventions produced by society. Because of this and because many visual images seem self-evident and easy to understand, we often forget that when we interpret them we are applying the conventions of meaning that we have learnt from our society.
- Many of the conventions of visual language have been developed for the specific purpose of communicating ideas in visual form. The use of a tick to indicate positive achievement is one example. The use of a fade in a film to indicate the passing of time is another.
- However many other conventions used to interpret visual texts are drawn from the conventions used in everyday social interaction. These include facial expressions, body language and clothing, all of which are also examples of symbol systems. These are explored in more detail in section 2 of this book.



## NOW TRY THIS

See activity sheet 11

### Flags

A flag is a visual symbol designed to communicate ideas about a country. Ask students to choose a country, research its flag and produce a poster explaining the flag to the rest of the class. The poster should include:

- the meanings of the colours and any symbols on the flag
- the history of the flag: when and how it was developed.

Students might also research any changes that have occurred to the flags they have chosen and the reasons for these changes.

### Researching a visual language

Form students into groups of two or three. The group's task is to research and report to the rest of the class on one of the visual languages below or another visual language of their choice approved by the teacher.

- Semaphore flag signalling system
- Maritime signal flags
- Auslan (Australian sign language)
- Aircraft interception signals
- Road traffic signs
- Aircraft marshalling signals (used at airports to guide in planes)
- Shipping navigation aids
- Umpiring signals used in a particular sport
- The insignia of rank in an armed force
- Dog obedience training
- Sheepdog commands

The report should encompass the following:

- the purpose of the language
- the situations in which the language is used
- how and why the language was developed
- some of the main features of the language (such as the use of particular colours or hand signals).

Students might illustrate their reports using visual aids or acting out messages or signals that form part of the visual language they are reporting on.

### Visual diary

Ask students to make a note of symbols they encounter on the way to or from school for one week. At the end of the week students can form a group with two or three other students, pool their findings and create a poster for the rest of the class illustrating the symbols the group noted, where and why they are used and their meanings.