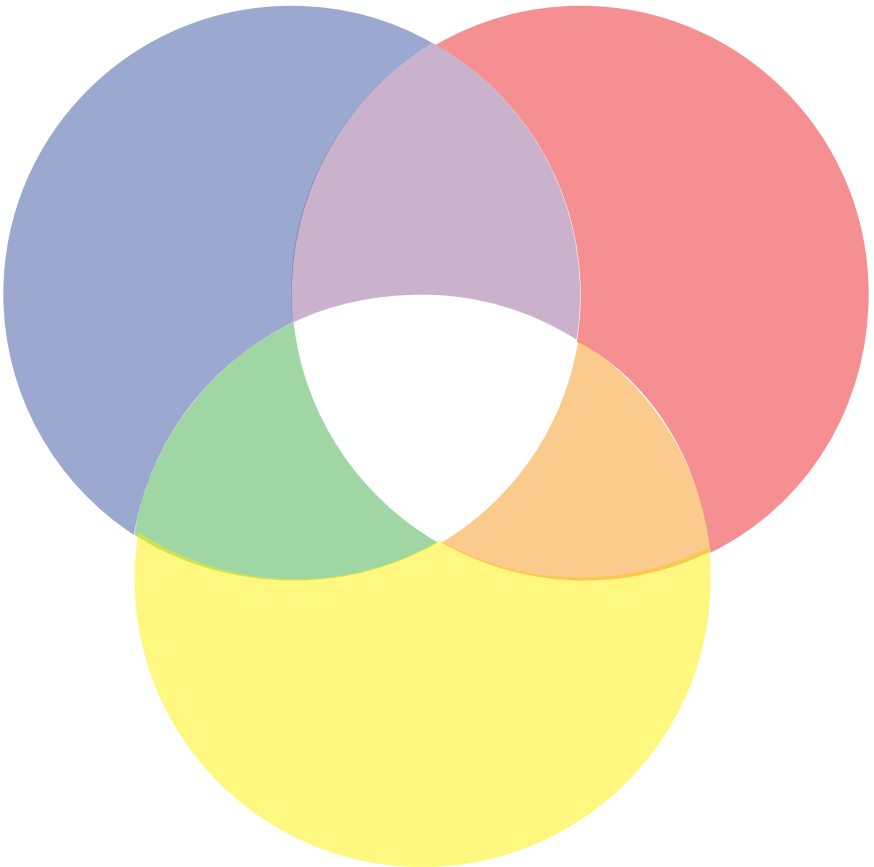


# Why Design Works

The Psychology and Visual Rhetoric behind Design



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# Contents

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Introduction . . . . . 3

Rhetoric and Visual Rhetoric . . . . . 3

    Brief History of Rhetoric . . . . . 3

    Rhetoric and Visual Rhetoric Today . . . . . 4

Perception . . . . . 5

Color . . . . . 7

    Using Color Combinations . . . . . 7

    Using Colors in Context . . . . . 8

Visual /Verbal Communication . . . . . 10

    Using Visual and Verbal Communications Together . . . . . 10

    The Interaction of Visual and Verbal Communications . . . . . 11

Conclusion . . . . . 12

Colophon . . . . . 13

References . . . . . 14

# Introduction

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Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. It is a common saying, but when it comes to design it is not particularly helpful. A designers job is to create something that people will find visually appealing, for whatever reason, but since beauty is subjective how is this even possible. What is it about design which makes it more, or less, appealing? Why do people tend to like certain designs more than others?

## Rhetoric and Visual Rhetoric

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Before understanding why visual rhetoric works, it is important to, more or less, understand visual rhetoric. To begin to understand visual rhetoric one has to understand rhetoric. The same things that make rhetoric effective can make visual rhetoric effective.

### Brief History of Rhetoric

In my experience, when people think about early rhetoric their mind immediately goes to ancient Greece and the time of Aristotle. While the word rhetoric was not heard until the fifth century (Sansone 2012) the concept of rhetoric existed long before. Before the time of the ancient rhetoricians there was visual rhetoric. Before the written word cultures used pictographs to write. Consider cave paintings for example, what are they if not a visual representation of an ancient culture? The earliest forms of writing were pictographic, long before letter shapes people drew their ideas. Ancient Egyptians to pictographic writing a step farther and created a script of pictures which stood for ideas, syllables, or even letters. As time passed writing with pictures fell away and letterforms began to emerge. Eventually the Greek alphabet came into being (Ullman 1963).

At the point that writing was introduced in Greece rhetoric was being practiced as an oratory craft. Those who were first considered rhetoricians practiced the art of speaking persuasively. One of the most familiar names among these early rhetoricians is

Aristotle who defined rhetoric as “the faculty of observing or discovering in every case presented the possible means of persuasion.” (Sansone 2012) In this classical time rhetoric was a presentation of an argument which a rhetorician would present, attempting to convince the audience to support a specific viewpoint. It was not only the presentation of the rhetorician’s view that a audience would base their judgment on but also how well that view aligned with their beliefs, how much the audience already knew about the subject, and how the audience perceived the presenter (Hill 2004).

## Rhetoric and Visual Rhetoric Today

In much the same way as early communication, today we still use pictures to convey ideas, through things like arrows and pictographic signs (Ullman 1963). Though this early form of communication was in a sense visual rhetoric the official concept of visual rhetoric is fairly new. The term visual rhetoric has become commonly used only in the last 50 years (Olson 2007).

The newness of the concept of visual rhetoric exemplifies how much our concept of rhetoric is still changing. At present the concept of rhetoric has evolved beyond only oration or written discourse to include the visual realm and to the point that one could argue that everything is rhetoric. In fact there I have seen many English classes which have embraced exactly that idea. The idea that whether an advertisement on television or the clothes we wear, on some level everything is trying to convey a certain message about what the perceiver should believe and thus is rhetoric. For example, if a girl wears a dress she is showing that she is feminine, whether consciously or otherwise. For the sake of this guide I am limiting my definition of visual rhetoric to purposeful use of images or design meant to convince an audience to a specific idea or action; this could be the design of a book cover meant to convince consumers to buy a book, an advertisement meant to convince consumers to buy a product, or some form of visual representation meant to convince viewers to feel a certain way about a topic (e.g. a picture of diseased lungs meant to discourage smoking).

Akin to the way that we still use pictures to convey ideas, we still use many aspects of ancient rhetoric today; including the

three rhetorical appeals. Whether in the classical sense of rhetoric or today’s when someone is actively trying to convince an audience to take on a particular view the same approach is generally effective in both verbal and visual rhetoric. The three rhetorical appeals may have originated in ancient Greece but modern rhetoricians find them very valuable. The three appeals separate the way a rhetorician appeals to an audience into three categories, ethos, pathos, and logos. Ethos, or the ethical appeal (or appeal through credibility), is how well the rhetorician appeals to the audience, whether the audience trusts their judgment and/or whether the audience believes the rhetorician to be truthful. Pathos, or the pathetic appeal, is an appeal to the audience’s emotions. Logos, or the logical appeal, is an appeal through logic using facts to support the rhetorician’s viewpoint. Here I use the word rhetorician, but it can easily be substituted for writer, designer, company, person, or a myriad of other words representing the person who holds the view and is trying to convince the audience. These three appeals are important to combine and use in any form of rhetoric because together they make a very strong persuasive argument. Emotional appeals are stronger in the short term and more likely to make an audience member act on an idea, but the rush of emotion can fade and that supporter can be lost. On the other hand a logical appeal can be more likely to convince the audience in the long term, but they may not be motivated to act (Hill 2004). Meanwhile, without an appeal through credibility the audience will not listen to the rhetorician in the first place.

## Perception

The three rhetorical appeals can influence a way an audience perceives a topic. For example, ethos is directly related to the way the audience perceives the rhetorician and their credibility. Perception is important, the way an audience comprehends the message can be altered by the way it is presented.

The more ‘present’ something is the more effect it will have on an audience. Statistics are great for logical appeals but hearing about millions of starving children is very different than seeing

images of a starving child and the emotion it evokes. A photograph also is more tangible than a statistic, a photograph proves that starving child exists (Hill 2004). Consider an ASPCA (American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) commercial, they use statistics about millions of dogs suffering but the part people remember is the images, the faces of the tortured animals. It is necessary to leave the audience remembering some portion of the argument. If an audience cannot remember an opinion or why it is important they are not likely to be swayed (Hill 2004). The ASPCA wants to make a permanent impression of the viewer combination of images, text, and Sarah McLachlan song *In the Arms of an Angel* are all added together in the hope that the next time an audience member thinks about adopting an animal the commercial will come to mind and they will rescue a shelter animal. While logic may convince an audience, emotion will drive them to act. Which of the following do you think is more effective?

*“The owner was intentionally starving her to death; she was skin and bones.”*  
(ASPCA n.d.)

OR



(Davis 2008)

Now the question is, which is the visual rhetoric? The picture, obviously. Visual rhetoric appeals primarily through emotions simply because the idea is represented visually. People react more logically to text and emotionally to visuals by nature (Hill 2004).

Something other than the three rhetorical appeals that can effect perception is physical context. A dark grey may appear light in comparison when placed on an even darker background (Meier, et al. 2012). A designer has to be aware of how different appeals or color interactions can influence the way the audience will perceive both the design and the message it conveys.

## Color

Everyone has different colors that they prefer. If you asked a group of people what their favorite color is, you would surely get a variety of answers. There are some generalizations that can be made about colors though. For example, people are more relaxed around lighter colors, and more likely to be excited around more saturated colors (Deng, Hui and Hutchinson 2010). Brighter colors can also draw more attention (Aslam 2006). General associations can also be applied to specific colors. Blue, for example, tends to be associated with freedom and openness, while red is associated with danger and mistakes. As a result if a designer wanted to motivate a viewer to try to work towards something they may want to use blue, but if the designer wanted to try to motivate the viewer to avoid something red may be the right choice (Mehta and Zhu 2009). Not only can the colors influence the audience, products that colors are associated with can influence the audience. From a food standpoint, blue is associated with healthier foods, dairy, and deserts while red is associated with pizza and meat dishes or green is associated with vegetables and health foods (Aslam 2006). I am using food because it illustrates my point, imagine broccoli in a red bag, does it not seem wrong somehow? Colors can also have associations based on holidays attached to them—e.g. red and green together are Christmas colors and always will be—it is worth considering (Aslam 2006).

### Using Color Combinations

It is not only colors by themselves to consider but their combinations, like with red and green together. Most images are not a single color, instead they tend to be a combination of two or more colors or shades. Attempt to think of a single example of a logo, or advertisement, or any visual representation that was a single color with no shading. It does not exist. Multiple colors are necessary to get a point across, if only black text on a white background the two separate shades are necessary to make the text readable. Black text on a black background would be pointless, as such a singular color is pointless from a design perspective; with some very rare

exceptions I am sure. As such, it is equally, if not more, important for a designer to consider how people may respond to colors in combination with each other, rather than a singular color.

As with everything else in design color combination preferences are rather subjective. However, There are multiple theories about what colors look good together. Many people think colors which are similar look good together, this is a visual coherence perspective. A visual coherence perspective is the idea that images should have unity and look as though there is some visual connection within the image or design beyond chance, that the colors should be complimentary or similar. This idea that things should look like they belong together is one of the more popular themes in color coordination. In a study where participants were asked to design a pair of Nike shoes—by choosing the colors they thought different portions of the shoes should be—people tended to choose various shades of the same color (Deng, Hui and Hutchinson 2010).

On the other hand, some people used a contrastive color to highlight one element. This approach is more aligned with the idea that visuals should be designed in a way that promotes optimal stimulation. In an optimal stimulation approach images are designed in a way which promotes visual complexity through the use of distinct colors; such as the combination of **red and yellow**. I would like to note that the use of distinct colors is different than the use of opposite or contrasting colors. Opposite colors—like **yellow and purple**—can be seen as clashing (Deng, Hui and Hutchinson 2010).

## Using Colors in Context

Context is everything. One color can cause multiple reactions among viewers based on how it is used. Red is a fantastic example, based on the situation red can motivate avoidance or approach behavior. Red could mean danger or it could mean romance. In a study on walking speed approach to an individual wearing a red shirt in a romance-related vs. a achievement related context, it was found that when the context was romance-related people approached the individual wearing a red shirt more quickly. However, when the context was achievement related, the walking

speed significantly declined. (Meier, et al. 2012)

Much in the same way, images can have a cultural context applied to them which helps the designer better guess what thoughts or feelings the image may evoke. An image of the Twin Towers, for example, is highly recognizable and reminds all United States citizens of the same moment in history (Hagan 2007). Colors can have similar cultural contexts. As an example, purple is a color of love in China, South Korea and the USA, but in Mexico it is related to anger and envy and in Japan it has connotations of sin and fear. In China, South Korea, and Japan purple is also considered as expensive (Aslam 2006).

An example which is capable of embodying both situational and cultural context is the heart shape. Rationally, this image is not actually a heart, but over time humans have created a socially constructed meaning around the shape relating it to romance. In this way, a red heart would mean something very different than a red arrow or circle, which people may perceive as a warning—especially in the case of an arrow which could be perceived as a directional command. To take it a step further a similar sentence in red may have very different meanings if it were related to a heart. The heart could provide the psychological context necessary to relate the color to romance, while utilizing a cultural context. If a designer were to utilize contextually relevant images—such as a heart—they could potentially have an easier time getting their ideas across, especially when using imagery and text in combination. Take the word dangerous for example, depending on the context something, or someone, being ‘dangerous’ could be hyperbole or actually dangerous. For example,

*“He’s dangerous.” vs. “He’s dangerous ♥.”*

In this case a simple heart can give a lot of context, the reader could probably imagine who would say that and in what context; for example what comes to mind for me is a flirty teenage girl talking to her friends. On the other hand, without the heart the message could seem threatening. This view would probably be illustrated even without the red color—i.e. He’s dangerous.” vs. “He’s dangerous ♥.”—however the red color further illustrates the potentially threatening vs. potentially romantic nature of the text.



# Visual /Verbal Communication

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The combination of text and imagery can be powerful, but it can also be difficult. Alone text invokes imagery or imagery invokes a story, but the designer cannot fully control either. By combining text and imagery the designer can guide the viewer's perception more fully than if the designer was working solely in imagery or text. Because visual rhetoric is so thoroughly based in emotional appeal, the combination with text—which is based more heavily in logical appeal—can help round out a rhetorical presentation.

## Using Visual and Verbal Communications Together

Visual and verbal communications can work together to improve and/or alter the meaning of a message because each mode of communication has its own strengths and weaknesses. While a designer can limit the number of unintended links a viewer may make to an image by limiting the number of objects present text can accomplish this even more effectively. Text is particularly effective because it can convey specific ideas whereas images are left for the viewer to interpret. Viewer interpretation can be influenced by personal history which can alter how a viewer may perceive the meaning of an image. Utilizing text can limit the perceived meaning of an image can help to limit the possibility the meaning of the image may be skewed by a viewer's personal experiences (Hagan 2007).

Meanwhile, in text it would take a long vague description to detail a room, the contents of that room, the placement of objects, and the size of both room and object within. However, with an image it is easy to show a room and the spatial relationships of the contents of the room clearly. In text it takes quite a few words to achieve the necessary information to create a cohesive relationship while one image can achieve a lot more (Hagan 2007). While visual communication can be vague because of interpretation, sometimes text can be vague in representation. It is necessary for ideas to have some sort of relationship for them to make sense. The two modes of communication together can help to cancel each other's weaknesses.

## The Interaction of Visual and Verbal Communications

The ways in which text and visual communications work together also can influence their interpretation and how an audience member interacts with the information. A fantastic example of interaction between visual and verbal communications is comic's or graphic novels. Comics imply information through the use of images and give other information by using text. In the case of comics and graphic novels text is set near the image, set on top of the image, and is replaced by images. If text is simply set near an image the two components are only loosely tied together. These loose ties allow readers to move through images and text at their own leisure; an approach which is common with magazines. For a more cohesive tie text can reference an image the reader is given direction to be pulled from text to view an image then to be placed back into text. When referencing is used it can be helpful for the reader if the designer includes a contrastive element, such as boldface, to guide the reader back to the correct portion of text. Another method of tying image and text together cohesively is by setting the text on top of the image or an image can also replace a textual element; usually a noun (Hagan 2007).

Another potential combination of text and visual elements is the transformation of text into a visual through typography. Typography can be used either in the shape of the text and the way it interacts with the image to create further meaning of the typeset itself can be used as an image element. The way a word is presented visually through typography can change the potential meaning or audience perception of the word (Hagan 2007). Take the word art for example, left in this typeface there are a myriad of possibilities of how a viewer may interpret the word. An audience member may think of Michelangelo, or da Vinci, of a painting or a statue, or maybe the viewer conjures a mental image of art supplies. With a simple word without further context there is no way to control how the audience will interpret the word. What if rather than just the word art it was graffiti art or art gallery? These word combinations give a clearer picture of what the word means, or the image that the word is meant to conjure. But what if rather than attempting to describe the art, using words like elegant or lively, the word was set in a typeface that described the word instead? In this way *art* becomes very different from **Art**, but still only one word was used. This kind of usage of combined visual/verbal communication could become very useful when space is limited.

## Conclusion

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Beauty may be in the eye of the beholder, but designers can have some idea of what the beholder might find beautiful. Based on my research I came up with a few questions, and related suggestions, for designers to consider.

- Do your colors complement each other or clash in an unpleasant way? Remember people generally prefer similar complementary colors with the possibility of dissimilar accents.
- What is your purpose? If the goal is to give the viewer a relaxed feeling use light colors, but if the goal is an excited feeling use highly saturated colors.
- What is the context? Does the red look threatening or romantic?
- How clear is your message? Is your text and images working together or is your text trying to do something an image would have more success with or vice versa?
- Are your rhetorical appeals balanced? How is this appealing to the audience and will it be potentially successful based on the message you want to send? Remember that visual rhetoric by nature is primarily an emotional appeal, is there some form of logical appeal present to round off the presentation?
- Is your typography working for or against you? Remember typography is as much of a visual element as any image.
- What do the colors you are using imply? Do they have strong connotations of another product, feeling, or object?
- Where is this going to be seen? Are there any cultural contexts to consider?
- What associations does your imagery imply? Are these acceptable associations for your subject matter?
- Does your imagery imply anything inappropriate?
- And the most important... How might my audience perceive this? Always think about your audience, they might not know things you do, or might know things you do not.

## Colophon

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For the cover I chose to create an image illustrating the relationship between colors because it is a basic art principle and what is design if not art?

I decided to layout my paper like a short guidebook/manual for designers to inform about the basics of visual rhetoric and how it applies to design. Because I decided to layout my paper in this way I thought it would be useful to break it up into sections and subsections so that particular topics are easier to find. With the breaking up of the paper I thought a short contents would come in handy just so that at first glance a designer would know if the guide would be useful to them and where to find the information they needed. I also added section breaks to make information easier to find because of the footers on the bottom of the page.

I chose to use design elements like color to illustrate my points because I talk quite a bit about how a combination of image and text can be particularly effective. By using images to illustrate my points I am also illustrating my point about using a combination of image and text. Meanwhile, I'm utilizing the design idea I talk about and making my design more effective by combining image and text.

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