

Approximately 83% of our learning is accomplished through the sense of sight yet verbal literacy seems to take the lion's share of attention when it comes to preparing to give instruction. How much more effective could one be with as much visual literacy?

What is visual literacy? Visual images are the "words" which transfer meaning from the presenter to the viewer. To be visually literate one must have an understanding of effective visual communications and be able to incorporate such communications into the presentation materials so as to successfully transfer the intended meaning/message.

Examples of literacy in visual media range from the simple but effective no smoking symbol, the X across a lit cigarette, to the slick advertising campaigns which train us quite effectively in how we should look, smell and act.

There are three key concepts that must be understood in order to achieve the optimum effectiveness with visual media. Number one is perception or how the mind receives and processes the information. Two is knowledge of the target audience. Number three is the quality and selection of materials, or in other words the suitability of the materials of the subject matter and the audience.

The process by which we take in and order information is complex yet there are generalities regarding this process which may be used as guidelines in the preparation of visual media. First and foremost is the principal of simplicity. In viewing visual educational media the mind takes in the entire image and then must sort out all extraneous material not essential to the knowledge desired to be retained. The visually literate presenter eliminates this extra mental "sorting out" by avoiding clutter, irrelevancy and poor sequence. Sequencing is an important consideration relating to perception. Presenting the material in an order, which leads the viewer to the desired logical conclusion, is important enough to make every effort to sequence the visual images properly.

Knowing the needs and abilities of the target audience is another important guideline in the production and presentation of visual media. Visual images must be within the viewer's comprehension level or else the material stands the risk of being rejected. Images, which are ambiguous or perceived as irrelevant are also outside the learners "level of aspiration", meaning: the mental task of organizing the visual elements into useful information is just too difficult. Some abstract art may fit within this category for some viewers.

The third key concept in the pursuit of visual literacy is the suitable choice of materials. Although simplicity is the cornerstone of visual literacy, the presentation must be produced and presented in such a way that the viewer will be attracted to and engaged with the subject matter.

Today's learner is exposed to the high production standards via television and film. The effect of this constant exposure to quality production values is that the learner tends to take inferior production quality less seriously, no matter how much more worthwhile the actual subject matter might be. After routinely watching multi-million dollar productions the learner becomes turned off to slipshod and unprofessional looking "educational" media.

Lest the presenter-educator become thoroughly discouraged with a feeling of visual-illiteracy, just remember that the three concepts approached in this article are mere guidelines and that a presentation with any relevant visual media is more effective than one with none at all.

If you have questions or would like more information regarding visual literacy please contact Kathleen_Maher@emory.org



Radiograph of Chambered Nautilus