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What Is Visual Grammar?

1–1 *Junior Bazaar*, **designers Alexey Brodovich and Lillian Bassman, 1947.**

There is so much intelligent design in this deceptively simple image; the black-and-white photo overlaid on a bright geometric background is a neat fusion of the real with the abstract. The image of an archer is a strong metaphor for goals, focus, and precision, and the positioning of the model's left hand within the bull's-eye implies she will be successful.

Graphic designers must consider several factors simultaneously when developing a solution to a problem. Who is this for? What do I want them to know? What is the best, clearest way to say it? How can I say it in my authentic, individual voice? Increasingly, as authors incorporate images within their written texts, they need to deploy these same skills and thought processes to ensure that the images chosen enhance the material's intended message and deepen a reader's understanding. This chapter introduces an overview of how images work their magic within texts of all kinds. It also provides essential guidelines and goals for planning image use—the rules of visual grammar—that will be explained and unpacked in greater detail in the subsequent chapters.

This book defines the visual qualities of a "good" image—not as a value judgment or matter of opinion (tomato/tomahtoe) or level of taste, but as a set of criteria regarding image quality and inherent attributes, including style, content, color, and composition. The reader is urged to weigh the merits of a particular image in both formal

1–2 *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,* by Lewis Carroll, illustrator John Tenniel, 1865.

Enjoyable on its own for the beautiful draftsmanship and sense of narrative, this illustration for a children's book slyly weaves in the politics of nineteenth-century London, a reward for adult readers astute enough to pick up the cues. The unicorn is widely believed to be a caricature of liberal British politician William Gladstone, while the lion represents conservative British politician Benjamin Disraeli. The two loathed each other; in fact, Disraeli referred to his opponent as "that unprincipled maniac."

terms and the more subtle emotive responses that it elicits from a viewer. Is this picture compelling/alluring? Do you care about it? What if we took it out? Would you miss it?

If that sounds like a tough call to make, it really isn't. Most people, even those without formal design training, have an instinct—a gut feeling—for what constitutes a "good" picture. Like the famous definition of pornography uttered in 1964 by US Supreme Court justice Potter Stewart, we know it when we see it. The good image moves us in some way; it makes something clear; it makes us stop and think; it exposes a hidden truth. It is, in some capacity, memorable. It is never generic. Oftentimes it is also unexpected, presenting us with a visual we didn't anticipate and that we enjoy even more for the pleasant surprise.

A set of images chosen with an underlying philosophy in mind will always communicate more forcefully than a group of images selected without a clear idea of how they will best support the text. The process is by no means an exact science, nor is there a right or wrong way to go about it. Some trial and error is always called for, but a successful conclusion—a set of images that enhances the written content of your work—is well worth the effort. As global

1–3 *Time* **magazine, photographer David Burnett, 1984.**

This image captures the complete and utter agony of US Olympic runner Mary Decker, who was poised to win the gold in the three-thousand-meter final in 1984 in Los Angeles when she collided with another runner, fell, and didn't finish the race. Her heartbreak is written large on her face and even her body language as she looks help-lessly at the finish line she didn't cross. The raw human emotion of the mo-ment captured in this perfectly timed shot makes the image unforgettable.

visual culture becomes increasingly image based, it's paramount for authors to supplement their texts with the sort of pictures that will delight readers and draw them in.

Design must attract, frame, and impart. Notice that the first part of that formula is attract. Only when a reader has been attracted can an author impart whatever information they hope the reader will take away. If you can't draw attention for the split second needed to make someone want to stick around and see what you have to say, you've lost them. Images provide this magnetic function, arousing curiosity and piquing interest, because visuals, as noted earlier, are taken in more rapidly than text, which must be read to be under-stood. Images evoke mood, feeling, and tone instantly and leave a

1–4 *Life* magazine, photographer Larry Burrows, 1965.

This image puts a viewer directly into the claustrophobic confines of an army helicopter with a dying pilot. The adrenaline and horror of the moment is plainly etched on the crew member's face at left. The photograph is a gut punch illustrating the fear and tragedy of combat, made all the more effective through journalistic black-and-white photography and a dramatic swirling composition. Notice how the wounded man's arms, the gunner's arm, and his weapon are all left-to-right downward-facing diagonals.

By LARRY BURROWS in VIETNAM
WITH A BRAVE CREW IN A DEADLY FIGHT
Vietcong zero in on vulnerable U.S. copters

In a U.S. copter in thick of fight— a shouting crew chief, a dying pilot

APRIL 16 · 1965 · 35¢

viewer hungry to know more. If your reader is a fish, images are the bait you use to reel them in.

The high-wire act of combining different types of images successfully—illustrations, photos, charts, and graphs—becomes a far simpler activity when there is a well thought-out blueprint in place for their functionality, both individually and as they contribute to the larger narrative. It's best to begin the image selection

↦ **1–5** *Irak+Ich*, designer Tarek Atrissi, 2012.

The narrative oddness of this cover photo practically dares a reader to buy the magazine. Why is this older gentleman leaping and apparently shouting? What's with the stuffed animal in his left hand? Does he always dress like that when he strolls into the desert? Whimsical, mysterious images like this are bait that captures readers' curiosity and reels them in to read the text.

↘ **1–6** *Six Girls in Search of Shelter*, Stenberg Brothers, 1928.

Vladimir and Georgii Stenberg were Russian avant-garde Soviet artists during the late 1920s, best known for their film poster designs. "Ours are eye-catching posters," Vladimir explained, "designed to shock. We deal with the material in a free manner . . . disregarding actual proportions . . . turning figures upside-down; in short, we employ everything that can make a busy passerby stop in their tracks." The bold but limited palette, abstract flat stripes, and rhythm of the repeated photographic faces and arms neatly illustrate this philosophy.

process with a direction—an idea of what you hope the images will contribute to your text. During the search process, don't be afraid to set off on detours if you feel inspired by an image that doesn't necessarily fit into your initial strategy. It's best to cast as wide a net as possible at first and try different image groupings before you narrow the choices down to your final selections.

Often, it's difficult to determine in advance how a particular image will function within a narrative or what a collection of pictures will say when viewed in total, but a few parameters and strategies will help narrow down the field to locate the optimal choices for any given text. Graphic designer Paul Rand wrote, "Readers of a report should be unaware of its 'design.' Rather, they should be enticed into reading it by interesting content, logical arrangement, and simple presentation. The printed page should appear natural and authoritative, avoiding gimmicks which might get in the way of its documentary character."

Why an image is good, suitable, or effective for its intended use, and *how* it communicates what it does, lie at the heart of understanding visual grammar. The examples in this book demonstrate a range of formal qualities contributing to their strong, memorable visual impact.

1–7 *The English Patient,* **by Michael Ondaatje, designer Chip Kidd, 1992.**

A book cover functions as a quick advertising poster for pages and pages of text. The imagery needs to be evocative and provide a clue to the content without trying to say everything (an impossibility, in any case). This pairing of a Cecil Beaton black-and-white photo and vivid strip of garden imagery captures many things with sensitivity: the North African desert setting of a key incident in the book, isolation of the mortally injured English patient himself, and the flashes of memory he relays to his nurse throughout the book.
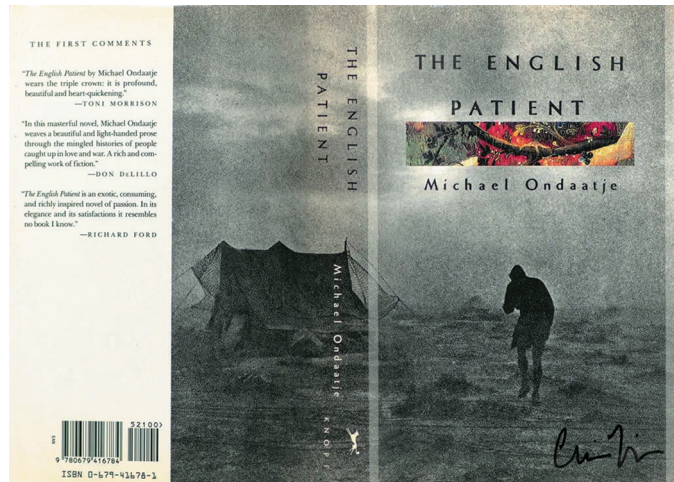
1–8 *Orchanical Apparition*, **Nathan Vieland, n.d.**

"Exploded" diagrams are familiar to most of us, but they generally show mechanical objects or architecture. This diagram is anatomically accurate even as it takes a lighthearted approach (and mixes in some mechanical parts along with the whale's natural structure). The beauty lies in the surprise of seeing something organic rendered in the manner of a technical drawing. This image strategy—a play on the expected—can bring life to dry or complex topics without distracting from the seriousness of the text.
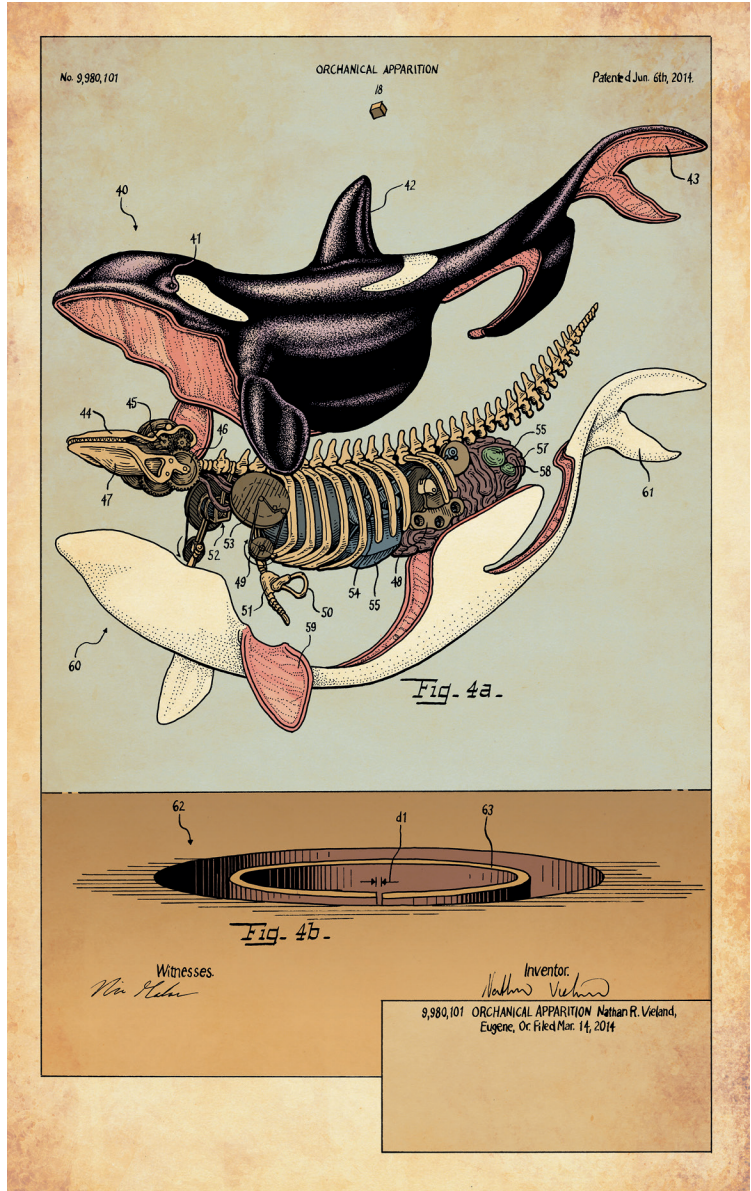
Baseline Rules of Visual Grammar

Images best support and enhance text when they:

1. Inform, delight, and intrigue

The most important role of images (after attracting the reader's attention) is to inform, delight, and intrigue. They inform by providing a visual corollary to what the author is writing about; they delight through aesthetic qualities that mirror the tone of the writing; and they intrigue by offering just enough mystery to pique the reader's curiosity and convince them to invest more time in the text. Well-chosen images are satisfying; they reward a viewer with something wonderful to look at alongside the text. They make the sheer mass of words less intimidating by supplying different entry points on the page, and offering a place for the eye to take a break and rest for a moment before diving back into gray columns of text.

2. Enhance understanding

Images expand an understanding of the written word by showing in order to tell. They assist comprehension via two main channels: getting between the lines, so to speak, by making visible what is not directly stated in words (mood, inferences, or how something feels), and/or clarifying what is directly stated (what something looks like or how it functions). Words are precise, but images are chameleons whose meaning shifts depending on the context. An image of colleagues sitting around a conference table says one thing when used alongside a text about the value of face-to-face meetings in office work, but something else when used within a text about the gender or racial dynamics of the workplace. The two separate contexts lead a reader to search for different things within the image. In the first, we might notice the degree of involvement in the conversation and how the workers appear to engage with each other. In the second, we may look to tally up the number of males versus females in this office or analyze the racial balance of the workers.
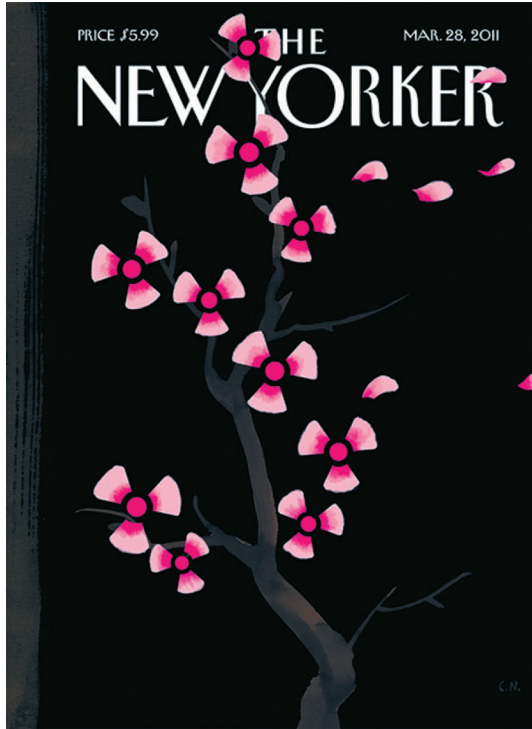
1–9 *New Yorker*, **artist Christoph Niemann, 2011 and 2020.**

In these March issue covers published almost nine years apart to the day, Niemann used objects with familiar associations to visualize upsetting current events. The 2011 nuclear disaster in Fukushima is evoked through atom-shaped cherry blossoms, a traditional symbol of spring and renewal in Japan. Both the isolation of the individual and danger to entire populations posed by COVID-19 at the beginning of the pandemic in 2020 is represented by the figure surrounded by easily toppled dominoes, with an added layer of meaning provided by the dominoes arranged to resemble a COVID virus.

3. Are specific and meaningful, curated and chosen with purpose

You can always tell when the person making your sandwich did it with love and care, or when they just slapped it together with a total lack of interest in the outcome. No one really enjoys that sandwich. Undertake the search for images with as much purposeful intent as you devoted to writing your text. Look for fresh visual examples. Images should not be generic (no one will care about them if so) but instead unique and meaningful on their own as well as suited to the specifics of the text. Allow your personal aesthetics to guide your choices, just as your writing reflects your unique voice and point of view.

With a clear strategy in mind, seek out pictures that fit your goals, and undertake the search with curiosity and an open mind as to what sort of images will best serve your purposes. Edit the options

1–10 *Black Panther*, designer Emory Douglas, 1969.

The official newspaper of the Black Panther Party was typically blunt and direct in its messaging, using its image-heavy pages to publicize the racial struggles of Black Americans and call for social justice. On this cover of *The Black Panther*, a pair of photos reinforces the provocative headline by contrasting a hungry Black child with a well-fed white police officer. In the background of the right-hand photo, the image of a Black patient being attended by a nurse suggests that the cop had something to do with the patient's injuries, without explicitly stating so.

down to the most suitable choices, sequence them with care and thought, and rest assured they will make a positive contribution to your publication.

4. Create a narrative arc in parallel with the text

Images should follow the text each step of the way, supporting the author's journey from point to point as they provide a visual narrative of their own. You can move along in a straight line or take the scenic route. In a paper or presentation of limited length, often the direct route works best (two or three well-curated images), but if you have the luxury of time and real estate, a more scenic route (several images with a wider range of visual content) will add color and flair to offer an enjoyable visual journey along the way. An image arc that develops and builds at the same pace and in the same manner as

that of the written content (soothing or stirring, circular or linear, oblique or direct, fast-paced or leisurely) reinforces the structure of the overall piece to aid the reader's comprehension.

The first or opening image should have the visual impact of a movie poster summarizing key plot points of the film in a single image; subsequent images can illustrate corresponding text points or develop a parallel narrative of their own; and the last image should provide a sense of wrap-up or completion. For example, an author could choose to show images of a bud, flower, and fruit in various stages of ripeness and decay to accompany a story about aging. The reader will quickly understand the connection between images and text. The narrative about aging is better supported by the visual analogy instead of photos of specific people growing older, which would distract from the general topic by personalizing it. Rather than focusing on the aging process, a reader might wonder, Who are these people? Is this a story about them?

5. Support through composition, color, and mood

One of the most valuable contributions that images add to a text is their ability to express and reinforce the intangible, implied meaning within the written text. This is accomplished through nuances of composition and color (along with actual image content) that evoke and establish mood and emotive qualities mirroring those of the text.

Color plays a vital role in conveying mood—a fact supported by numerous scientific studies—and can be used to guide the overall feeling of a text in whatever direction the author wants. Context subtly shapes our perception of color; for instance, blue is positive when seen on a first-place ribbon, but a piece of meat with a blue tinge is likely spoiled. Wearing red has been shown to enhance performance in sports competitions; one study found that tae kwon do competitors wearing red outperformed those wearing blue. When used in website design, blue increases perceptions of quality and trustworthiness.

Composition, too, shapes the emotive impact of images, lending visual excitement or calmness, balance or lack of it, or a feeling of

1–11 Black Women Too, designer Zuleika Arroyo, 2021.

A limited color palette, generous white space, and inventive navigation system create a welcoming user experience for a website aimed at reducing violence against Black women. Positioning the figure at the heart of the solar system set up by the orbiting blue navigation dots implies that she is an important central figure.

random chaos or firm structure. Viewers don't stop to think about these factors; they don't need time to process visual information as with written text. This is part of the superpower of images: they hit right away, operating in an almost clandestine manner to make you feel first and think second. A reader's initial emotional response to the images within a text has a close relationship to their reaction to the text content. It hardly needs to be said that boring images don't often inspire anyone to start reading. Building in these considerations as part of the initial groundwork will develop a successful set of image strategy guidelines and steer the image research process.

6. Provide visual variety along with consistency

Think of the images you choose as a set. There should be an order and logic to their selection, making it clear to the viewer that these images describe individual aspects of a larger story. A simple but effective plan is to set some limits for your image search, such as this publication will be accompanied by (fill in the blank)—black-and-white street photos, full-color photo landscapes, botanical drawings,

1–12 *Cinémathèque Suisse,* **designers Werner Jeker and Marcus Kutter, 1984.**

A sense of mystery can be created quite easily with simple visual elements. This poster features just one black-and-white photo, minimal typography, and an imposing deep black void above the man's head. Is he rising or sinking, friend or foe? The repeated photo segments call to mind the interruption when film running through a projector accidentally skips—always a jarring moment for the audience. Come to think of it, does he look a bit sketchy?

CINÉMATHÈQUE SUISSE JEAN-LUC GODARD 12 NOV. 84 AU 12 JAN. 85 CASINO DE MONTBENON LAUSANNE

or metaphoric illustrations. An overly ambitious or complicated image strategy can be difficult for the author to implement as well as hard for the reader to follow. By establishing some self-imposed ground rules to define the image quality and functionality, the author's task becomes narrower in scope but deeper in meaning, and more focused on what will bring the most additional value to their text. You can always adjust your search as needed.

An effective and interesting set of images features some variety within its consistency. It mixes up point of view, scale, balance, hierarchy, and other compositional qualities such that it doesn't feel repetitive, yet the images are clearly related to one another. Combine a long shot of greenhouses with a close-up of some of the flowers inside. Include a detail of an artisan's hands using woodworking tools along with a shot of the finished table.

When images are drawn from too many styles and sources, the main thing that gets communicated is haphazard chaos. If you decide to use photos, stick to that; don't throw in a random line drawing, unless your strategy is to use both photos and drawings together, and then you'll need to find a balanced number of each for the overall strategy to hold together. If you're using illustrations, don't mix up a variety of styles unless you do so purposefully and with confidence.

Defining Image Strategy

Authors should decide what their strategy and criteria for image selection will be before they begin to search for the images; while this may seem intimidating at first, it's merely a question of knowing your text and audience. In other words, the image selection process builds on your expertise in your field. A journalistic article can be supported by news photography or editorial cartoons, and neither is the "right" or "wrong" choice; it depends on the author's intention and the tone of the writing.

Images can either match or contrast the text; for instance, a serious message can be well served by humorous illustrations if they help get the point across. Within the basic image types of photography, illustration, and data visualization, each can have crossover functionality. For example, a photograph can be entirely documentary (I was here and took a photo of this) to support a journalistic text or digitally collaged into a photo illustration of something not possible in the real world (a man with a giraffe's head and neck), or it can be from the world of fine art with more abstract and ambiguous imagery.

1–13 *Graphis* **18, 1947.**

Form and function combine to create a compelling image. The razor-sharp calligrapher's pen point, seen at large scale, becomes a sculptural element as imposing as a skyscraper. The swirling handwritten flourishes and title bring a viewer back to the real-life miniscule scale of a pen—something familiar, to be held in the hand, that interacts with human movement as well as ink and paper to communicate ideas. You can almost hear the scratch of the nib traveling across paper.

Analyzing text with an eye toward visual grammar ensures a satisfying relationship between image content, text content, and the overall effectiveness of communication. To get started, make a list of the key words that describe your text content along with its overall tone, mood, and feeling. Then ask yourself,

1. What is the purpose of my text?
2. What do I want to say?
3. Who is the audience?
4. What do I want them to know?
5. What will help the audience understand the text?

It's helpful to have an idea of how many images are needed as you define your image strategy. This can be a ballpark figure at first. There's no sense in spending days gathering hundreds of images if you have room in your publication for perhaps five total. With that said, always pull a wider selection than you think you'll need to allow room for serendipity and experimentation in your final choices and image pacing, but don't go crazy. If an image doesn't make you pause to consider it for more than a split second, move on. It didn't grab you. Remember, that is the image's job one: to attract.

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