Writing with Images

“Seeing comes before words.”

—John Berger

As members of a visual culture, we must learn how to navigate, interpret, and analyze the messages conveyed to us via imagery. Many English 134 instructors ask students to study images through a rhetorical lens, which means that students learn how images make rational arguments (logos), how they evoke an emotional response from a viewer (pathos), or how (when used effectively) images can enhance a writer’s or speaker’s credibility (ethos). Yet focusing on images in a writing course raises certain questions: How can images enhance writing? How do they affect an argument? In effect, the images permeating students’ day-to-day experiences influence how they formulate arguments.

Visual rhetoric allows us to understand both the explicit and implicit arguments that images make about our culture. Many people wrongly regard the act of examining an image as an effortless process, assuming that only a casual, quick glance is required. The sheer pervasiveness of images seems to place them outside the reach of critical reflection. Writing, on the other hand, is often regarded as something that takes careful planning and decision making to become effective. However, visuals and writing have much in common: they are intricately bound as they seek to entertain, to educate, and to persuade. Better understanding this relationship will enable you to approach the images you encounter—in advertising, in films and television, on YouTube and My Space, and even in video games—with a greater critical eye.

Readers are not persuaded by written arguments alone; thus, when an image is effectively paired with text, the reader can get a fuller understanding of an issue. As you read Fresh Voices, focus on the relationship between the images and the writing. For example, in Kris Schober’s essay, “Shine On,” he includes a photo of himself in the second-grade, and in Julianna Hein’s essay, “The Woman Behind the Weave,” she includes images of her grandmother and her work. Without these images, the audience may not be able to fully engage with both authors’ ideas. Could the content of any of the other essays be enhanced by a thoughtful integration of images?

Each photograph in this year’s collection has a purpose and an audience in mind—just like an essay, these photos can be read as texts. Examine the photographs of the Geisha paintings below, the photographs matched with each section, and the color photographs on the front and back cover. What is the purpose of each image? Who is the audience? How does the placement of each photograph relate to the content of its section?

All of the images used in this collection were generously contributed by Marya Figueroa, Angela Rezai, and Svyatoslav Markeyev.
Like writing, painting requires determining a subject, outlining, and retouching. After examining the Geisha painting above and the one on the next page, list the details that make each unique. For example, contemplate the subjects’ facial expressions, the placement of their hands, the umbrellas they hold, and how each Geisha occupies her physical environment. What is the focal point of the image? In other words, where does your eye “go” first? In addition, what messages are conveyed through the artist’s choices?