Visual codes and conventions

Carefully read each definition and examine the provided images. Make sure you understand each explanation.

Technical codes
Medium

The medium of an image is the material or techniques used to create it, for example: photograph, pencil or charcoal drawing, water colour, acrylic or oil painting, mixed media or digital image.

Camera distance

Close-up

Close-up shots direct viewers' attention to details of objects or subjects such as facial expressions which reveal a subject's emotions, details of workmanship or interesting or specific features.

Close-up shots exclude details of setting and focus the narrative actions and events of the shot on the subject. These shots invite a close, or intimate, relationship between the viewer and the subject.

Extreme close-up

Extreme close-up shots focus on a single detail or feature and emphasise either its literal or symbolic significance. For example, an extreme close-up of a subject's teeth may suggest either the clean, healthy results of a particular toothpaste, or a vampire threat.
Extreme close-ups may also reveal close details of the workmanship or features of an object.

Little relationship between the viewer and subject is invited.

Medium shots

Medium shots show subjects from a mid-distance (eg knees/waist up), with some background visible. This distance invites a relationship such as that between friends between the viewer and the subject. It positions viewers to relate to the subject in a natural way, and to feel as though they are part of the narrative.

Longer shots which show a whole subject may represent a social distance, such as one between colleagues or acquaintances, and may be used to invite viewers into the narrative.

Long shots

Long shots show the entire subject, and their context or background. These shots may represent a public relationship such as one between acquaintances or strangers. These shots position viewers as observers and distanced from the narrative.

Extreme long shots

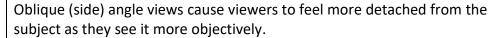Extreme long shots establish a sense of place. Subjects are shown isolated and/or at great distance, and may appear insignificant or lost. Viewers develop little relationship with the subjects of extreme long shots.

Camera angle

Eye level

Positioning the viewer at eye level to the subject, and at the front invites the viewer to relate to the subject in an equal and natural way, and to feel as though they are part of the narrative.

Oblique (side) angle views cause viewers to feel more detached from the subject as they see it more objectively.

High angle

High angle shots position viewers above the subject. They may make the subject seem insignificant, weak, powerless or less important, and position the viewer to feel powerful or dominant.

These shots may also be used to establish an overall sense of place, and to create a narrative setting that viewers may relate to.

Bird's-eye

Bird's-eye shots place the viewer high above, the subject, and create an unnatural distance between them. Viewers see the general characteristics, rather than the details, of the subject, which may seem insignificant, weak, powerless or unimportant and are positioned to feel powerful. Viewers have little sense of relationship with the subject.

These shots may be used to show subjects as part of the wider scheme of things.

Low angle

Low angle shots position the viewer below the subject, and may make the subject seem important, powerful or dominant.

The lack of detail in the background (sky or ceiling) may isolate the viewer from the narrative.

Tilted

Tilted (canted) angles use an unrealistic angle for dramatic effect, or to reflect the effect of a hand-held camera. Their unnatural angle may distance viewers from the subject.

Framing

Framing refers to what is seen in the image: the subjects placed within or left out of the frame (borders).

In an open frame, viewers may be positioned to believe that there may be people and/or objects out of frame (eg people may be looking out of frame, or there may be open doors), and that the world outside the open frame remains an important element of the narrative.

In a closed frame, viewers' attention is directed to the action and to events and ideas which are contained only within the frame.

The photographs below show almost identical images shot from different distances. Consider the effect of the distance and framing on the impact of each image.

Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USF34-9058-C

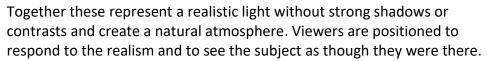Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USF34-9095

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Lighting

Three-point lighting artificially produces natural looking light by using:

- key light to provide the main, brightest, light
- fill light opposite the key light to reduce contrast and shadows
- back light to distinguish the subject from the background so they don't merge.

Together these represent a realistic light without strong shadows or contrasts and create a natural atmosphere. Viewers are positioned to respond to the realism and to see the subject as though they were there.

High key lighting

High key lighting is bright light which eliminates shadows, reveals the features of the subject and represents natural looking images. A cold or sterile atmosphere may be created by high key lighting.

Low key lighting

Low key lighting is soft, low level lighting which creates shadows, softens contrasts and hides features. It may be used to create an ominous, mysterious mood, a quiet, contemplative mood or a soft, romantic mood.

Back lighting

Back lighting is a hard, bright light directed from behind the subject. It separates the subject from the background, highlights the contrast between them and creates shadows, a silhouette or a halo effect around the subject. Because features are shadowed or hidden, back lighting may create a sense of mystery.

Side lighting

Side lighting creates strong shadows, or profile images, by directing light from one side of the subject. The shadows may create a sense of mystery or drama.

Spot lighting

Spot lights highlight and direct viewers' attention to a key element of an image. Lighting may be used to emphasise the importance of particular objects or aspects of the image.

Juxtaposition

The juxtaposition (placing together) of contrasting objects or subjects emphasises literal or symbolic differences or similarities, and may be used to represent a particular concept or perspective. For example, a group of people placed closely together may suggest a family unit or team, while a loosely arranged group may suggest disconnection.

Symbolic codes

Subject
(including props)

The objects, shapes and figures included in an image may symbolically represent ideas, values, beliefs or perspectives. Whether they are realistic or abstract images may influence viewers' responses.

Viewers may identify with subjects with whom they share characteristics, such as age or gender, or respond, positively or negatively, to particular subjects. They may feel less connection to abstract images.

Costume

Costumes, clothing and makeup may be selected to represent the time, place, culture or status of subjects. They may also symbolically represent aspects of character. They may be exaggerated to emphasise particular characteristics.

Costumes position viewers to respond in particular ways to subjects. For example, viewers may respond negatively to an image of a young person wearing a hoodie, torn jeans and a backwards turned cap and positively to one wearing a neat school uniform. Image creators appeal to viewers' knowledge of stereotypes to shape viewer responses.

Setting

The setting is where the subjects are placed, or their context. Settings may be interior or exterior and may or may not be a significant part of the narrative. Setting places viewers in the context of the narrative, positions them to relate to subjects, and may trigger emotional responses which enhance the impact of the image and its message.

Layout

Layout (composition) refers to the placement or position of subjects in an image. The 'rule of thirds' where the frame is divided into vertical and horizontal thirds, may be applied. Objects placed at/near the four intersections may be represented as more important, while those placed further from the centre may appear less important. Subjects represented as powerful or important may be placed at the top of the image, while those represented as less important may be placed lower in the image. (You may see 'rule of thirds' lines on some camera viewfinders.)

Leading lines (the lines created by fences, roads, outstretched or pointing arms, shadows or other features) may be arranged to direct viewers' attention to the main idea/object/information.

A balanced placement creates a sense of order, whereas an unbalanced or random arrangement suggests disorder or chaos.

Body language

Creators of images may represent particular ideas, attitudes or beliefs through the subject's stance, facial expression, gestures or action. Viewers' responses may be shaped by their connection to particular aspects of the body language represented.

Colour

Creators of visual texts may use the associations attached to certain colours to symbolically present information and ideas and shape viewers' responses. For example, the colour red may be associated with the concepts of love, blood or passion, green with jealousy or envy, or the environment, and black with evil.

Colour may also suggest concepts, for example a silvery blue light may suggest the idea of an alien/science fiction context. It may suggest a mood, for example, dark blue light may symbolise mystery.

Contrasting colours may be used to highlight important features by distinguishing them from the group. Contrasting bright colours may be used to suggest energy and excitement. Harmonious colours may be used to suggest unity.

Year 10 English

Written codes

Headlines

Headlines are designed to grab viewers' attention and invite them to engage with the image. They are usually presented in large, bold fonts for emphasis and may convey an advertisement's essential message.

For example,

DON'T BE LEFT BEHIND. BE A WINNER NOW.

Captions

Captions are presented in smaller, and different, font sizes to provide information and address the needs, desires and interests of the image's target audience. Persuasive language techniques may be used to convince viewers to accept the 'promise' of an advertisement. The amount of text may vary according to the 'promise' or the product.

Speech bubbles

Speech bubbles enable creators to add interest and information to images, and offer personal or expert comments, or opinions that viewers may relate to.

For example: *The Geewhiz smartphone is the greatest! My Tumblr. site is so popular now!*

Or: *I recommend the GeeWhiz smartphone for sharper images, more realistic colours and faster graphics. Ned Nguyen, Photographer.*

Language style

Style refers to the unique way words and sentences are selected and crafted for effect.

Language styles include:

- *elaborate language*
  long, complex sentences with extended or elaborate descriptions

- *simple language*
  plain language, no unnecessary details or descriptions, and short and simple sentences

- *formal language*
  impersonal language, complex sentence structures and technical vocabulary

- *persuasive language*
  emotive or exaggerated vocabulary and persuasive techniques to influence readers and shape their responses.