Visual Literacy and Design Principles

"I do think it is more satisfying to break the rules if you know what the rules are in the first place. And you can break them better."
— Robin Williams, in Design Workshop

Verbal literacy

In order to communicate well verbally, one must learn the basic components of the written language (letters, words, spelling, grammar, syntax)
What can be expressed with just these few elements and principles is truly infinite
Once in command of the skill, any individual can produce

1. an endless variety of creative solutions
2. a unique personal style

Visual literacy operates somewhat within the same boundaries
The average college student has years of verbal (and written) literacy training

Visual literacy

Like verbal literacy, can be broken down into basic elements and principles at the simplest level
Design principles or composition (i.e. unity, balance, emphasis, rhythm, etc.)
Design elements (i.e. color, tone, line, texture, etc.)
Compositional relationship of elements convey meaning
The average college student has very little visual literacy training

Visual meaning

Interpreting meaning visually can be understood as

1. The cumulative effects of the arrangement of the basic elements
2. The perceptual mechanism that is universally shared by humans

Composition

Most crucial step in visual problem solving
Compositional decisions set the purpose and meaning of the visual statement
Carry strong implications for what the viewer receives
Greatest opportunity to express the total mood the work is intended to convey
No absolute rules (only guidelines)
Breaking the rules can also result in engaging imagery (but one has to learn the rules first)
This understanding stems from studies in human perception (Gestalt theory)
Design Principles

Gestalt theory

- Visual information is understood holistically before it is examined separately
- Human beings have an inherit need to coherent patterns and organization in images

Unity and variety

- Unity can be defined as similarity, oneness, togetherness, cohesion
- Variety can be defined as being different
- Too much unity is boring and predictable
- Too much variety is chaotic
- Creating effective partnership between unity and variety is essential for interesting compositions
- Ways to achieve unity: proximity (grouping), repetition, continuation, color
- Intellectual (non-visual) unity is culture-specific
- If there is confusion or unrelated chaos, viewers will turn away and ignore the image
Emphasis

- Emphasis gives prominence to a part of a design
- Emphasis and "focal point" can be used interchangeably
- Strong focal points allow viewers easier "entrance" into the image
- Conflicting focal points cancel each other out ("emphasize everything and you emphasize nothing")
- Way to achieve emphasis: isolation, position/direction; contrast in size, shape, placement, color
Balance

- Distribution of visual weight (or importance) within a composition
- Assessed by assuming a center vertical axis, expecting to see equal weight on either side
- Most important psychological and physical influence on human perception (two feet planted firmly on the ground)
- Ways to achieve balance: symmetrical balance, asymmetrical balance (equal visual weight without mirroring along vertical axis), random balance, mathematical balance (or "grid")
- Well-designed images use only one type of balance within a composition (do not mix-and-match different types of balance)
Imbalance

- Purposeful imbalance can be a useful tool (can be used to attract our attention)
- Expresses slight uneasiness (stress), disquieting responses in the viewer
- Useful for creating disturbing images (horror movies, anti-war images)

Rhythm

- Rhythm is the result of repetitive patterns
- Like rhythm in music, visual rhythm can alter moods dramatically
- Types of rhythm: legato, staccato, alternating, progressive
Illusion of depth

- Depth can add drama and movement to a composition
- Depth perception makes images more "real"
- Ways to achieve depth: size, overlap, atmosphere, perspective, shadow

Further reading

*Launching the Imagination* by Mary Stewart
*Visual Literacy* by Judith & Richard Wilde

See slide show