

## Seeing to Learn

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Visual literacy has never been more important than in our world of viral images, social media, and near-constant screen use. Information is increasingly communicated in primarily visual forms, and research has accordingly shown that an image-rich curriculum more effectively transmits course content and increases student engagement than traditional text-based assignments and teaching methods alone.

When students use images to learn, they **perform an understanding** of the relationship between text and image and the transmission of complex ideas, unfamiliar values, and expansive datasets. Visual aids are often featured in high-stakes oral presentations and to illustrate formal writing assignments, and **scaffolding** your course with image-centric assignments paired with written or spoken elements can play an essential role not only in content mastery but also in students' preparedness to critically analyze and deploy images to support ideas and messages in their own work.

### Examples of Seeing to Learn assignments:

- Word maps or clouds generated in group discussions of particular topics can elicit visual connections between concepts, actors, and definitions that may otherwise be unclear or surprising.
- The basic verbal description of images or works of art, performed during group discussion or individually as a low-stakes writing assignment, facilitates vocabulary development and the practice of close “reading” for details and formal attributes of an object of inquiry.
- Applying a theoretical concept or argument to an image may be easier for students than performing the same analytical move on a text, and thereby scaffold higher-order thinking.
- Observation assignments that send students beyond the classroom to find and observe a particular scene or event, recording their impressions, can encourage connections between course concepts and their manifestation in the real world, while providing students opportunities to practice relevant selection.
- Storyboarding can scaffold a **high-stakes assignment**, allowing students to visually organize their thoughts and structure.
- Photo essays allow students to represent course concepts through images of their own making or finding, and demonstrate that a choice of images can represent a point of view, visual argument, or thesis.
- Individual or group presentations with visual aids are higher-stakes opportunities for students to perform their understanding of course content and should be encouraged to fluidly move between text and image.

## References

- Hutton, Deane W., and Jean Anne Lescohier. “Seeing to Learn: Using Mental Imagery in the Classroom.” *Mental Imagery and Learning*, edited by Malcolm L. Fleming and Deane W. Hutton. Englewood, NJ: Educational Technology Publication, 1983, pp. 113-128.
- Bean, John C. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011.
- Burmark, Lynell. *Visual Literacy: Learn to See, See to Learn*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision & Curriculum, 2002.

## See also

High-stakes and Low-stakes Assignments  
Performances of Understanding  
Scaffolding Student Learning