

ACTIVITY 6

VISUAL ARGUMENTS

TEACHER NOTES

This activity is for a class that is either already considering “argument” as a form in print or that is considering the possibilities of visual texts.

GOALS

In the course of this activity, students:

- build visual arguments.
- consider how visual arguments differ from print-based arguments.

TIME

This activity has an initial homework assignment that should be given a week before the assignment is due, followed by in-class discussion, a reading (as homework), further in-class discussion, and finally, a revision of the original homework assignment (also discussed in class).

LEVEL

This assignment is useful in any level of class that is considering argument and/or visual texts—but be sure that the reading is at a level for which the class is ready.

ACTIVITY

- 1 Ask students to build, as homework, a visual argument.

Tell them that there are not (yet?) fixed definitions of what constitutes a “visual argument,” so that they will have to work with what they understand “argument” and “the visual” to be—but also tell them that the visual argument they build has to stand on its own: others in class are going to respond to their arguments without an argument’s composer being able to answer questions or explain.

If you are teaching a class on argument, students will have a working definition of “argument”; if they do not have such a working definition, ask them to write informally for a few minutes to define for themselves what they consider “argument” to be.

You can give them a topic around which to build their arguments if class work and discussion leads obviously to such topics. Or you can ask them to write in response to the following prompts to help them develop ideas for their arguments:

Brainstorming a visual argument

- 1 What are 3 (or more) concerns you have—
political/economic/personal/cultural/educational/any other
adjective—now?

- 2 List any visual images that come to mind when you look at what you listed in #1...
- 3 Which images from #2 seem most compelling to you? why?
- 4 What colors do you associate with what you listed in #1?
- 4a Why (do you think) do you associate the colors you listed in #4 with what you listed in #1?
- 5 What associations might other people make with the images you've listed in #2?
- 5a What might you do with the images you listed in #2 to help other people make similar associations as you do? (and what sort of people do you want to understand your associations, anyway? that is, who is your audience for this imagery?)

So that they do not spend too much time constructing their arguments—because the point is for them simply to get something made to start discussion—you might want to limit what they build to the size of a piece of posterboard or a single-computer screen, depending on the media to which they have easy access. Tell them to construct arguments that fit on a single screen or page—arguments that use no words, only photographs or drawings.

The audiences for these arguments is the class.

- 2 When students bring their visual arguments to class, have them arrange them around the room, and put a sheet of paper (with their names at the top) next to what they have built.

For approximately 30-45 minutes, ask the students to move around the room, looking at the visual arguments. On the sheets of paper next to the arguments, they should write down what they think the argument of the piece is, and why.

After everyone has looked and responded, ask each person to read the responses to her argument, and to write her own observations, based on these questions: What did most people interpret the argument to be? What aspects of the presentation stood out most for people, and how did that shape how they interpreted the argument? What expectations did people bring to their looking, expectations that helped shape how they responded?

If there is time, ask students to pair up and compare the responses they received. Do they see any general patterns in the expectations?

- 3 For homework, ask students to read the following article, which you will have to make available to them through the reserve systems available to you:

Blair, J. Anthony. "The Possibility and Actuality of Visual Arguments." *Argumentation and Advocacy* 33 (Summer 1996): 23-39.

In this article, Blair defines “argument” formally and in a way very much dependent on the conventions of print. Because of how he defines “argument,” Blair says that he is unable to find any instances of visual argument within a range of examples he examines, although he does not rule out that visual arguments might exist.

Ask them to bring their visual arguments, as well as the written responses they received about their arguments, to the class in which you discuss the article.

- 4 After they have read the article, use whatever strategies you usually do to help the class come to a general consensus over the arguments of the reading, and then encourage discussion around the following questions (and ask them to use their visual arguments as examples to support their responses, when appropriate):
 - Does the class think Blair’s definition of “argument” is the only possible definition?
 - If they think that some of his examples are or do contain arguments, how does Blair’s definition of argument have to be modified so as to include these examples?
 - Does Blair’s definition preclude the possibility of visual argument? (That is, *can* a visual argument have premises?)
 - What might a visual premise look like? Are premises only possible when a text builds over time? Would a visual argument then necessarily have to have multiple screens or pages?
- 5 Ask students to write informally. Are they persuaded by Blair’s arguments, such that visual arguments need to take the form of argument as Blair defines it, or do they think that other forms of argument are possible, such that there can be different kinds of visual argument?
- 6 Tell students that for homework they are to revise the visual arguments they made. They can revise their arguments to try to make them fit into the form of argument Blair defines, or they can revise them to fit other definitions that have developed in class.

Ask them to write for just a few minutes, informally: first, they should state their intended argument, and then they should write about any changes in the visual argument that might help them better achieve their ends, based on their responses to Blair’s article.
- 7 Ask them to work in pairs: have each member of the pair describe what she intends to argue; then the pair should look at the feedback each received from classmates and discuss revisions that would help make the intended argument as visible and persuasive as possible.
- 8 When students bring their revised arguments to class, repeat step 2 for feedback.

After all feedback has been given, ask students to write individually in response to the feedback. What had they hoped others would understand about their arguments? How much success did they have in conveying their positions? What would they change, were they to revise again?

Then: Do they think visual arguments are possible? Why or why not? Do they think our notions of argument and persuasion need to be shifted or changed when we shift to considering non-alphabetic texts?