Analyzing Visual Documents

Key Components

Composition
- Of what elements is the visual composed?
- What is the focal point—that is, the place your eyes are drawn to?
- From what perspective do you view the focal point? Are you looking straight ahead at it, down at it, or up to it? If the visual is a photograph, what angle was the image shot from—straight ahead, looking down, or up?
- What colors are used? Are there obvious special effects employed? Is there a frame, or are there any additional graphic elements? If so, what do these elements contribute to your “reading” of the visual?

People/Other Main Figures
- If people are depicted, how would you describe their age, gender, subculture, ethnicity, profession, level of attractiveness, and socio-economic class? How do these factors relate to other elements of the image?
- Who is looking at whom? Do the people represented seem conscious of the viewer’s gaze?
- What do the facial expressions and body language tell you about power relationships (equal, subordinate, in charge) and attitudes (self-confident, vulnerable, anxious, subservient, angry, aggressive, sad)?

Scene
- If a recognizable scene is depicted, what is its setting? What is in the background and foreground?
- What has happened just before the image was shot? What will happen in the next scene?
- What, if anything, is happening just outside the visual frame?

Words
- If text is combined with the visual, what role does the text play? Is it a slogan? A famous quote? Lyrics from a well-known song?
- Does the text help you interpret the visual’s overall meaning? What interpretive clues does it provide?

Tone
- What tone, or mood, does the visual convey? Is it light-hearted, somber, frightening, shocking, joyful? What elements in the visual (color, composition, words, people setting, etc.) convey this tone?
**Contexts**

**Rhetorical Context**
- What is its main purpose? Are we being asked to buy a product? Form an opinion or judgment about something? Support a political party’s candidate? Take some other kind of action?
- Who is its target audience? Children? Men? Women? Some sub- or super-set of these groups (i.e. African American men, “tweens,” seniors)?
- Who is the author? Who sponsored its publication? What background/association do the author and the sponsoring publication have? What other works have they produced?
- Where was it published and in what form? Online? On television? In print? In a commercial publication (e.g. a sales brochure, billboard, ad) or an informational one (newspaper, magazine, gallery)?
- If the visual is embedded within a document that is primarily written text, how do the written text and the visual relate to one another? Do they convey the same message, or are they at odds in any way? Does the image seem subordinate to the written text, or is it the other way around?

**Social Context**
- What is the immediate social and cultural context within which the visual is operating? If we are being asked to support a certain candidate, for example, how does the visual reinforce or counter what we already know about this candidate? What other social/cultural knowledge does the visual assume its audience already has?

**Historical Context**
- What historical knowledge does it assume the audience already possesses? Does the visual refer to other historical images, figures, events, or stories that the audience would recognize? How do these historical references relate to the visual’s audience and purpose?

**Intertextuality**
- How does the visual connect to, relate to, or contrast with any other significant texts, visual or otherwise, that you are aware of? How do such considerations inform your ideas about this particular visual?