

*How image and text work*

**Jon Callow**



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### *Jon Callow*

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You don't take a photograph, you make it.

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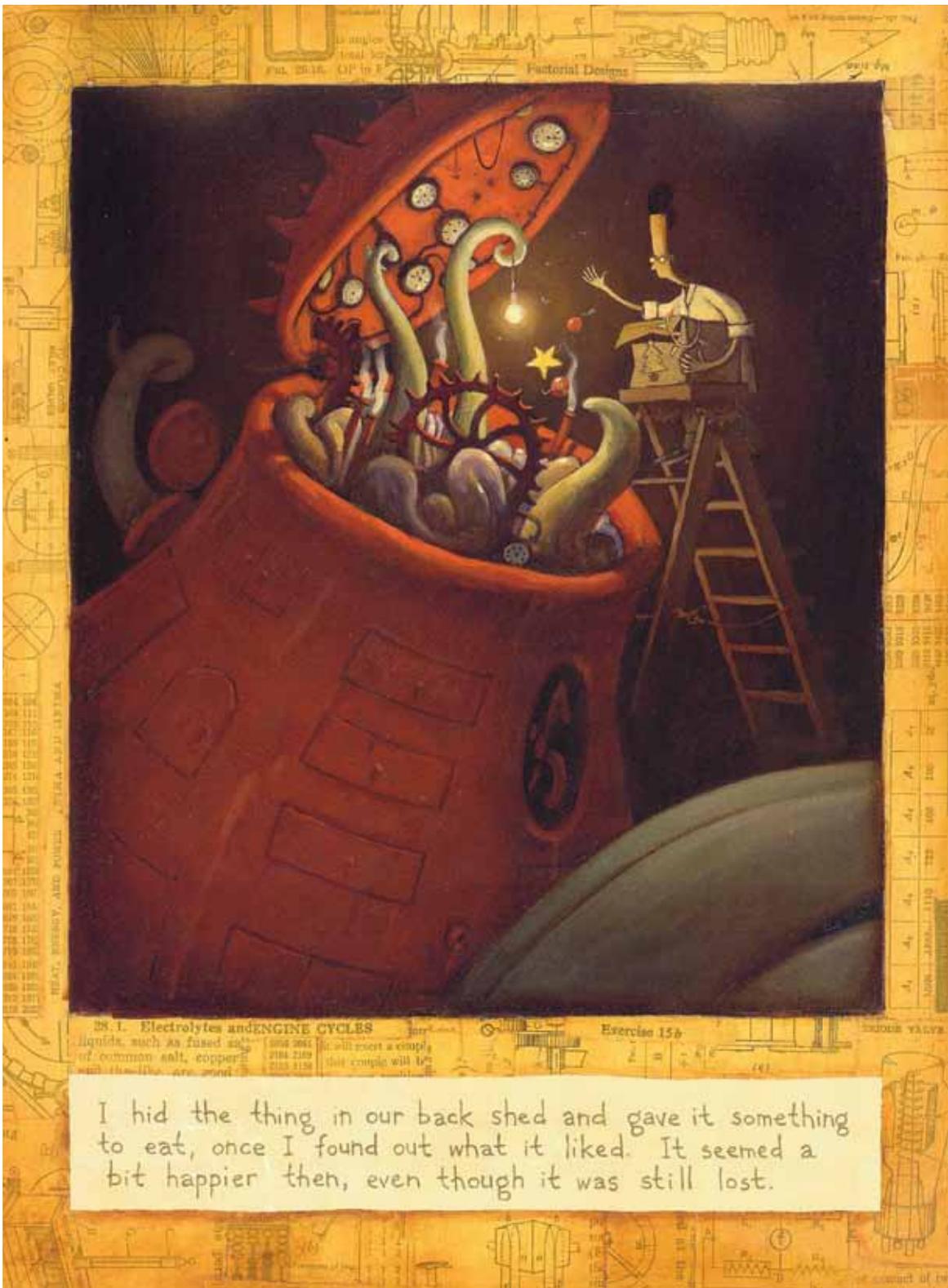
*Ansel Adams*

It's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see.

---

*Henry David Thoreau*





28.1. Electrolytes and ENGINE CYCLES  
liquids, such as fused soda  
of common salt, copper  
with the like, are used

Exercise 15b

I hid the thing in our back shed and gave it something to eat, once I found out what it liked. It seemed a bit happier then, even though it was still lost.



If you could say it in words, there'd be no reason to paint.

---

Edward Hopper

You discover how confounding the world is when you try to draw it.

---

Shaun Tan





When you photograph a face ... you photograph the soul behind it.

---

Jean-Luc Godard

Photography takes an instant out of time, altering life by holding it still.

---

Dorothea Lange



To photograph is to hold one's breath, when all faculties converge to capture fleeting reality. It's at that precise moment that mastering an image becomes a great physical and intellectual joy.

---

Henri Cartier-Bresson

## Visual texts

Visual images are hard to ignore. They pervade our waking hours and sometimes our sleep. Even when we are focusing on a particular task, our eyes are taking in all sorts of visual cues, interpreting them, choosing to notice or ignore them. Even before the advent of paper, books and computer screens, the world for most people was a visual text.

Written text has always held and will continue to hold a key place in our cultures. However many commentators note the rise of the visual as part of cultural and technological change. In one sense, the written word has to share the limelight with the visual. But do they have a closer connection than we realise?

Print is a visual text.

The type on this page  
has a visual aspect:

**the size**

*the shape*

the design

the white space.

What is the shape of text to come? Nearly everyone in Western culture is impacted by visual texts each day, learning how to respond to them and understand them in order to go about their daily lives. Educators, however, have a particular interest in understanding how visual texts work. We need to understand how to best teach our students to enjoy, engage with and critically interpret all types of texts.

The purpose of this book is to engage educators with both image and word, while at the same time acknowledging that other modes and communicative forms are part of the literary landscape. It is hoped that this book will engage you as a reader both affectively and intellectually. It seeks to provide a way for teachers to understand how images work in their own right, as well as in relation to written text. Text, in the broad use of the term, can be print, screen-based or live presentation and performance. A variety of modes can be utilised through each form, such as word, image, sound, music, movement, video and interactive elements. The term ‘multimodal’ acknowledges this variety of meaning-making resources. While all are important, and should be part of classroom experiences, this book will focus more specifically on images, and how they work, both alone and with written text.

## ***The Australian Curriculum: English***

The *Australian Curriculum: English* v.3.0 pays significant attention to multimodal texts and the role of visual images. As well as including a sub-strand entitled ‘Visual Language’, reference to multimodal texts, visual and other modalities permeates the content descriptions of the Curriculum. Appropriately, these inclusions are meant to form an integrated and coherent curriculum, seeking to ensure that students:

- learn to listen to, read, view, speak, write, create and reflect on increasingly complex and sophisticated spoken, written and multimodal texts across a growing range of contexts with accuracy, fluency and purpose
- understand how Standard Australian English works in its spoken and written forms and in combination with non-linguistic forms of communication to create meaning.

To this end, the content of the curriculum is organised into three interrelated strands:

***Language:*** knowing about the English language

***Literature:*** understanding, appreciating, responding to, analysing and creating literature

***Literacy:*** expanding the repertoire of English usage.

Each strand is developed through Content Descriptions, sequenced from Foundation to Year 10, and grouped by sub strands (see Table 1). Each of the sub-strands is intended to interrelate when planning teaching and learning experiences in the classroom.

In one sense, multimodal texts are relevant to every strand and sub-strand, whether as the basis for reading, viewing, writing and creating, talking and listening or for the development of knowledge about texts and context. At the same time, there are some sub-strands, which deal specifically with viewing, visual analysis and creation of visual and multimodal texts. Specific focus areas within a sub-strand are termed threads.

The following table highlights a selection of sub-strands and threads that are particularly relevant when focusing on visual and multimodal texts. However, these are not exhaustive and teachers will find that nearly all sub-strands will apply to some aspects of multimodal texts.

Language	Literature	Literacy
<b>Language variation and change</b>	<b>Literature and context</b> How texts reflect the context of culture and situation in which they are created	<b>Texts in context</b> Texts and the contexts in which they are used How texts relate to their contexts and reflect the society and culture in which they were created
<b>Language for interaction</b>	<b>Responding to literature</b> Expressing preferences and evaluating texts Expressing a personal preference for different texts and types of texts, and identifying the features of texts that influence personal preference	<b>Interacting with others</b>
<b>Text structure and organisation</b> Concepts of print and screen The different conventions that apply to how text is presented on a page or screen		<b>Interpreting, analysing and evaluating</b> <b>Comprehension strategies</b> Strategies of constructing meaning from texts, including literal and inferential meaning
<b>Expressing and developing ideas</b> <b>Visual language</b> How images work in texts to communicate meanings, especially in conjunction with other elements such as print and sound	<b>Creating literature</b> <b>Creating literary texts</b> Creating their own literary texts based on the ideas, features and structures of texts experienced	<b>Creating texts</b> <b>Creating texts</b> Creating different types of spoken, written and multimodal texts using knowledge of text structures and language features
Adapted from Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2012		

The scope and sequence chart in the Australian Curriculum English shows the development of each of these threads from Foundation to Year 10 ([www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/English/Rationale](http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/English/Rationale)). For each content description there are Elaborations, which are intended to exemplify and illustrate but not prescribe nor limit the ways a teacher may develop the content description. Chapter 6 in this book provides links between teaching and learning activities and relevant Content Descriptions and threads.

The shape of text to come will continue to evolve. The shape of text now already shows the importance of understanding how visual images work. What teachers see now shapes what our children will see and understand in the future.

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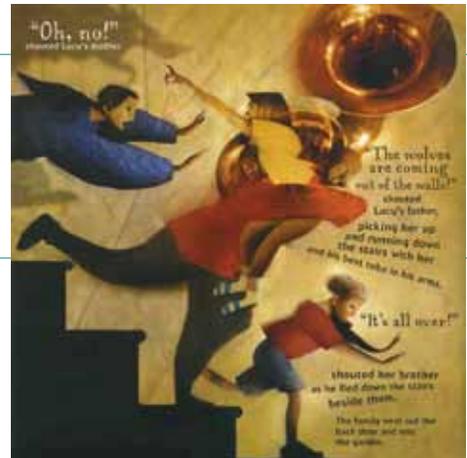


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# Chapter 1



# I see what you mean

## Theories that explain how we see and make sense of visual texts

Glance at the cover of this book or Figure 1.1. What do you see? While this act may seem quite simple, there are a number of complex processes occurring. Your eyes allow you to physically observe what is on the page, but then the job of interpreting what is seen, making sense of words and images, and then fitting them into the task at hand or your world view, adds complexity to the ‘simple’ act of viewing. Approaching images and visual texts from an educational position assumes that we are interested in not only how meaning is made but also the skills and roles associated with making meaning. What sorts of possible interpretations might we be able to explore with our students, as we read or view a picture book, a graphic novel, a film or an interactive e-book? How can we enjoy, critique and make clear for our learners not only the various meanings in texts but also how they have been created?

In the same manner that we consciously bring ways of reading and writing into our everyday activities, we do the same with viewing. Reading a favourite novel on holidays will be different

to reading it in preparation for an examination. Critiquing an historical photograph for possible bias will differ from reflecting on the same photograph for its aesthetic qualities. A magazine review for a new movie will be constructed quite differently from the same review shared with friends over drinks or at a meal. Understanding that there are a number of ways to read and view visual texts is a key part of becoming a literate individual. Viewing is more than just enjoying the pictures, although this is an integral aspect. As with reading, it involves decoding, comprehending and questioning all types of texts. Most teachers are aware that they are not only helping their students to understand what they read and view, but also helping them to enjoy, create and develop the tools necessary to critique the texts and ideas they come across now and will in the future.

All types of texts, from early manuscripts and children’s illustrated picture books to film, video and interactive media, have some type of visual elements present. Even spoken texts, when performed or delivered, have a certain ‘visuality’, depending on their context. For the scope of

FIGURE 1.1

this book, the focus will mainly be on the visual image, as well as its relation to the written word. It's important to acknowledge areas such as theatre, drama and media studies, which regularly deal with a variety of modes – spoken, written, gestural, visual, aural. Research in drama and media studies continues to inform many aspects of the literacy, English and arts curricula (Anderson & Jefferson, 2009; Bazalgette & Buckingham, 2012; Jenkins, 2008; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011).

Whenever we teach a class or a learner about visual texts, we are taking on a theoretical position, whether we are conscious of it or not. A teacher who mainly asks students what pictures they liked best in a story has a different theoretical position to the one who explains how the visual elements work to make meaning in the same story. A teacher who provides time for small groups or individuals to pore over the images in a text and discuss them has a different theoretical position to a teacher who reads the book once and tells the students what the main ideas were in the pictures. Some of the examples presented here relate to pedagogy, but some are

also to do with the knowledge teachers have about the visual texts that they use in their classrooms. This book focuses on the latter, the knowledge of visual texts. Providing educators with solid theoretical frameworks not only builds their own enjoyment and understanding of how texts work, but allows them to systematically teach and develop their own students' skills, at whatever stage their students happen to be, from pre-school to high school and beyond. The sections of this chapter that follow present some key concepts of visual literacy drawn from a number of disciplines, acknowledging the diversity and influence of fields such as perception studies, graphic design, media studies and advertising. The chapter concludes with a focus on multimodality and visual semiotics.

## Perception

Working with visual texts assumes the ability to see, and with that there are a number of cognitive processes and visual capacities that are helpful to understand.

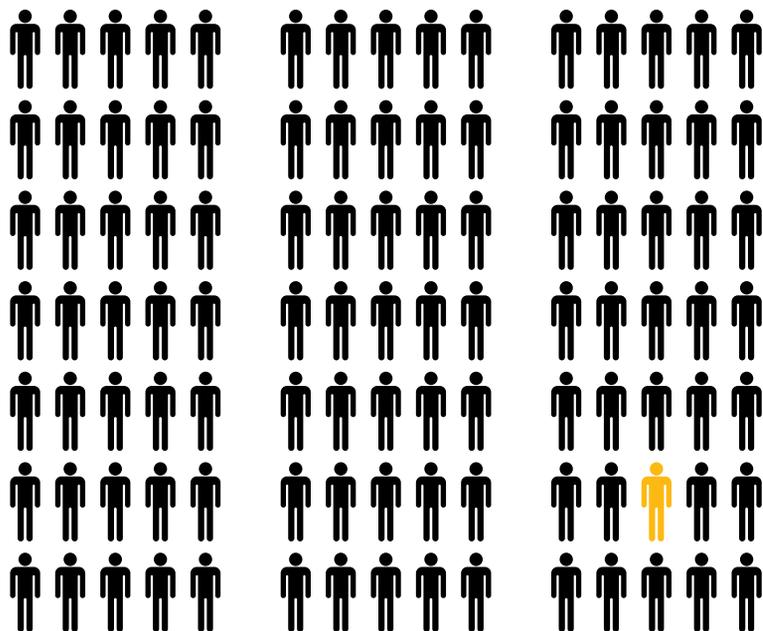


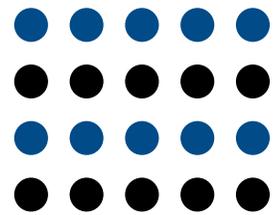
FIGURE 1.2

Can you find the person that is different in Figure 1.2? As soon as you look at it, over a 100 million light-absorbing receptors on your retina convert the light into electrical impulses. More than a million nerve fibres then send these signals to your brain, which interprets them. You then perceive the yellow figure as being different from the others. Our ability to see and interpret seems almost instantaneous as we encounter and look at hundreds of images each day. We are able to remember thousands of images in our long-term memory. Visual perception involves a number of processes. Without knowing it, we are always processing visual elements in our world. A short glance at a person or a photo and we detect shapes, colours and contrasts. From birth, we begin to recognise objects and people, and we start to characterise and categorise what we see and what catches our attention. These are understood as bottom-up processes (Ware, 2008 p. 10). At the same time, there are top-down processes. These are driven by a purpose, such as needing to read a map or reaching out to catch a ball, where visual information is being linked to non-visual information to achieve a goal (Ware, 2008 p. 12). Top-down processes are also informed by our experiences, our memories and our social and cultural knowledge. The figures above are a generic representation of people or perhaps ‘men’, which is a particular Western cultural representation that is learnt.

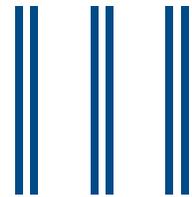
While cognitive studies detail visual processing systems in terms of sensory memory, working memory and long-term memory, our brains are also predisposed to creating meaning and order from what we see. Without conscious effort, a number of ‘pre-attentive’ processes occur as we seek to make sense of our world. The yellow figure seemed to ‘pop out’ because we are attuned to features that stand out, which may include the use of colour, movement, orientation or size. Similarly, we are aware of the textures in what we see, so we can differentiate edges and recognise individual objects (Ware, 2008, Ch 2).

We are also predisposed to grouping elements in what we see. In Figure 1.2, we perceive the people to be in three groups, even though all of the individual figures are identical. Whether we are trying to orient ourselves in a busy market or view a complex artwork, we tend to look for elements that are similar or grouped in a meaningful way. We also look for continuity that the eye follows or lines that seem to form a known shape. Gestalt principles draw on these perception behaviours and are often cited by those working in design fields (Chang & Nesbitt, 2006). Based on Gestalt psychology, these principles are based on the premise that we tend to see objects in their entirety before seeing the individual parts. *Similarity* occurs when elements are perceived as being related by aspects such as colour, size, shape or orientation, such as the blue dots in Figure 1.3. *Proximity* states that elements that are close to each other will be perceived as a group.

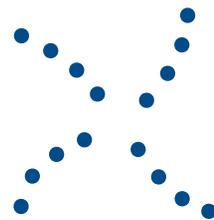
FIGURE 1.3



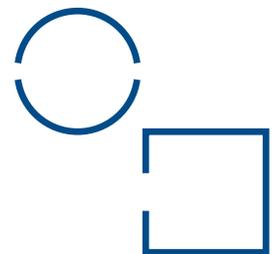
similarity



proximity



continuity



closure

The principle of *continuity* suggests that viewers prefer a continuous flow between elements and will interpret grouped objects as a line or curve. *Closure* builds on our ability to fill in perceived ‘missing parts’ when viewing objects, such as the incomplete circle or square in Figure 1.3.

Visual perception abilities not only equip us to live and function in our world, but also inform the development of visual literacy skills when we focus on the variety of visual and multimodal texts we experience in our daily lives.

Many people say, ‘Oh, I’m a visual learner’. In one sense, we are all visual learners because now, more than ever, information is presented using a variety of visual elements and features. Even if some people feel more attuned to a learner style that focuses on visual images, the truth is that we need to develop every learner’s visual literacy skills. This is of course more than just immersing them in a visually rich environment. It is providing them with the content and skills to make sense of all types of texts, especially those that work across the visual mode as well as other modalities.

## The impact of the visual

Images are often prominent in our lives because of the pleasure and enjoyment they provide. From the personal aesthetic of our own homes, decorations and clothing to books, advertising, public buildings and art galleries, the affective role of images is an important part of our lives. The immediate emotional power of images is recognised across a number of fields, from media studies to the fine arts (Bordwell & Thompson, 2010; Fahmy, et al., 2006; Fahmy & Wanta, 2007; Joffe, 2008; Lang, et al., 1993). Images regularly work in accord with written text, whether they are persuading, informing, entertaining or

decorating. The power of the visual to affect and emotionally engage us is evident from advertising research to the prominence of multimedia video, gaming and social media (Buckingham, 2005; Lenhart et al., 2008; Singh, et al., 2000). Although some argue that Western culture has been shaped by visual images for many centuries, changes in technology have meant that there has been a proliferation of images over the past 20 years, through print and on screen, which is quite unlike past eras. While researchers from fields such as sociology and philosophy debate the implications of such changes (Mitchell, 1994; Sturken & Cartwright, 2009), educators are also called to respond to the evolving cultural and literacy landscape.

In response to the changing literacy landscape, research in education covers a wide terrain. Much work has developed around children’s picture books (Arizpe & Styles, 2003; Pantaleo, 2005; Sipe, 1998), screen-based texts (Callow, 2010; Unsworth, et al., 2005; Walsh, 2010), online identities, video games, fan fiction and blogging (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). Curriculum documents, locally and internationally are also reflecting the changing landscape, where the use of screens and internet skills sit alongside literary appreciation and print-based texts (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2012; Leu et al., 2011). Educators and teachers need to develop their own knowledge and skills for teaching literacy in this continually expanding area. In the same way that teachers have a set of skills or metaphorical ‘tools’ for understanding and teaching reading and writing, that toolkit needs to be flexible enough to take on new types of texts and concepts. The following section introduces a toolkit that goes beyond written text to include images and multimodal texts.

## Understanding signs

A pair of wings.

What do they mean?

What could I use them for?



FIGURE 1.4

A physical pair of wings could have many surprising uses – an adult’s fancy dress costume, a child pretending to be a bird, an artefact for an artwork or collage. It depends on what your motivation and needs might be at the time you come across these wings.

Similarly, an image of wings can also be put to many uses. They could decorate a card, illustrate a story, sell a product or re-tell an ancient myth. They could signify a number of meanings – black wings may suggest a fallen angel, or the wings of a crow. On a birthday card they may be playful but in a Halloween story they could signal fear and horror. It seems that one pair of wings could be an excellent resource because they represent a sign for a number of meanings.

## Semiotics

Semiotic theory is the study of signs. Signs can include written or spoken language, as well as visual images. Someone calling out ‘STOP!’ is a verbal sign, while the same words on an octagonal shape is both a written and visual sign. A red traffic light can also mean stop, by virtue of the shape and colour of the light. More broadly speaking, signs can be understood as ‘images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all of these, (Barthes, Lavers, & Smith, 1967, p. 9). Semiotics has been applied across a range of fields, from media to linguistic studies.

One of the key concepts when understanding semiotics is that it is concerned with systems of signs and how they make *meaning*. This can range from understanding the visual and architectural features in Gothic cathedrals to high-end fashion design, from the scribbled pictures a two-year-old creates to the advertising logos and brands we see. In semiotics, signs are thought of as having two aspects – the *form* the sign takes and the *concept* it represents. Look at the image below and the associated concept.



FIGURE 1.5

We attach the word ‘pipe’ to this particular image, although as speakers of other languages will know, the word for this object is arbitrary, in the sense that there are many words in different languages that can name a pipe. While this sign, in the form of a photo and the attached concept of ‘pipe’, may seem obvious, many signs are more abstract or arbitrary, depending on your

social and cultural knowledge. If you are familiar with detective stories, this type of pipe could visually reference Sherlock Holmes. The red and yellow flags on Australian beaches are meant to indicate the area safe for swimming, but without this knowledge, there is nothing in the flags themselves that clearly signify their meaning. Thus semiotics raises important questions about how we make sense of all that we see and read.

Daniel Chandler’s book, *Semiotics: the basics* provides a good introduction to semiotics as does his website. See Chandler, D 2002 in the References.

## Social semiotics

Social semiotics, a particular strand within semiotics, stresses the importance of the social settings and contexts in which all types of meanings occur (Kress, 2010). When creating a Halloween card, there are various ‘signs’ that might be used, which will have particular cultural meanings – the black cat, the jack-o-lantern, the witch’s hat. Whether a young child or a graphic designer is creating the card, they will be thinking about what resources might get their ideas across, allowing them to be creative and clear. A key principle in social semiotics to keep in mind, both as a reader and viewer, as well as a writer and designer, is to consider the audience, purpose and resources that have been used in any text. In what social context will this text be used or read? Will it be appropriate and clear? What impact does the choice of colour, layout and image content have on the viewer? Is there a particular viewpoint put forward here? Who is included and who or what is excluded? Who may be challenged, offended or discriminated against by certain content? One of the aims of this book is to provide readers with an understanding of social semiotics, in order to build their toolkit to answer these types of questions.



Donating is uplifting.



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FIGURE 1.6

What do you look at first in Figure 1.6:

- the large, tattooed biker standing in the centre with red 'wings' on his shoulders?
- the logo at the top or the social media logos at the bottom of the page?
- the tag line above the biker's head?

As experienced readers, we may quite quickly begin to interpret the elements, or 'signs' in terms of what they mean in this poster. The red wings (visually echoing the hand logo of the charity) suggest a bird, but when attached to a person, the image of an angel could spring to mind. The tag line 'Donating is uplifting' works nicely with the double meaning implied here, as we shift from the visual to the written mode. However, the image of a tough, tattooed biker somewhat contrasts the stereotypical image of an angel. Perhaps that is part of the ad's purpose – to include a variety of possible donors, imbuing them with the 'angelic' qualities of kindness and care. In fact, this poster is from a series, where various people are presented using the same technique (see the 2012 campaign <http://www.centraide-mtl.org/en/>). The logo is made up of a hand cupping a small figure, surrounded by a rainbow. These iconic symbols have associated meanings, used here for the purposes of a charity campaign. As a reader, we have to be able to understand the visual and verbal signs, the semiotic resources, which are being used. Of course, the designers of the poster used the visual and textual resources they thought were most appropriate when they were creating the poster, considering their audience, the cultural connotations and the clearest way to achieve their purpose.

You will notice that while we initially focused on some specific signs, such as the wings or the person, the interpretation keeps returning to the overall meaning of the poster. The overall meaning includes the effectiveness of the advertisement, who the audience may be, and the assumptions about what symbols mean in different settings. The social nature of the communicative process always needs to be considered, along with the various elements, from the words and sentences, to the objects, typography, symbolic meanings and overall

purpose of the text. Adopting a socio-critical approach, we can also view texts through a critical lens, asking whose interests are served by what is presented. As with written text, visual representations present a particular view of the world, which may privilege or normalise certain beliefs, while excluding others. Working with various sign systems, or modes, we use our own semiotic tools to make sense of what we see, while at the same time the poster designers creatively drew on a range of semiotic resources to compose the poster.

Many educators are familiar with understanding language from a social semiotic viewpoint. Michael Halliday's work is seminal here. As part of his work in developing functional grammar, he argues that language is a semiotic system, from which writers and speakers use words and language as resources for making meaning (Halliday & Hasan, 1985). More recent work by theorists such as Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen have developed a functional semiotic framework, including a type of visual 'grammar', which works across language and images, as well as a number of other modes such as sound, gesture and music (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). This functional semiotic approach has been applied across various texts, including picture books (Painter, Martin, & Unsworth, 2012), popular culture (Zammit, 2007), science texts (Bezemer & Kress, 2010), film (Bateman, 2008), animation (Khajavi, 2011) and online reading environments (Chan & Unsworth, 2011). The application of functional semiotics across a number of modes has supported the development of multimodality as a theory. This theory of multimodality, which ranges from the word and visual level up to structural features of texts and discursive analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001), offers educators some solid theoretical 'tools' when reading and viewing a variety of visual and multimodal texts. The

analysis of the charity poster drew on multimodal theory when pointing out particular visual and design elements – the symbolic meaning of the wings, how various elements drew our gaze, the cultural assumptions about bikers. These aspects form part of a larger set of visual semiotic resources (sometimes called a visual grammar) that this book will explore in more depth over the subsequent chapters.

Multimodality is a theoretical perspective that asserts communicative meanings are made (as well as shared, challenged and re-mixed) through the use of multiple modes, ranging across writing, speech, image, sound, gesture, typography, moving image and so on. Modes are 'organised sets of semiotic resources for meaning-making', (Jewitt, 2008, p. 246). Multimodal theory incorporates the use of functional semiotics as well as considering the broader contexts of culture, audience purpose and structures of a range of texts, such as film, performance, music, electronic texts and picture books.

While multimodality draws on linguistic studies and semiotic theory, the study of English and literacy is a broad church, where educators often adopt a number of theoretical perspectives. Thus, personal response theories and more aesthetic understandings of literature sometimes sit in tension with more language-focused approaches. The role of pleasure and enjoyment was noted earlier in this chapter. A number of scholars advocate for the inclusion of creativity and aesthetic approaches to teaching English and literacy, while at the same time acknowledge the need to have a strong language-based and socio-critical approach as teachers. There have been profitable discussions about the role of various theoretical models in English and literacy teaching, which continue to make education a professional and vibrant field. A number of writers present views about a range of theoretical approaches to literacy (Andrews, 2010; Callow, 2005; Green, 2002; Manuel, Brock, Carter, & Sawyer, 2009).

Using multimodality and a functional semiotic framework to inform our reading and viewing practices provides a powerful resource for us as educators. Informed by the importance of aesthetic and creative aspects, as well as socio-critical understandings, the following chapters develop in detail the semiotic resources of multimodal theory, focusing on how visual images make meaning, both independently and in accord with written text.