

VISUAL NARRATIVE LESSON 1

Introduction to Visual Narratives: Definitions and Purposes



Untitled, Michelle Jeronimo, 2018

Grade Levels: 9–12

Duration: One 45-minute to one-hour classroom period

MESSAGE TO EDUCATORS

Visual narratives are everywhere. They not only reflect but shape our daily experiences, our thoughts and even our values. They can present information, demand our attention, and construct our realities. As educators, our call to action is to support students as they discover the types and purposes of visual narratives, the elements that distinguish them, and the tools to effectively construct their own visual narratives.

The five-lesson unit on visual narratives begins with this lesson, on the power and the purposes of visual narratives in photography. This introductory lesson covers significant ground and you may choose to divide it into two sessions. Subsequent lessons break down the idea into several skill sets:

- Identifying photography skills that lead to effective visuals
- Storytelling with imaginary elements
- Storytelling with real-world events

The last lesson asks students to put all those skills into practice in a final project.

This lesson plan includes photographs to spark discussion, a list of materials, and cues to help you foster a brave space and lead confidently, as students create and present their visual narratives. The Getty Museum is committed to supporting meaningful dialogue through art, and this lesson was created with educators to carefully walk you through the steps.

ABOUT THIS EXPLORATION

This lesson is based around group discussions using photography examples, in order to establish shared understanding of the definition and purposes of visual narratives. We set the stage with the work of an emerging artist from the Unshuttered program, intended to remind students that they are also/already artists. Moving from there into a conversation about the purposes of photographic narratives, the group discusses four works from the Getty collection, with additional information provided in order to aid in interpreting the artists' purposes and intents.

Following the group discussions, the framework of "purpose" becomes the basis for student assignments, in which they create or find examples of the purpose of visual narratives and present them to each other.

Getty Visual Narrative Learning Objectives

- Define "visual narrative"
- Explore different types of visual narratives and their purposes
- Prep Time: 2–3 hours

Notes on Group Discussions Good classroom discussions can take different directions. It is important for students to make observations and construct their own knowledge in a way that connects to principles of photography or art history. It is equally important for students to go down new paths and support their ideas using their own powers of observation. We are committed to the idea that both directions, and many in between, are valid and worthwhile.

After viewing each work of art, the lesson provides further context. We encourage you to use the context as needed to further classroom discussions. When possible, we include the artist's own words. Even so, art histories carry bias and are rarely the complete story, so please use them with that knowledge in

mind. There are times when a classroom discussion doesn't need context because it is fueled by student responses, observations and interpretation of the works. These conversations, especially when ideas are well supported, are as much the goal as those that make use of the prepared lesson.

ASSOCIATED STANDARDS AND LEARNING OBJECTIVES

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task

MATERIALS

- Projector/ Screen sharing abilities for remote classrooms
- Photo from the Unshuttered platform
- Photos from the Getty photography collection
- A digital camera or smartphone

VOCABULARY

Background The choices made by a photographer about visual elements behind the subject. Background adds depth to a photograph and may show context.

Composition How the subject is arranged in the frame; and how different elements relate to each other.

Foreground The choices made by a photographer about elements in front of the subject. Foreground can further the illusion of depth, and it can also flatten the perspective. It can call attention to something of interest.

Framing The choices made by the photographer about what to include, and leave out, of the photograph.

Leading Lines One or more lines, edges, or other visual elements in a composition, which point the viewer's eye where the photographer wants them to go, usually toward a focal point or main subject.

Light The origin and qualities of a photograph's light source(s); e.g., outdoors or indoors; natural or artificial light; directional or diffused; colored or neutral; filtered or unfiltered.

Pattern Design elements, including lines, shapes or colors, which repeat. Patterns can add visual depth and zest to an image. Repetition creates a dialog between related visual motifs.

Perspective Where the photographer stood to take the photograph, e.g., eye level, high level (looking down), low level (looking up), or canted (at an angle).

Portrait style How the subject is shown, e.g., traditional (focused on the subject's personality and mood), environmental (incorporating more clues about the subject by showing their surroundings, candid (with the subject unaware), lifestyle (with the subject going about their day), or self-portraiture.

Scale How much the subject fills the frame, or is shown from a distance, e.g., close up, medium shot, long shot.

Sequence A sequence of photographs is intended to be viewed in a particular order. To build the story, the viewer begins with the first image and continues in the order prescribed by the artist.

Series In contrast to a sequence, a series denotes multiple images related by a theme or idea, which may be viewed in any order.

INSTRUCTIONAL PLAN

Introduction

Visual narratives use images to tell stories to the viewer. The questions for inquiry at the center of this lesson are:

- What is a “visual narrative”?
- For what purposes do artists create visual narratives?

Set the Stage

Begin by projecting the image shown here, created by Michelle Jeronimo, a photographer from the Unshuttered teen program. Provide the caption to situate the photograph in time and space. By beginning with a student photograph, we seek to embolden students to think of themselves as artists. The discussion can begin by simply asking students what they notice about the photograph.



Untitled, Michelle Jeronimo, 2018

Suggested questions for discussion

- What do you notice first about this image?
- How would you describe the subject of this photograph? (A close-up portrait of two young people facing the viewer, with their faces touching. We see only half of each subject's face.)
- What is the photographer's point of view or perspective? (The photograph is taken very close up; it is an intimate portrait, or perhaps a portrait of intimacy)
- What can we tell about the subject or subjects of the photograph? (We see very few details other than their faces; the close framing draws the viewer into a comparison of their features.)
- What can we tell about the setting or surroundings of the subjects? (Almost nothing; the focus is on the two faces and their closeness.)

- Does the scene's lighting add to the story? (The light seems to be indoor, artificial light, which casts strong shadows and increases the contrast and thus the drama in the photograph.)
- Are there noticeable visual elements such as patterns or leading lines? (The photograph is both symmetrical, because of the half face in each vertical half of the image, and asymmetrical, in the differences between the two faces, which calls the viewer into a close examination of the subjects.)
- What do you think is going on in this photograph? What story is it telling you?
- Do you think the artist had a purpose in taking the photograph? If so, what purpose?
- What other questions does the photograph pose for you?
- Is this photograph a visual narrative? How so?

FURTHER CONTEXT

The physical closeness of the two subjects invites us to ask about their relationship—are they friends, siblings, cousins, a couple? Are they comparing themselves to each other? Are they expressing intimacy—or rivalry—or something else? Many purposes can be imagined from the photograph, depending on what one imagines the relationship of the two subjects to be—they could be documenting a relationship, creating a selfie to invite reactions on social media—or revealing what it's like to be cousins, just as a few possibilities.

As a story, this photograph poses many questions and offers some clues, but mostly seems to leave viewers to solve the mystery of its message for themselves.

The group discussion brings forth responses about what the photograph shows, how it works visually, and how it tells its story. Next, broaden this discussion into brainstorming a definition of visual narratives.

As the group sets out to study and create visual narratives, it is valuable to come to a shared understanding of what a visual narrative is. Start with a concrete question, "What are examples of visual narratives?" Solicit and share a list with the whole group. Examples may include:

- Comics (single panel and multi-panel)
- Photojournalism
- Art photography
- Advertisements/ Commercials
- Graphic novels
- Collage and mixed media
- Social media including Instagram stories, TikTok videos, etc.

What elements need to be present in a visual narrative? As students brainstorm a list of those elements, help them shape a sentence or two to serve as a definition. An example is given below for reference.

Visual narratives can encompass individual images, series of images, and sequences of images created with the intent to tell a story. Visual narrative formats include drawing, painting, illustration, still photography, film, collage, and performance art. The intent to tell a story is what sets visual narratives apart from works (including photographs) created using visual language purely to evoke imagination or engagement.¹

EXPLORE FURTHER

Discuss: The Purposes of Visual Narratives

With a shared definition, we can now turn to the more substantial question of the purposes of visual narratives, particularly photographic visual narratives. Four broad purposes for photographic narratives are outlined below, which are adapted from the work of Marvin Heiferman.² Your group may see the purposes differently, which is an opportunity for conversation and exploration. In a nutshell, these purposes are intended as an organizing framework, not the final word.

If time and circumstances allow, you may wish to brainstorm why artists create visual narratives, to arrive at a shared sense of the purposes of photographic visual narratives. If time is short, you may prefer to start with this framework:

1. Exploring desire: Photographs can illustrate, stoke, provoke, twist, evoke, or even quell the viewer's desires. Advertising or selling products and experiences is a significant purpose of photography. The instantaneity of photography in the early 21st century only strengthens its relationship with impulse or aspiration.
2. Revealing what lies beyond immediate sight: Photographs can reveal new perspectives and worlds that are invisible to the naked eye, for example through microscopes, thermal imaging, or cameras on spacecraft. Photos can also show us other places, whether for promotion, tourism or travel journalism.
3. Influencing choices: Photography can evoke responses by adding dimension and detail to stories about social justice issues, ranging from racism to sexism to human migration to climate change.
4. Creating and/or offering a particular perspective on history and memories: Works of photography can simply document history, frame history (for example, wedding and family portraits), or even offer a particular perspective on history (e.g., Ansel Adams' photographs of the Manzanar War Relocation Center in California; For more information about this project, please visit <https://www.nps.gov/manzanar/index.htm>).

Now, we look at photographs from the Getty collection and analyze their purposes, and how they work as storytelling devices. If possible, project all five images at once, and share their captions, to situate the photographs in time and place. Using the framework above, encourage students to match each photograph to a purpose, supporting their choices with evidence from the work.

Following the matching activity, if time and group size allows, you may wish to explore all photographs as a group. If time is short or group size is larger, divide into four smaller groups and ask each small group to go deeper with one of the works. Allow 15–20 minutes to explore and discuss, using the questions for discussion below as a starting point. Bring the small groups back together at the end, and have them share what they noticed in 3–4 clear and detailed sentences.

Exploring Desire



Sisters Violeta, 21, and Massiel, 15, at the Limited in a mall, San Francisco, California, negative 1999; Lauren Greenfield, silver-dye bleach print. The J. Paul Getty Museum.
© Lauren Greenfield/INSTITUTE

Suggested questions for discussion:

- What do you notice first about this image?
- How would you describe the subject of the photograph?
- What is the photographer's point of view or perspective? (She shows her subjects in a classically posed portrait; the background adds another layer to the image and the story.)
- What can we tell about the subject or subjects of the photograph? (The title tells us that they are sisters, separated in age by six years. Both have their hair styled very neatly, and wear make-up; the sister at right wears a crucifix as well as a shell necklace and a Tweety Bird t-shirt, leading us to think that she is the younger of the two. Based on the title, they are shopping at a mall, a sisterly rite of passage.)
- What can we tell about the setting or surroundings of the subjects? (The title tells us that the photograph takes place at a retail store in a mall. The huge faces in the background, the smoothness and obvious retouching employed, and the location, indicate an ad for clothing or beauty products, which can be seen as an attempt to tap into mall-goers' desires for beauty and admiration.)
- **Composition** What principles of composition (framing, background, foreground, patterns, leading lines) do you notice in the photograph? (The background ads and their scale contrast with the human scale of the girls in the foreground, to suggest that the power of advertising can be ubiquitous and overwhelming.)
- **Lighting** How is the photograph lit? (The photographer used available indoor light, to set the photograph firmly in the real world.)
- What story is it telling you?
- What other questions does the photograph pose for you?

FURTHER CONTEXT

The photograph is part of a project by the photographer called "Girl Culture," which was an exploration of young women's struggles with body image and self-acceptance. Greenfield sees girls' bodies as a "...canvas on which girls express and evaluate themselves. It's such an important part of our culture."³ The background ads and their scale contrast with the human scale of the girls in the foreground, to suggest that the power of advertising can be ubiquitous and overwhelming. The photographer used available indoor light, to set the photograph firmly in the real world. Greenfield may be showcasing the power of advertising and its influence on girls, by showing the contrast between advertising photography and real life. Perhaps she is even calling into question what is most desirable—is it the beauty of the enlarged, retouched models, or the beauty of the sisters and their relationship?

Revealing What Lies Beyond Sight



[Central Park, North of the Obelisk, Behind the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York](#), May 1993, Joel Sternfeld, chromogenic print. The J. Paul Getty Museum. Gift of Nancy and Bruce Berman. © Joel Sternfeld, Courtesy of Luhring Augustine, New York

Suggested questions for discussion:

- What do you notice first about this image?
- How would you describe the subjects of the photograph? (The photograph shows a mature tree in a park-like setting.)
- What is the photographer's point of view or perspective? (The photographer used eye level perspective to show us the site as a casual observer would see it.)
- What can we tell about the subject of the photograph? (No people are visible; the setting is the star of the photograph.)
- What details of the setting do you notice??
- Composition: What principles of composition (framing, background, foreground, patterns, leading lines) do you notice in the photograph? (The artist carefully composed the image to lead the viewer's eye into the background or distance; yet, the background is not quite fully informative, as though the photographer is urging the viewer to seek more information.)
- Lighting: How is this photograph lit? (The photographer used available outdoor light to bring out color and detail, while minimizing shadows)
- What story or narrative does the image inspire you to create about this scene or place?

- What changes when you have the artist's descriptions of the events that took place at this site? (see "context," below)
- Does the story shift once you learn more about the history of the location?
- How does the individual story of this photograph resonate with others as part of the series?
- Was the artist's text essential to understanding the story of the series? What role does text play in interpreting visual narratives? Is it always necessary?
- Do you think the artist had a purpose in taking the photographs? If so, what purpose?
- What other questions does the photograph pose for you?

FURTHER CONTEXT

The choices of subject, composition and lighting add to the sense that this is an ordinary, unremarkable place with an air of mystery or possibly, tragedy.

The artist's description adds significantly to the understanding of the photograph. Sternfeld created the photograph as part of his series, "On This Site: Landscapes in Memoriam." You can see other works from the series on the Getty website [here](#). About the series, he said: "I set out to photograph sites that were marked during my lifetime... Experience has taught me again and again that you can never know what lies beneath a surface or behind a façade. Our sense of place, our understanding of photographs of the landscape is inevitably limited and fraught with misreading."⁴ On his website, the artist describes the events that took place at each site:

"Jennifer Levin and Robert Chambers were seen leaving Dorrian's Red Hand, an Upper East Side bar, at 4:30 AM on August 26, 1986. Her body was found beneath this crab apple tree in Central Park at 6:15 AM that same morning. An autopsy revealed that she had been strangled. She was eighteen years old when she died. Chambers, who was nineteen at the same time of the crime, pleaded guilty to first-degree manslaughter."⁵

[View Joel Sternfeld photographs in the collection.](#)

INFLUENCING CHOICES



New York City, 1963, Leonard Freed,
gelatin silver print. The J. Paul Getty Museum.
© Leonard Freed/Magnum Photos

Suggested questions for discussion

- What do you notice first about this image?
- How would you describe the subject of the photograph? (A Black man on a crowded, busy street corner holds up a newspaper to the viewer.)
- What is the photographer's point of view or perspective? (The photograph is taken at eye level; the photographer is just another person on that street. The subject looks directly into the photographer's lens.)
- What can we tell about the subject or subjects of the photograph? (The man is dressed in a suit and he seems to be selling or handing out the newspaper; the name of the newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*, tells us that he is perhaps a member of the Black Muslim community (the newspaper is understood to have been founded by ministers in the Nation of Islam, including Malcolm X, and was one of the most widely-read Black newspapers of the era⁶; his sharp focus, half-smiling, calm expression contrasts with the anonymous, rather drab, city-dwellers behind and around him. He is the only person in view who looks directly at the photographer, and therefore at the viewer, too.)
- What can we tell about the setting or surroundings of the subjects? (The title tells us that the setting is New York City; the signage and crowded street show a bustling urban scene.)
- Composition: What principles of composition (framing, background, foreground, patterns, leading lines) do you notice in the photograph? (The framing intentionally includes both the newspaper in the foreground and the signage in the background, in a repeating series of rectangles. The seriousness of the newspaper headline in the foreground, a call for social justice, contrasts with the superficiality of the advertising images in the background—a pin-up girl illustration advertising soda, and a giant image of a frankfurter. The inverted triangle of those three rectangles frames the subject and reinforces the contrast between the messages of the foreground and those of the background.)
- Lighting: How is the photograph lit? (The photograph uses natural outdoor light and a black/white process to raise the contrasts and the intensity level of the image.)
- What story is it telling you?
- What do you know about when and where the images were created? (The year 1963 was a peak of the US Civil Rights Movement; inclusion of the "SODA FOUNTAIN" sign in the background might be an oblique reference to the lunch counter sit-ins taking place in the segregated South at the time; the newspaper headline "WE MUST HAVE JUSTICE!" also speaks to that theme.)
- What other questions does the photograph pose for you?

FURTHER CONTEXT: WORK FOR DISCUSSION

In the 1960s, Leonard Freed embarked on a project that culminated in the book *Black in White America*, in which this photograph appears. His project was to influence the course of justice by documenting, as an outsider, the daily existence of people living with injustice. In his words, "I wanted to see the black city in my city."⁷

[View Leonard Freed photographs in the collection and learn more about the artist](#)

CREATING AND FRAMING HISTORY AND MEMORIES



Laura Aguilar, 1987, *Laura Aguilar*, gelatin silver print. The J. Paul Getty Museum. Purchased with funds provided by the Photographs Council. © Laura Aguilar Trust of 2016

Suggested questions for discussion:

- What do you notice first about this image?
- How would you describe the subject of the photographs? (The image is a self-portrait of the artist, with a border based on lotería cards [a Mexican game of chance played with cards], and a handwritten message about her queer identity and general self-image at the bottom.)
- What is the photographer's point of view or perspective? (She shows herself full-length, smiling, fully facing the camera, surrounded by her possessions, in a pose that may communicate acceptance of her circumstances and identity.)
- What can we tell about the subject or subjects of the photograph? (She is smiling broadly, posed informally, and wearing shorts, polo shirt, and sneakers. The lotería cards probably allude to her Latina heritage, and might be seen as extending the theme of play.)
- What can we tell about the setting or surroundings of the subjects? (A stuffed animal hangs by one arm from the ceiling. The artist stands next to a bookshelf filled with books, toys, framed photographs, and other clutter, all of which can be seen as conveying a sense of playfulness. In the background is a poster showing a Frida Kahlo self-portrait, an artist whose life and work has echoes in Aguilar's—a self-portrait within a self-portrait.)
- Composition: What principles of composition (framing, background, foreground, patterns, leading lines) do you notice in the photograph? (The image is carefully composed with the receding lines of the baseboard drawing the viewer's eye to the artist in the center of the V.)
- Lighting: How is the photograph lit? (The photograph is taken indoors; the artist used black and white to reduce distractions and focus the viewer's attention on the essential elements of the composition)
- What story is it telling you? How is it creating a history?
- Why did the artist choose to include text in the artwork? How might your reading of the artwork be different if no text was included? (The artist statement at the bottom of the image says, "I'm not comfortable with the word Lesbian but as each day go's by I'm more and more comfortable with the word LAURA. I know some people see me as very child like, naive. Maybe so. I am. But I will be damned if I let this part of me die!")
- What other questions does the photograph pose for you?

FURTHER CONTEXT

In a later artist statement in 1993, she develops ideas of framing the history of queer people and people of color: "My artistic goal is to create photographic images that compassionately render the human experience, revealed through the lives of individuals in the lesbian/gay and/or persons of color communities. My work is a collaboration between the sitters and myself, intended to be viewed by a cross-cultural audience. Hopefully the universal elements in the work can be recognized by other individuals' communities and can initiate the viewer to new experiences about gays, lesbians and people of color."⁸

Practice: Find or Create a Visual Narrative

With definitions complete, and an understanding of some of the purposes of photographic narratives, students embark on their first project of this unit. If possible, assigning this practice as homework affords students time to work on the assignment. Ask students to choose two of the following prompts, and find or create multiple examples of each:

- A visual narrative that advertises
- A visual narrative that explains or shows something otherwise often unseen or overlooked
- A visual narrative that spotlights an aspect of history or humanity
- A visual narrative that influences a choice or belief
- A visual narrative that explores a place
- A visual narrative that establishes or complicates a memory

Reflect

Whether students find or create their visual narratives, presenting work is a vulnerable moment. Having the viewers provide constructive feedback is key to the exercise. Use your best judgement about whether a group share-out is appropriate, and enlist the support of your students to create a brave space. At times, 1:1 share-outs may be more appropriate. The format can be the same:

Ask each student to introduce their visual narratives with the name and background of the makers, their titles, and when and how they were made.

Questions for a group share-out/critique (modify for 1:1):

- What purpose do you see in the work?
- How do the image's technical aspects (principles of art and elements of design) support its purpose?
- What aspects of the story would you like to learn more about?
- Questions for individual reflection:
 - What was challenging, and why?
 - What details do you find most interesting, and why?
 - Is there anything you would do differently?

ASSESSMENT

Observe the group discussions during Set the Stage and Discuss. Assess contributions to the large group dialogue, and the small group discussions. Did students pose thoughtful questions? Did they respond to questions with reasons and evidence? Did they listen to different points of view? Did they clarify and challenge ideas and conclusions when appropriate? Did they synthesize evidence and ideas?

Evaluate the small group summaries of their discussions. Were the summaries within the limit of 3–4 sentences? Were they clear? Did they include appropriate detail?

Collect the visual narratives to check for completeness, and to assess students' understanding of the photographic purposes.

Observe and evaluate student presentations. Assess students' understanding of the roles that photography can play, and their ability to clearly state and strongly support their ideas.

In Reflect, assess student feedback for clarity and thoughtfulness.

THANK YOU...

...for your commitment to inspiring young people to create art and tell their stories.

Please adapt and improve upon this lesson plan to meet the needs and age range of your group

OTHER RESOURCES AND CITATIONS

- 1 Cohn, N. and Joseph P. Magliano, 2020. ["Editors' Introduction and Review: Visual Narrative Research: An Emerging Field in Cognitive Science."](#) *Topics in Cognitive Science*, 12: 197–223.
- 2 Heiferman, Marvin. 2012. *Photography Changes Everything*. New York: Aperture.
- 3 Sanders, J., 2003. ["Girlhood. Interrupted / Photographer's Book, Exhibition Document Young Women's Tortured Relationships To Their Bodies."](#) San Francisco Chronicle, February 2, 2003.
- 4 Sternfeld, Joel. Undated. ["On This Site."](#)
- 5 [Ibid.](#)
- 6 ["Muhammad Speaks."](#) 2020. Columbia Center for Teaching and Learning, New York
- 7 Freed, Leonard. 1990. ["Leonard Freed—Photographer Technique & Process."](#) Filmed by RIFF International Production.
- 8 Aguilar, Laura. 1993. ["Laura Aguilar."](#) Nueva Luz, 4, #2: 22–31.

Related photography skill videos can be found on [Unshuttered](#).