Understanding and questioning images

From memes to Instagram, our increasingly hyper-visualised society makes the ability to read images (visual literacy) a vital skill.

This interactive tutorial will give you the skills to read images using a five-step process to enable you to analyse and understand images and their implicit meanings.

“In an era in which gossip has become more about pictures than words, it was inevitable, then that the paparazzi were never far away”


The five step method

Watch the video below for an introduction to the five-step method of understanding and questioning an image.

Video transcription:

Hello, and welcome to this screencast on Understanding and Questioning images. From memes to Instagram our increasingly imaged based society makes the ability to read images a vital skill. By the end of this screencast you will gain awareness of the five step method as described by Brown et al. (2016) in Visual Literacy for Libraries and you will be able to apply this five step method to an image.

Here is the image we will be understanding and questioning, we will split it into four to analyse each quadrant in turn using the five step method.

First, gaze at the image - what can you see in each quadrant? What can you see in the image? Who or what is in the picture? What is happening in the image, what are the people doing? What is going on in the background?

- In the first quadrant you can see the text ‘women say go!’
- In the second quadrant you can see two women looking longingly into the distant countryside with the word Britain
- In the third quadrant we can see a little boy holding onto one of the women looking into the countryside
- In the fourth quadrant we see soldiers marching into the distance

Next read - is there text in the image? If so what does it say? What does this mean? What does this text tell you about the image and what does it add?
Understanding and questioning images using the five-step process.

- The text in the first quadrant relates to gender and is a command so is trying to get a certain agenda across.
- The women in the second quadrant look to be dressed in Edwardian clothes and there are elements of nationalism with the use of ‘Britain’.
- The little boy in the third quadrant holding onto the woman looks to be seeking protection so maybe vulnerable.
- The soldiers in the fourth quadrant are marching and look noble. The way in which the others in the picture are looking at them suggests admiration.

Then Infer - match what you’ve seen in the image to the text you’ve read. What can you infer from this and what does it mean? Has this given you a new understanding and opened up new avenues?

- The text in quadrant one is persuasive with the use of the exclamation mark and speech bubbles - this could be perceived as an order.
- In the second quadrant, the women and the way in which they are standing and looking appears admiring of the soldiers and romantic with longing. The use of the word Britain infers nationalism.
- In the third quadrant, the little boy not only looks scared but also appears to be looking admiringly at the soldiers inferring he looks to them for protection.
- In the fourth quadrant, the soldiers are marching inferring they are going to war and this poster is describing an order from the women for them to do this. This infers that the poster was made before conscription and aims to encourage men to join the war effort. The style of clothing also suggests this is during the First World War.

Fourth, articulate what you can see in the image and why these choices have been made. How do the design choices contribute to the meaning of the image? For example, how does the font influence the meaning of the image? Who are the intended audience of the images and how has this influenced the design and creation of the image? What is the purpose of the image - why was it created and what is it trying to do?

- In the first quadrant, the text is in capitals and underlined suggesting an aggressive order due to these design choices.
- Women are the focus in the second quadrant suggesting they are the intended audience to persuade the men to join up and fight. The use of women in the first quadrant also indicates this.
- The use of the little boy in the third quadrant may appeal to the family and sentimental values particularly targeted at women.
- In the fourth quadrant the soldiers are marching through an idyllic countryside - does this suggest they are protecting a quintessentially British way of life?
Understanding and questioning images using the five-step process.

The fifth and final step is to check your understanding. Having looked at the metadata, or tags and attached information, does this match your understanding? For example, does the information on the creator of the image suggest it was made for a particular purpose? Was the image created during the time period you first thought?

The understanding of the image being a tool used to persuade women to encourage men to join the army in the First World War is backed up by the information we can find. The white feather campaign was around pre conscription during the First World War. This is where women were encouraged to give men who hadn’t joined the army a white feather to persuade them to sign up.

According to the metadata, the image was produced in 1915, before conscription was introduced in 1916 this suggests it is aiming to get men to join the army. The image was made in Britain, during the First World War, by the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee, so it aimed to recruit men in to the army.

The image is also an item in the Imperial War Museum Collection, so is of historical significance.

However, this final step may generate more questions based on your findings, and you may want to find out more about how your perspective has informed your analysis.

References to the video:


Try it!

Having watched the video, you can now try to apply this method to an image.

The image will be split onto quadrants and you can write your ideas down. Once completed you can see how you did and find out more information to check your understanding.
Understanding and questioning images using the five-step process.

Step 1: Gaze

What do you see and what is happening? Click on the number to see a model answer.

1. We can see the head of the Statue of Liberty in a park with the tops of trees. This is not the setting we are used to – which is on an island in New York’s Hudson River.
2. We can see the head of the Statue of Liberty in a park with the tops of trees. We can also see a building in the background. Again, this is not the normal surrounding we are used to seeing when looking at the Statue of Liberty.
3. We can see a plinth with the neck of the Statue of Liberty. We can also see a little gate leading into the monument, as well as park benches.
4. We can see the shoulder area of the head. There is also a sign with writing. There are two people looking at the statue, as well as trees and benches.

Step 2: Read

Is there text in the image? What new information does this text tell you about the image? Click on the number to see the model answer.

1. No text in this quadrant.
2. No text in this quadrant.
3. No text in this quadrant.
4. We can see a sign on the plinth. The text is difficult to see and in French, but it possibly says:
   a. Line 1: Symbole de l’amitié Franco-Américaine
   b. Line 2: ‘Monument de l’indépendance’
   c. Line 3: La Liberté éclairant le monde
   d. Line 4: Statuaire
   e. Line 5: [Unable to make any text out on this line]
   f. Line 6: Monduit - Gaget, Gauthier

Step 3: Infer

Match what you have seen in the image to the text you’ve read to gain new understanding of the image. Click on the number to see a model answer.

1. We saw that the surroundings do not match the usual surroundings of the Statue of Liberty and that the rest of the statue is missing. This infers that the statue is somewhere other than the United States of America. The caption of the image supports this theory.
2. We saw that the surroundings do not match the usual surroundings of the Statue of Liberty and that the rest of the statue is missing. This infers that the statue is somewhere other than the United States of America. The caption of the image supports this theory.
3. The plinth has an entrance, why is that? Is it for people to look around inside the monument? Was the monument there to raise awareness or money for the project to build and ship the statue to the United States of America?
4. The text confirms that this is the head of the Statue of Liberty. The text is in French - and says that it is a ‘symbol of Franco-American Friendship’. It also says that it is an ‘Independence Monument. It also gives the name ‘La Liberté éclairant le monde’ – Liberty Enlightening the World. We also have the text Monduit and Gaget Gauthier – This appears to be the foundry in which the materials for the statue were made.

Step 4: Articulate

What is the deeper meaning of the image? How do design choices, the intended audience and purpose of the image influence this? Click on the image to see a model answer.

The purpose of the image is to document the historically important development of the Statue of Liberty. This is clear, as the picture is formal and imposing with the head of the statue at the centre. The statue is the key feature. It is also from a New York Public Library collection, this would suggest some historical importance. The image in is black and white/sepia – this suggests that it is an old photograph. The date supports this.

Step 5: Develop or further understanding

Metadata about the image:

**Artist:** Albert Fernique

**Title:** Head of the Statue of Liberty on display in a park in Paris

**Date:** 1883

**Medium:** Photograph – Still image

**Provenance:** The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection

**Credit:** From The New York Public Library [https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47de-0a2d-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99](https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47de-0a2d-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99)

Click on the image to see information gathered from the background reading:

The erection of the Statue of Liberty was threatened by a lack of funds (Trachtenburg, 1976, p.181). The statue was exhibited at Paris’s World Fair in 1878 with only the first part completed (Trachtenburg, 1976, p.181).

Fundraising occurred with tickets available to view the construction site, and a lottery was held (The Statue of Liberty – Ellis Island Foundation, ©2018).

The head was permitted to be displayed as it permitted visitors to enter and climb a viewing platform (Trachtenburg, 1976, p.125). The statue was a gift from the French to America to celebrate the centennial of independence and their friendship.
The location of the statue in America was chosen as the island could be seen by anyone who entered the country via New York (National Park Service, 2015). The statue was envisioned as being able to “visually control the entrance to the free world” (Trahctenburg, 1976, p.149).

References


Over to you...
“All images carry meanings that can only be understood through a contextualization of how, when, where and why they were produced. Images do not exist in a vacuum. Situate images within the framework of their social, political, and economic circumstances”

(Brown, Bussert, Hatwig & Medaille, 2016, p.2)

Images are often used to represent meanings beyond what you literally can see within it. Suggestion or metaphor can be what gives the image its impact. Photographs in particular are often reproduced these days out of their original context, for example in memes. It is important to question and understand why a particular image was chosen, and how things like added text can create an entirely new context for that image.

Now that you understand the modified five step process for understanding and questioning images, you will be able to apply this not only within your studies but also in your everyday life in today's highly visualised culture.


You have reached the end of this resource.

Why not look at some related resources:

Book onto a workshop:

- Images, Discover, Understand, Reference (https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/library/infoskillworkshops/index)
Understanding and questioning images using the five-step process.

- Questioning and Evaluating Information
  (https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/library/infoskillworkshops/index)

Take an online tutorial:

- Discovering images

Complements the tutorial
http://www.librarydevelopment.group.shef.ac.uk/storyline/understanding/understanding_questioning_images%20-%20Storyline%20output/story.html

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