

# how to do a visual analysis



## 1 Choose an artifact that

- + you are interested in;
- + you feel makes a social, cultural, historical, or political impact;
- + and that you can research.

You can pick just about anything visual, including

- + famous artwork, like a Van Gogh painting or an Andy Warhol print;
- + not-so famous artwork, like graffiti or a cereal box;
- + visual campaigns, like product marketing or political graphics;
- + three-dimensional objects, like Michelangelo statue or a Volkswagen Beetle;
- + physical spaces, like a shopping mall or a museum;
- + landscape designs, like a flower garden or outdoor campus.

## 2 Make sure your artifact is human-designed, NOT something

- + found in nature, like a seashell or a squirrel;
- + ethereal or intangible, like a dream or poetic thought;
- + supernatural or mythical, like a ghost or a dragon.



## 3 Consider the context

in which your artifact was created.

### who

- + Who is/was the creator of the visual: an individual, group, or corporation? What else has this author created?
- + Who did the creator make the visual for and who is/was affected by it?
- + What do you know about the creator's background, including heritage, education, status, mission, and so forth?

### what

- + What kind of an artifact is it? What genre or category would you label it as?
- + What seems to be the creator's attitude toward the subject?
- + What makes it special or important? What impact has it had?
- + What is the artifact made out of (wood, stone, plaster) and what is included it (images, colors, shapes, text)?

### where

- + Where was the artifact originally constructed?
- + Where was the artifact intended to be viewed and where was it actually viewed?
- + Where might the artifact be viewed in the future?

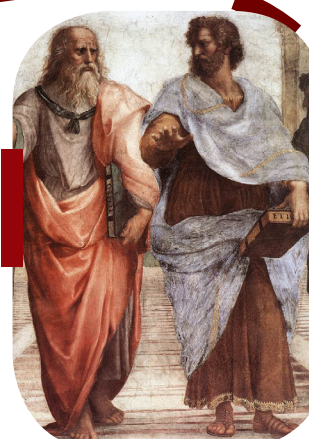
### when

- + When was the artifact created?
- + What other historical and cultural events were occurring in the same time period?
- + When did the artifact have its greatest significance? When might it again?

### why

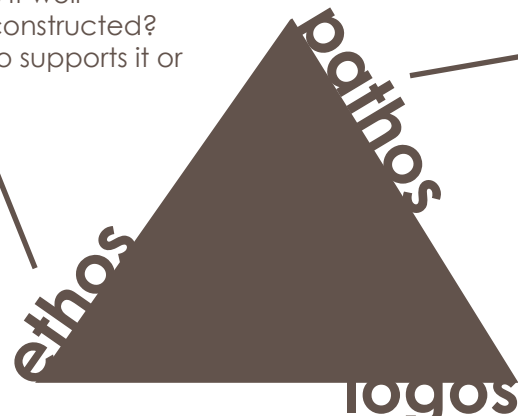
- + Why was the artifact created? To make a profit, deliver a message, change perception?
- + Why did/does the artifact affect its viewers?
- + Why should we care about the artifact?

## 4 Review the rhetorical means of persuasion.



Consider the credibility of the artifact. What makes it believable and trustworthy? Does it follow ethical guidelines? Is it well-designed or poorly constructed? Who created it? Who supports it or uses it?

Does the artifact employ devices (colors, images, words) that cause an emotional reaction to it? Are those devices cultural, historical, political, or idiosyncratic? What specific emotions are meant to be evoked and is the artifact successful in evoking them?



### kairos

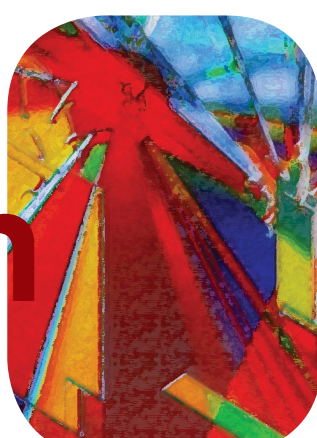
Was the artifact created and displayed at the opportune moment? If it had been presented at another time and place, would it have been as effective? More? Less?

### topos

How does this artifact fit in with other artifacts of its kind? Does it follow conventions? Where does it break away from them? Does it adhere to expectations?

What kind of logic or reason is used in the artifact to affect an audience's interpretation? Is there an argument being made? Are there facts, statistics, or historical references present (either implicitly or explicitly)?

## 5 Evaluate the design principles employed.



There are thousands of design principles and concepts to choose from, so just pick a few of the most relevant ones, such as

- + Typography
- + Color
- + Shapes
- + Contrast
- + Alignment
- + Consistency
- + Gestalt
- + Figure-ground Relationship
- + Multistability
- + Closure
- + Ambiguity
- + Mnemonic Device
- + Leading and Kerning
- + Rule of Thirds
- + Red Effect
- + Facism Ratio
- + Horror Vacui
- + Anthropomorphic Form
- + Personification
- + Metaphor
- + Highlighting
- + Proximity
- + Uncanny Valley
- + Symmetry
- + Baby-Face Bias
- + Nudge
- + Grouping
- + Nesting
- + Chartjunk/Noise
- + Legibility
- + Readability
- + Picture Superiority Effect
- + Stickiness
- + Choice
- + Bleeds
- + Gutters
- + Aesthetic-Usability Effect
- + 80/20 Rule
- + Affordance

and so forth.

Ask yourself: Which of these design principles are being used? Why? What effect do they have?



## 6 Develop your own argument about the artifact's impact.

### Have an opinion.

You are now the expert on this artifact and you should have something to say about it. How does it make people feel, think, and react? How does it contribute to, affect, or reflect upon society or communities? Write your opinion down in one sentence; this is your thesis statement.

### Organize your thoughts.

Make a logical sequence of arguments that supports your overall opinion. Your main thesis should be developed with a series of smaller sub-arguments, connected with clear transition statements. Walk your reader through why this particular artifact has the effect it does on people and be sure that all sub-arguments directly relate back to your main thesis.

### Reference credible sources.

Support your argument with other research and opinions of people with expertise. Quote your authority bolded (don't say "this proves," but rather say something like "this suggests"). Remember to refer to your own analysis; give readers a sense of the depth you went into and how you went about analyzing various aspects of the artifact. As you do this, be careful not to be overbearing or pompous.

### Use visuals.

This is a visual analysis, so avoid relying solely on text to argue your point. Use actual images and graphics to supplement the argument(s) you are making. Consider using flowcharts and visualized data for support. People are persuaded by visual representations so use this to your advantage. Every time you use a visual, you should title it ("Figure 1: Color in the text"), label it (give it a caption for further clarification), and refer to in the text ("as you can see in Figure 1, ...").