

# *The Framework for Visual Literacy* [Draft for Feedback]

Feedback survey link: [https://oakland.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_0xmt6A1JzKVq6I6](https://oakland.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0xmt6A1JzKVq6I6)

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## Introduction

In 2018, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) charged the Image Research Interest Group (IRIG) with creating a visual literacy companion document<sup>1</sup> to align the 2011 *ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*<sup>2</sup> with the 2016 *Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education*<sup>3</sup>. The ACRL Visual Literacy Standards Task Force (VLTF) was convened for this purpose.

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<sup>1</sup> "Chapter 14: Standards, Guidelines, and Frameworks," Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL), September 1, 2006. <http://www.ala.org/acrl/resources/policies/chapter14>.

<sup>2</sup> "ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education," Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL), October 27, 2011. <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/visualliteracy>.

<sup>3</sup> "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education," Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL), February 9, 2015. <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>.

While some see visual literacy as a concern limited to the fields of art, architecture, and design,<sup>4</sup> visual information is truly multidisciplinary in nature.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, students across higher education must have opportunities to develop critical and ethical ways of engaging with visual information in order to become discerning citizens in today's image-saturated society. To create a companion document that reflects this approach to visual literacy, the VLTF conducted interviews with engaged stakeholders in a range of roles and disciplines through an IRB-approved empirical research study. The goal of this study was to identify what these practitioners perceived to be important trends, challenges, and opportunities for visual literacy.

Informed by the study's findings, we identified four emerging themes for learning in visual literacy. These themes form the structure of this companion document, called the *Framework for Visual Literacy*.

- Learners perceive visuals as communicating information
- Learners actively participate in a changing visual information landscape
- Learners practice visual discernment and criticality
- Learners pursue social justice through visual practice

The *Framework for Visual Literacy* is not designed as a standalone document; rather it is to be used in direct discourse with the *Framework for Information Literacy*. Throughout the drafting process, our aim has been to create a flexible document to support a variety of users, including scholars, librarians, students, and communities of practice. To this end, we expanded the conceptual underpinnings of our four themes and created associated knowledge practices and dispositions to address a variety of educators' and learners' needs. The resulting document is a reflection of the 2016 *Framework's* expanded understanding of information literacy,<sup>6</sup> as well as the changing landscape of both visual information and visual communication. Ultimately, we hope that educators across the disciplines will be able to use this document as they continue to incorporate visual literacy into their curricula.

## How to read this document

We chose not to group our knowledge practices and dispositions according to the frames of the *Framework for Information Literacy*. Instead, we identified potential connections between the knowledge practices and dispositions within each of our themes and the frames of 2016 *Framework*. In the document below, these potential connections are denoted as follows:

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<sup>4</sup> "What Is Visual Literacy?," *Visual Literacy Today*. June 3, 2021. <https://visualliteracytoday.org/what-is-visual-literacy/>

<sup>5</sup> Frank Serafini, "Visual Literacy," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*, February 27, 2017. <https://oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.001.0001/acrefore-9780190264093-e-19>

<sup>6</sup> Lori Townsend, Korey Brunetti, and Amy R. Hofer, "Threshold Concepts and Information Literacy," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 11, no. 3 (2011): 853–69.; Thomas P. Mackey and Trudi E. Jacobson, *Metaliteracy: Reinventing Information Literacy to Empower Learners*. Chicago: Neal-Schuman, 2014.; Carol C. Kuhlthau, "Rethinking the 2000 ACRL Standards: Some Things to Consider," *Communications in Information Literacy* 7, no. 3 (2013): 92–7.

Authority Is Constructed and Contextual [AICC], Information Creation as a Process [ICaaP], Information Has Value [IHV], Research as Inquiry [RaI], Scholarship as Conversation [SaC], and Searching as Strategic Exploration [SaSE].

In addition, it should be noted that some practitioners have called for the adoption of a social justice-oriented frame as part of a revised *Framework for Information Literacy*.<sup>7</sup> While social justice is the focus of one of our four themes in this companion document, we believe social justice cannot be siloed as a discrete entity for visual literacy learning. Rather, the pursuit of social justice must be recognized as integral to all aspects of visual practice. For this reason, each knowledge practice and disposition in our theme 'Learners pursue social justice through visual practice' first appears in one of the three other themes, denoted as [SJ], before being reiterated in the final theme.

For additional related readings, please see our working bibliography at [https://www.zotero.org/groups/2264485/acrl\\_visual\\_literacy\\_taskforce/library](https://www.zotero.org/groups/2264485/acrl_visual_literacy_taskforce/library)

## Learners perceive visuals as communicating information

Visuals in every format are created by people. Intentionally or unintentionally, these visuals communicate messages based on cultural, community, and disciplinary conventions. Learning to read visuals requires deconstructing and interpreting different elements and contexts of visual communications to comprehend their aesthetic, evidentiary, and persuasive functions. By developing reading, design, and technical skills, visual literacy learners can produce, use, and remix visual media to create inclusive visual messages tailored to a specific audience.

## Knowledge Practices

Learners who are developing their visual literacy abilities:

- Define and articulate the need for visuals within a project, assessing the audience for the project and the manner in which it will be shared, as well as how the use of visuals supports the purpose of the project. [SaC] [SaSE]
- Evaluate a range of visuals with attention to format, creator, and rhetorical message in order to select the most relevant for an intended purpose or context [ICaaP]
- Explore choices made in the production of visual communications to construct meaning or influence interpretation, especially with regard to representations of gender, ethnicity,

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<sup>7</sup> Laura Saunders, "Connecting Information Literacy and Social Justice: Why and How," *Communications in Information Literacy* 11, no.1 (2017): 55-75.  
<https://doi.org/10.15760/comminfolit.2017.11.1.47>

Karin Heffernan, "Loaded Questions: The Framework for Information Literacy through a DEI Lens," *College & Research Libraries News* 81, no.8 (2020). Accessed June 3, 2021.  
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.81.8.382>.

Christopher Sweet, "Overdue: Incorporating Social Justice into the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education," *College & Research Libraries News* 82, no.5 (2021).  
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.82.5.210>.

- race, and other cultural or social identifiers. [AICC] [ICaaP] [SJ]
- Anticipate that the process of visual creation is iterative and involves many phases (e.g. inspiration, transformation, experimentation, synthesis, refinement). [ICaaP] [RaI]
- Explore creative or generative engagement with visuals to conceptualize, research, and analyze complex topics (e.g. mind mapping, photo elicitation, visualization). [RaI]
- Implement a range of principles and strategies for accessibility in visual media (e.g., alt text, complex image descriptions, audio description of visuals in video). [ICaaP] [IHV] [SJ]
- Prioritize ethical information practices for use, attribution, and remix when they conflict with aesthetic preferences or creative objectives for visuals. [IHV]

## Dispositions

Learners who are developing their visual literacy abilities:

- Identify as both consumers and creators of visuals, acknowledging how positionality, bias, experience, and expertise inform the interpretation and communication of visuals. [AICC] [ICaaP] [IHV] [SJ]
- Recognize that a visual's communicative intent and purpose can be changed through modification, repurposing, remix, or reformatting. [ICaaP] [SaC]
- Realize that visuals in all formats are works of intellectual property. [IHV]
- Cultivate an appreciation for visuals from cultures that are not their own, respecting the value of visual materials to creators and their communities. [IHV] [RaI] [SJ]
- Reflect on the role of personally-created visuals as meaningful contributions to research, learning, and communication. [IHV] [SaC]
- Recognize the varying role of visuals in disciplinary scholarship, examining evolving trends and standards for communication impact, style, purpose, creator intent, and audience reaction. [AICC] [SaC]
- Consider how incorporating accessibility practices and principles can enrich the experience of visuals for all users. [ICaaP] [IHV] [SaSE] [SJ]
- Appreciate that receiving feedback about visuals is a valuable step in the creation process. [ICaaP] [SaC]
- Identify as contributors to a more socially-just world by intentionally and ethically including a diversity of voices in their visual media projects. [ICaaP] [IHV] [RaI] [SaC] [SJ]
- Value the ways that different ways of knowing and being, including traditional and Indigenous knowledge, may be represented in visuals. [AICC] [IHV] [RaI] [SJ]

## Learners actively participate in a changing visual information landscape

The proliferation of visuals in everyday life has increased within a rapidly evolving digital landscape. The life cycles of visual materials have and continue to be altered by digital tools, new techniques for image and video manipulation, participatory cultural practices, and online

communities. Visuals are predominately classified and described via text-based descriptions, which involve human subjectivity and can reinforce structural inequities by privileging whiteness, heterosexuality, masculinity, and hegemonic notions of knowledge creation. As text-based search acts as the primary access point for many visuals, these factors influence how individuals find, engage with, and understand visual media. Visual literacy learners must scrutinize new technologies, multiple modes of information, and shifting norms as they develop creative and ethical practices for using, producing, and sharing visuals within the information landscape as it exists today and into the future.

## Knowledge Practices

Learners who are developing their visual literacy abilities:

- Compare search results for visual media across multiple search engines and databases in order to identify underlying biases grounded in existing canons, authorities, structures and systems. [SaC] [SaSE] [SJ]
- Attribute visuals produced by other scholars, creators, and practitioners through citations, acknowledgements, or credit lines using available best practices. [IHV] [SaC]
- Anticipate the ways in which algorithms and participatory technologies obscure or promote visuals and visual media creators, reflecting commercial interests and reinforcing existing social dynamics. [AICC] [IHV] [SJ]
- Evaluate multimodal works with visual elements holistically, instead of as disparate parts. [ICaaP]
- Evaluate privacy settings when sharing visuals on digital platforms, understanding that one's personal work may be reused without permission or misattributed once it is shared online. [ICaaP] [IHV]
- Seek out and participate in a range of online creative, social, and scholarly communities in order to create, produce, and disseminate visuals. [ICaaP] [RaI] [SaC]
- Assess how emerging technologies such as deep fakes, facial recognition, and other applications of artificial intelligence may impact visual perception, privacy, and trust. [AICC] [ICaaP] [IHV]

## Dispositions

Learners who are developing their visual literacy abilities:

- Recognize that the socio-cultural interpretation of a visual may change throughout its life cycle, which includes the creation, distribution, description, consumption, and iteration of a visual. [AICC] [ICaaP] [SaC]
- Understand that ethical, legal, and economic frameworks for accessing and sharing visuals are not universal and vary by country and global region. [IHV]
- Appreciate that creativity and inquiry can be inspired through browsing and experiencing serendipitous encounters with both digital and analog visuals. [RaI] [SaSE]
- Understand that visuals may not have clear indicators of their production or dissemination processes, particularly in online environments, which presents unique challenges for evaluating authority and credibility. [AICC] [ICaaP]

- Recognize that organizing visuals for efficient access, retrieval, and analysis requires the use of different methods and tools than those used with textual information. [RaI] [SaSE]
- Acknowledge that the digital tools for creating and viewing visuals may cause or exacerbate technological, economic, or accessibility barriers that affect user experience. [ICaaP] [IHV] [SJ]
- Consider that file formats and other technologies for engaging with visuals are ever-changing, resulting in possible loss or alteration of information as new tools and platforms replace older ones. [ICaaP]
- Prioritize ethical considerations for cultural and intellectual property when creating, sharing, or using visuals. [ICaaP] [IHV] [SJ]

## Learners practice visual discernment and criticality

Visuals and their creators are never neutral. In addition to conveying economic, social, and ideological values, visuals can be used to misinform, manipulate, and exploit. Criticality, an orientation toward information that combines critical and reflective thinking, mindfulness, and curiosity, helps learners explore their own assumptions and biases as well as those embedded within the visual world. Visual literacy learners must cultivate critical evaluation skills for creating, viewing, consuming, and disseminating visuals through persistent and purposeful interaction with visual media over time. By resisting strict binaries, developing healthy skepticism, fostering empathy, and growing in their own agency regarding visuals, learners can become discerning, engaged citizens.

## Knowledge Practices

Learners who are developing their visual literacy abilities:

- Examine visuals for signs of technical manipulation, such as cropping or use of digital filters, and consider the intent and consequences of any changes for meaning or reception. [AICC] [ICaaP]
- Analyze visuals within their published context, considering the related information such as captions, credits, and other types of metadata in order to interpret a visual. [ICaaP] [SaC] [RaI]
- Evaluate how authorities establish what is or is not included in the visual canon of a field, elevating some voices and cultures while suppressing others. [AICC] [SaC] [SJ]
- Investigate personal positionality, acknowledging how an individual's background, experiences, values, worldviews, biases, etc., can and do shape the reading of, interaction with, and research around visuals. [AICC] [SaC] [SJ]
- Examine visuals slowly and deeply in order to develop and refine critical observation skills. [RaI]
- Question whether a visual could be considered authoritative or credible in a particular context (e.g. compare to similar visuals, track the visual to its original source, analyze embedded metadata). [AICC] [IHV] [SaSE]

## Dispositions

Learners who are developing their visual literacy abilities:

- Acknowledge that no platform is neutral, and that concealed factors like suggestion algorithms and power structures within the publishing industry shape experiences with visuals. [AICC] [IHV] [SJ]
- Value critical viewing of, and critical reflection on, visuals across all formats. [Ral] [SaSE]
- Recognize that the knowledge needed to understand visuals builds over a lifetime and involves background influences, lived experiences, and disciplinary knowledge, as well as participation in communities of discourse. [AICC] [SaC] [RAI]
- Discern the role of visuals in the spread and acceptance of misinformation, malinformation, and disinformation. [AICC] [IHV] [SaC]
- Distinguish between the ways different disciplines, professions, and communities confer values such as legitimacy and credibility on visual media. [AICC] [SaC]
- Consider if creation and/or use of a visual will constitute misappropriation, which dissociates visuals from their original contexts and deprives individual creators and cultural communities of agency and credit. [ICaaP] [IHV] [SJ]
- Reflect on the role of visuals in fostering harmful or restrictive social or cultural norms, and recognize that these can be resisted or subverted (e.g. white supremacy, heteronormativity, and ableism, among others). [AICC] [ICaaP] [SaC] [SJ]

## Learners pursue social justice through visual practice

The pursuit of social justice within visual practice is an ongoing journey and requires consistent diversity, equity, and inclusion work. Pursuing social justice can include decentering whiteness and hegemonic practices in visual collections and canons, improving accessibility of visuals and platforms, or opposing exploitative practices that deprive visual creators of intellectual property control or Indigenous communities of sovereignty. Visual literacy learners understand that pursuing social justice through visual creation, sharing, use, remix, and attribution takes continual effort and education. By building reciprocal relationships with communities, acknowledging the limits of their own knowledge, and seeking to better understand their worldviews, biases, and perceptions as well as those around them, learners can become conscientious contributors to a more just world.

## Knowledge Practices

Learners who are developing their visual literacy abilities:

- Explore choices made in the production of visual communications to construct meaning or influence interpretation, especially with regard to representations of gender, ethnicity, race, and other cultural or social identifiers. [AICC] [ICaaP] [SJ]
- Implement a range of principles and strategies for accessibility in visual media (e.g., alt text, complex image descriptions, audio description of visuals in video). [ICaaP] [IHV] [SJ]
- Compare search results for visual media across multiple search engines and databases

in order to identify underlying biases grounded in existing canons, authorities, structures and systems. [SaC] [SaSE] [SJ]

- Anticipate the ways in which algorithms and participatory technologies obscure or promote visuals and visual media creators, reflecting commercial interests and reinforcing existing social dynamics. [AICC] [IHV] [SJ]
- Evaluate how authorities establish what is or is not included in the visual canon of a field, elevating some voices and cultures while suppressing others. [AICC] [SaC] [SJ]
- Investigate personal positionality, acknowledging how an individual's background, experiences, values, worldviews, biases, etc., can and do shape the reading of, interaction with, and research around visuals. [AICC] [SaC] [SJ]

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