



Companion Document to the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education

The Framework for Visual Literacy in Higher Education

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Table of Contents

- Introduction
- How to read this document
- Authors of this document
- Learners participate in a changing visual information landscape
- Learners perceive visuals as communicating information
- Learners practice visual discernment and criticality
- Learners pursue social justice through visual practice

Introduction

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) groups and task forces regularly review existing literacy guidelines and standards.¹ As a component of this revision, these groups were asked to align existing literacy standards and guidelines with the 2016 *ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*.² In 2018, the Image Research Interest Group (IRIG) was charged with creating a visual literacy companion document³ to re-envision the 2011 *ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*⁴ and the ACRL Visual

Literacy Standards Task Force (VLTF) was convened for this purpose.

While some see visual literacy as a concern limited to the fields of art, architecture, and design,⁵ visual information is truly multidisciplinary in nature.⁶ Visuals can include but are not limited to charts, drawings, graphs, icons, maps, memes, paintings, photographs, symbols, or other visualizations, as well as multimodal texts⁷ with visual elements.⁸

Visual literacy definitions differ among disciplines. The definition below, from the 2011 *ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*, is commonly used in the context of librarianship:

Visual literacy is a set of abilities that enables an individual to effectively find, interpret, evaluate, use, and create images and visual media. Visual literacy skills equip a learner to understand and analyze the contextual, cultural, ethical, aesthetic, intellectual, and technical components involved in the production and use of visual materials. A visually literate individual is both a critical consumer of visual media and a competent contributor to a body of shared knowledge and culture.⁹

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 empirical research from 2019-2021, interviewing stakeholders in a range of roles and disciplines.¹⁰ 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:

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

This companion 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. We also use the phrase, "Learners who are developing their visual literacy abilities," to signal that visual literacy requires continuous and lifelong engagement. The resulting document is a reflection of the 2016 *Framework's* expanded understanding of information literacy,¹¹ 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 dispositions¹² according to the frames of the *Framework for Information Literacy*. Instead, we suggest potential connections between the knowledge practices and dispositions within each of our themes and the frames of the 2016 *Framework*. In the document below, these potential connections are denoted as follows: 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]. As in the *Framework for Information Literacy*, these knowledge practices and dispositions are in an alphabetical order and not arranged according to hierarchy.

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*.¹³ While social justice is the primary focus of one of our four themes in this companion document, we believe social justice should not 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, in order to better reflect its fundamental role.

For additional related readings, please see our working bibliography at https://www.zotero.org/groups/2264485/acrl_visual_literacy_taskforce/library.

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¹ Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Guide to Policies and Procedures, Chapter 14: Standards, Guidelines, and Frameworks. “14.5 Procedures for Preparation of New Standards, Guidelines, and Frameworks.” 1996-2021. <https://www.ala.org/acrl/resources/policies/chapter14#14.3.1>.

² Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Framework Taskforce, “Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education,” Working Paper (Association of College and Research Libraries, February 20, 2014), <https://alair.ala.org/handle/11213/8657>.

³ “Chapter 14: Standards, Guidelines, and Frameworks,” Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL), September 1, 2006. <http://www.ala.org/acrl/resources/policies/chapter14>.

⁴ Association of College Research Libraries (ACRL), “ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education,” October 2011,

<http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/standards/visualliteracy.pdf>.

⁵ “What Is Visual Literacy?” *Visual Literacy Today*. June 3, 2021.

<https://visualliteracytoday.org/what-is-visual-literacy/>

⁶ 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>

⁷ A multimodal text is a text that uses a combination of two or more modes of communication.

⁸ While this document focuses on the visual nature of these examples, some visuals may require applying additional literacies in order to fully engage.

⁹ Association of College Research Libraries (ACRL), “ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education,” October 2011,

<http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/standards/visualliteracy.pdf>.

¹⁰ IRB #00001310 was coordinated through the University of San Diego.

¹¹ 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.

¹² As a companion document, we derive our understanding of knowledge practices and dispositions from the Introduction to *Framework for Information Literacy*, see footnotes 3-6.

¹³ 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>

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<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.82.5.210>.

Learners 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, which includes the creation, distribution, description, consumption, and iteration of a visual, have been and continue to be altered by digital tools, new techniques for image and video manipulation, participatory cultural practices, and online communities. At each phase of this life cycle, humans introduce layers of meaning that can reinforce systemic inequities and hegemonic notions of knowledge creation. This subjectivity can be exacerbated by how visuals are classified and described via text-based descriptions, which can perpetuate their own systems of power. Text-based search acts as the primary access point for many visuals influencing 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:

- Anticipate the ways in which algorithms, social media, and participatory technologies obscure or promote visuals and visual media creators, which may reflect commercial interests and reinforce existing social dynamics. [AICC] [IHV] [SJ]
- 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]
- Attribute visuals produced by other scholars, creators, and practitioners through citations, acknowledgements, or credit lines using available best practices. [IHV] [SaC]
- 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]
- Evaluate multimodal works with visual elements both holistically and as disparate parts in order to fully understand the work. [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 creative, social, and scholarly communities in order to create, produce, and disseminate visuals. [ICaaP] [RaI] [SaC]

Dispositions

Learners who are developing their visual literacy abilities:

- 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]
- Appreciate that creativity and inquiry can be inspired through browsing and experiencing

- serendipitous encounters with both digital and analog visuals. [RaI] [SaSE]
- 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]
- Recognize that organizing visuals for efficient access, retrieval, and analysis requires the use of different methods and tools than those used for textual information. [RaI] [SaSE]
- Recognize that the socio-cultural interpretation of a visual may change throughout its life cycle. [AICC] [ICaaP] [SaC]
- Understand that ethical and legal frameworks for accessing and sharing visuals are not universal but vary by country and global region. [IHV]
- 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]

Learners perceive visuals as communicating information

Visuals are created by people. Intentionally or unintentionally, these visuals communicate messages based on cultural, community, and disciplinary conventions. They are works that communicate visually, but can also communicate through multiple modes and involve other senses. Learning to read visuals requires deconstructing and interpreting different elements and contexts of visual communications in order 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 visual messages that prioritize inclusivity or are tailored to the needs of specific audience.

Knowledge Practices

Learners who are developing their visual literacy abilities:

- Anticipate that the process of visual creation is iterative and involves many phases, including inspiration, transformation, experimentation, synthesis, and refinement. [ICaaP] [RaI]
- 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] [ICaaP]
- 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, race, and other cultural or social identifiers. [AICC] [ICaaP] [SJ]
- Explore creative or generative engagement with visuals to conceptualize, research, and analyze complex topics, such as mind mapping, photo elicitation, visualization, and other methods. [RaI]

- Implement a range of principles and strategies for accessibility in visual media, including alt text, complex image descriptions, and audio description of visuals in video, among other techniques. [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:

- Acknowledge that receiving feedback about visuals is a valuable step in the creation process. [ICaaP] [SaC]
- Appreciate that creation, dissemination, selection, and use of visuals may be mediated by economic factors, including compensation for creators, material production costs, licensing, and associated publication fees. [IHV] [ICaaP] [SJ]
- Consider the varying role of visuals in disciplinary scholarship, examining evolving trends and standards for communication impact, style, purpose, creator intent, and audience reaction. [AICC] [Sacs]
- Cultivate an appreciation for visuals from cultures that are not their own, respecting the value of visual materials to creators and their communities. [IHV] [Ral] [SJ]
- 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]
- 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] [Ral] [SaC] [SJ]
- Realize that visuals in all formats are works of intellectual property. [IHV]
- Recognize that a visual's communicative intent and purpose can be changed through modification, repurposing, remix, or reformatting. [ICaaP] [SaC]
- Recognize how incorporating accessibility practices and principles can enrich the experience of visuals for all users. [ICaaP] [IHV] [SaSE] [SJ]
- Reflect on the role of personally-created visuals as meaningful contributions to research, learning, and communication. [IHV] [SaC]
- Value the ways that different ways of knowing and being, including cultural, traditional and Indigenous knowledge, may be represented in visuals. [AICC] [IHV] [Ral] [SJ]

Learners practice visual discernment and criticality

Visuals are never neutral. In addition to conveying economic, social, and ideological values, they 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 negotiations with visual media over time. Learners can become discerning, engaged citizens through fostering empathy, developing healthy skepticism, and resisting strict binaries.

Knowledge Practices

Learners who are developing their visual literacy abilities:

- Examine visuals for signs of alteration, such as cropping or use of digital filters, and consider the intent and consequences of any changes made. [AICC] [ICaaP]
- Examine visuals slowly and deeply in order to develop and refine critical observation skills. [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]
- Interpret visuals within their disseminated context by considering related information such as captions, credits, and other types of metadata. [ICaaP] [SaC] [RaI]
- 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]
- Question whether a visual could be considered authoritative or credible in a particular context, which can include comparing it to similar visuals, tracking it to its original source, analyzing its embedded metadata, and engaging in similar evaluative methods. [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]
- 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]
- 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]
- 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]
- Reflect on the dual role that visuals may play in either fostering or subverting harmful, restrictive, social, or cultural norms. [AICC] [ICaaP] [SaC] [SJ]
- Value critical viewing of, and critical reflection on, visuals across all formats. [RaI] [SaSE]

Learners pursue social justice through visual practice

Visual practice is the creation and consumption of visuals for the purpose of transmitting and building knowledge. The pursuit of social justice through visual practice is an ongoing journey, which requires consistent work related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Pursuing social justice

can include decentering whiteness, heteronormativity and other hegemonic practices in visual collections and canons, improving accessibility of visuals and platforms, and 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.

*Please note: each knowledge practice and disposition in this theme first appears in one of the three other themes.

Knowledge Practices

Learners who are developing their visual literacy abilities:

- Anticipate the ways in which algorithms, social media, and participatory technologies obscure or promote visuals and visual media creators, which may reflect commercial interests and reinforce existing social dynamics. [AICC] [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]
- 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]
- 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]
- Implement a range of principles and strategies for accessibility in visual media, including alt text, complex image descriptions, and audio description of visuals in video, among other techniques. [ICaaP] [IHV] [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]

Dispositions

Learners who are developing their visual literacy abilities:

- 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]
- 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]
- Appreciate that creation, dissemination, selection, and use of visuals may be mediated by economic factors, including compensation for creators, material production costs, licensing, and associated publication fees. [IHV] [ICaaP] [SJ]

- 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]
- 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]
- 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]
- 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]
- Prioritize ethical considerations for cultural and intellectual property when creating, sharing, or using visuals. [ICaaP] [IHV] [SJ]
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- Reflect on the dual role that visuals may play in either fostering or subverting harmful, restrictive, social, or cultural norms. [AICC] [ICaaP] [SaC] [SJ]
- Value the ways that different ways of knowing and being, including cultural, traditional and Indigenous knowledge, may be represented in visuals. [AICC] [IHV] [RaI] [SJ]