

The Process of Critique

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Excerpt from....

Trumbo, J. (1997, Summer) "The Process of Critique in Visual Communication." *Journalism Educator*, Vol. 52(2): 15 - 23.

Description. The critique of visual work begins with a thorough description of the physical attributes of the design, object or product. The nature of the object, the content, the medium and the form are all described in detail. No attempt is made at this juncture to interpret how or why elements are used. Nor is there an attempt to discuss the relative success of the effort. Rather, the descriptive process offers a visual accounting of the elements that are in use.

The nature of the object describes its general characteristics. Is it a newspaper, magazine, WEB site, etc.? The content is the intended message and the combination of elements that make up the visual design. The medium includes the specific materials that are used to create the visual design as well as its delivery system. The form includes the arrangement of elements and format, composition, use of images, overall layout and design, art direction, etc.

The process of description:

What is the nature of the object or visual product? What specifically has been designed?

What is the specific content? Is it persuasive? Entertaining? Informative?

Is the content primarily text? Image? Sound? Is it three-dimensional? Two-dimensional?

How has the content been delivered? Electronic? Digital? Print?

What is the form? Shape of the pages? Optimum screen size? Viewing area?

How have design elements such as color, line, shape, etc. been used?

How would you describe the composition?

How do elements interact?

Describe the use of images, sound, and text.

Interpretation. The process of interpretation helps the designer examine the potential of a visual product to create meaning. Through the process of interpretation, the designer reaches beyond the passive absorption of images and the tendency to appreciate visual design for its formal success. The designer examines why choices were made and how they contribute to make the visual design comprehensible and meaningful. Interpretation is a carefully constructed critical evaluation of the visual product.

Critical evaluation and persuasive argument need to be built around an examination of the evidence. The evidence in visual communication is that which is observed and described: the nature of the content, medium and form of the visual design. In the first step, description, the designer developed a thorough accounting of the visual design or product. The next step, interpretation, requires that the designer defend these choices in relation to the intent and the desired outcome of the visual design.

The goal is to seek evidence that can help the designer better understand the environment and culture within which the product will function. The only way to truly understand what is meant or implied by the use of a particular color, style of illustration, typeface, icon, or photographic style is to examine its origin and the influences that lead to its selection.

The process of interpretation:

What specifically did the designer intend?
What specific communication problem does the design solve?
Why are the physical properties of the design appropriate?
Who specifically is the audience and how does the design reach them?
Demographic information such as age, income, etc. can be used to define the audience. Psychographic information such as lifestyle, attitudes and beliefs can also augment our understanding of the audience.
How does the design interact with those outside the target audience?
What environmental influences are important? How does the environment impact our understanding of the design?
What does the visual design MEAN? Can it be interpreted? Does it have symbolic, political, cultural meaning that is not in keeping with the intent? Can it be misinterpreted?

Evaluation. Most examples of visual communication can be evaluated from a number of perspectives. It is therefore important to define the criteria by which the product is being judged. Some common criteria in print media include a comparison to a competitor's product, subscription or readership increases or decreases, the relevance of the product to the target audience, etc. Evaluating the success or failure of an effort is partly a qualitative judgment based on knowledge of design and communication principles, production realities, and audience characteristics.

In a critique session, describe why something does or doesn't work in as much detail as possible. Statements of value ("I don't like the colors...") must be backed up with insight concerning the basis for the evaluation ("... because the use of primary colors and a complimentary color scheme is too bold to express the spirit of serenity and relaxation that is described in the editorial philosophy"). If an evaluation signals a change in direction for the client, the evaluation should be backed up with research. For example, color theory that describes physiological responses to the colors currently in use or research that looks at color preferences of the identified audience.

The process of evaluation:

What value statements have been made concerning the success or failure of the visual design? How might these be examined further?
Who will evaluate the success or failure of the visual design? What are their unique qualifications?
How specifically will success be measured?
Can the design be produced as planned? Can it be distributed properly and efficiently?