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Descriptive Terminology: Visualization, Creativity, and Ideation

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For the past five years I have been teaching this assignment, a coffee labels/posters, to senior/junior-level students at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF), and at Virginia Commonwealth University, Qatar (VCUQ). (The work shown in this article are from students I taught at VCUQ). The goal of this first semester, 300/400 level course is to expose students to different methodological structures to increase their creative thinking and problem solving skills and to help them better execute concepts. With this objective in mind, this course is designed to enhance the students' formal and conceptual abilities in preparation for their final capstone classes within our graphic design curriculum.

Introduction

The overall philosophy behind this assignment is explicit versus implicit learning, in other words, a full expression of a subject matter through precise methodology defined by its objectives, delimitations, processes, and techniques for the utilization of visual problem solving. The philosophy includes defining paradigms for conceptual ideation and the formal underpinning structures of concept development and composition. For graduate and undergraduate students alike I do not value implicit instruction. The average BFA program in the United States requires 11.5 graphic design studio courses. The National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD) recommends 25 to 35% of all the overall units/credits within a four year Bachelor of Fine Arts in Graphic Design be devoted to graphic design curricula. Typically 25 to 35% equates to 11 to 16 graphic design courses. This does not include supportive courses within the visual arts outside graphic design.¹ Many BFA programs have fewer, including California State University, Fullerton. To teach on an implicit intuitive level is to forgo the foundation of a given discipline, including graphic design. A BFA degree is a foundation degree with which a student can support a career with hard work, dedication, and a desire to learn more. Implicit instruction leads to a career marred with creative blocks.

When I was a practicing graphic designer working in studios, and prior to my graduate studies, I was an intuitive designer who was very susceptible to creative blocks. My undergraduate experience was such that most of the course work I was exposed to was taught on an intuitive/implicit level. The instructors would give a project brief asking for 25 thumbnails the following class. We would continue to refine the project until the final comprehensive was due. Instead of being exposed to or understanding how one might create conceptual paradigms that help foster a direction through explicit learning, we were left to our God-given intuitive imagination. In many ways this was a means for weeding out students. As a practitioner, my way

of dealing with creative blocks was to work on 12 to 18 jobs at one time. If I did not have an idea for one job I would put it down and pick up a job that had a good direction. I would wait for an idea to magically arise with the job I had trouble with. Usually this would happen when I was taking a shower, hiking, fishing, or some other non-stressful event. I trained my mind to dream in color combinations in the Rapid Eye Movement (REM) state of sleeping, all of which did not help me at work. To this day I am still an intuitive designer; however, I do not think it is an effective way of teaching undergraduate students. The difference between an undergraduate student and me is experience. In other words, I have worked with and developed explicit methodologies, processes, and techniques that have been imbedded into muscle memory. They have passed from the mechanical explicit into the intuitive design vernacular I possess. My mind, now, naturally operates in this manner.

When you teach students to intuitively design they inherently do not understand the fundamentals beyond their own implicit perception. Such an approach tends to create designers who are one-dimensional, meaning they can solve a problem only one way. What happens when their way does not work? There is a great article in *The New Yorker*, entitled **Performance Studies: The Art of Failure**, by Malcolm Gladwell. Gladwell cites numerous examples of explicit versus implicit learning, and likens the two learning styles to the difference between choking and panicking. One of the performance examples given is JFK Junior's tragic death over Martha's Vineyard – a dramatic example, but one that clearly illustrates the difference between choking and panicking. JFK Jr. had little experience in instrumentation flying. He had little to fall back upon, which ultimately caused his death. Within a design context, especially working within a graphic design studio or an advertising agency, it is tough to be creative 24/7. If a practitioner has some methodological training, he or she will know how to overcome the creative block.

I want my students to be able to internalize design methodology. Therefore, I have the students work on a semester-long project. **The project is divided into four components: four labels/posters and a process notebook.** The students work with **eight methodological paradigms: Descriptive terminology, two elements widely different, object substitution, die cut substitution, empty scene/context, unexpected context, unlikely reference, and image of resemblance.** The method of descriptive terminology is the focal point of this article. Each method-ology is explicitly taught to the students to enable them to create four variations of a coffee label/poster. The process notebook used to illustrate the methodology, processes, and techniques the students have learned over the semester, including examples of finished work. The methodologies of two elements widely different, object substitution, die cut substitution, empty scene/context, unexpected context, unlikely reference, and image resemblance was devised by Professor John R. Carter that California State University, Fullerton.

1. **Two elements wildly different** – *“A combination of two elements that are wildly different and would not normally be seen together and place them in a supportive context.”²*
2. **Object substitution** – *“Remove an object from one context and replace it with another unexpected object.”²*
3. **Die cut substitution** – *“Cut along the silhouette of an object, leaving a hole, and then place that image with the silhouette of the missing object over other images so that the silhouette becomes a window. The goal is to search for interesting and surprising juxtapositions of imagery.”²*
4. **Empty scene/context** – *“Find an empty visual scene or context, one that is like a stage set, or a proscenium waiting for the players to appear, and place an unexpected happening within that space.”²*
5. **Unexpected context** – *“Take something from one context and place it in another unexpected or unlikely context.”²*
6. **Unlikely references** – *“Combined unlike frames of reference, such as taking part of a comic book and placing it in a photograph or baroque oil painting.”²*
7. **Image resemblance** – *“Allow the mind to fantasize how one image may, in some way, resemble another image.”²*

Each of the eight methodologies is distinctive and creates a different visual outcome. The standard within the industry is to provide the client three to four visual approaches. The client will then choose one. Within this assignment descriptive terminology is primarily used to solve the four final comprehensives. The other seven methods help students understand different ways of visually constructing metaphorically based concepts – a subcomponent of descriptive terminology.

Methodology

“Descriptive Terminology” is an approach derived from deconstructionism, a devised methodology by reading **The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida’s Haunt**, By Mark Wigley. The method for determining the conceptual and formal directions of this system was to highlight the descriptive terminology, the nouns and verbs use by Mark Wigley to describe the subject matter. This is a method I use frequently to clarify terminology.

In this case, the terms that establish the conceptual and formal design objectives and the delimitations for manipulation are **distorting, distressing, disfigurement, misshaping, deforming, harassing, straining, stressing, instability, over extending, subverting, decaying, conflicting, and constraining.** However, the terminology bank will change with new content, ultimately creating unique solutions. Descriptive terminology has two levels. **Level 1 is purely formal in its approach – syntactical relationship in the formalistic structure (for example, distortion: (Noun) a physical blemish or disfigurement).** **Level 2 is a conceptual approach that does not necessarily need to be syntactically related to the concept (for example, distortion: level 2 (Verb) twist out of shape, or condition the true meaning – semantic interpretation that leads to a conceptual direction).** In this case, a visual concept is usually brought about through a metaphoric relationship using irony, parody, or simile and the juxtaposition of two images that distort our preconceived expectations.

For instance, literature about coffee may describe the caffeine buzz associated with drinking it. The word “buzz” can be used as a conceptual primer for formally manipulating typography, type and image, or photography to create a metaphoric interplay. The word “buzz” also can be used to create an onomatopoeia with its typography – a word whose sound suggest its meaning (*Figure 1a-c*).



Fig 1a. (Parody) Whisper: Speak softly.



Fig 1b. (Simile) Hum: To make a low prolonged sound.



Fig 1c. (Irony) Rumor: To discuss something, often of questionable veracity.

Level 1 is a formalistic method that deals with the governing of syntactic interplay within a given piece.

Governing takes place through the use of each descriptive term definition. This is done first by looking up the complete definitions of each term within the descriptive terminology bank. Each term's definitions indicate a syntactical direction in which to physically manipulate, in this assignment, a photograph, composite photograph, or illustration. For example, a student can create a composite photograph in which the composition and color scheme are persistently vibrating. In this case, the formal translation would equate to an asymmetrical composition with a direct complementary color palette. We can formally add to this composition by making the signifiers within the piece take on the appearance of a murmuring and whispering object. This can be done by the use of Photoshop or Illustrator as a medium, to create the final comprehensive. Through the use of the descriptive terminology bank multiple directions can be applied to the composite photograph or illustration. Each term's definitions are used as a formalistic mental primer that signifies a particular syntactical relationship specific to the creator's interpretation.

The designer can alter or amplify the inherent signifiers within the photograph or illustration. To help students understand if they are altering or amplifying the inherent meaning within a piece I provide a model to strip away the layered complexities found within most illustrations, photographs, and especially composites. Most images can be broken down into three categories: form/silhouette, tone/texture, and color (including black and white). The signifiers typically are communicated through one of the above three categories. I ask the students to analyze their photographs, illustrations, initial sketches, basic ideas, and determine the categories, form/silhouette, tone/texture, or color, in which the primary signifier is being communicated. In some cases, the primary signifier may be communicated through color. In other words, it may be communicated through form/silhouette or tone/texture. To amplify the inherent meaning found within an illustration, photograph or composite photograph the primary signifier, in most cases, should stay relatively intact. A good example is a tennis ball. The primary signifier falls under the category of form/silhouette. Ultimately the color and tones/texture are not necessary for the round object to be recognized as a tennis ball.

To amplify the meaning of the tennis ball color can be integrated into the composition by making the ball yellow-green and by providing context through application of a forest green color within the background – tennis court. To further amplify the tennis ball in the context in which it is used, the form and silhouette of the ball can be altered to an oval to imply bouncing. We can further amplify the context by applying a motion blur, thereby altering the tone/texture to indicate a ball bouncing in motion (Figure 2a-e).

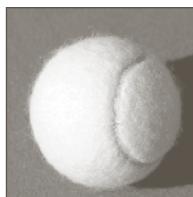
To alter the meaning within a given photograph the primary signifier should be changed by heavy manipulation, substitution, or addition of another signifier that is equal to the original primary. This does not necessarily mean scale, or any singular compositional device. Most photographs have multiple signifiers that lie on a hierarchical scale. I ask the students to identify the three primary signifiers that best communicate the content and arrange them in rank order. I then have the students place in rank order each of the three signifiers through the use of the model below (form/silhouette, tone/texture, and color) to understand how and where to penetrate the underpinning structure for manipulation purposes. In this way, the students' perception becomes more practiced, and they begin to understand how to approach amplifying or altering the illustration, photographic, basic idea, and/or initial sketches.



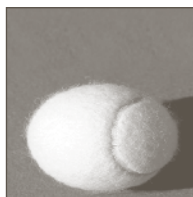
*Fig 2a.
Black & white tennis ball.*



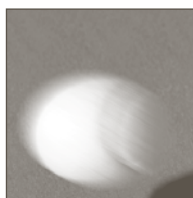
*Fig 2b. (Content) Color:
yellow/green tennis ball.*



*Fig 2c. (Context)
forest-green background.*



*Fig 2d. (Oval)
form/silhouette.*



*Fig 2e. (Motion blur)
tone/texture.*

Descriptive terminology

Buzz:

1. To make a low continuous humming sound like that of a bee.³
2. To murmur, whisper: To be filled with a confused murmur (a room of excitement).³
3. To make a signal with a buzzer.³
4. To go quickly: hurry.³
5. To utter covertly by or as if by whispering.³
6. To fly low and fast over.³
7. To drink to the last drop.³
8. To engage in a flurry of activity.³
9. To create a persistent vibrated sound.³

Formal and conceptual translators

Definition of word + Form/silhouette = Appropriate shapes and figures, including the direction, lighting, and perspective.

Definition of word + Tone/texture = Appropriate tonal structure of the object.

Definition of word + Grid = Appropriate grid (traditional, modern, or post-modern).

Definition of word + Image = Appropriate subject matter and type of image (illustration, photograph, actual object, rubbing, xerography, etc.).

Definition of word + Color = Appropriate color scheme (primary, secondary, tertiary, monochromatic, achromatic, complementary, near complementary, split complementary, analogous, neutral, and incongruent, or their variations).

Definition of word + Simile = Conceptual direction.

Definition of word + Irony = Conceptual direction.

Definition of word + Parody = Conceptual direction.

Grid, type, image, and color act as visual translators for a design vernacular. Simile, irony, and parody act as conceptual translators for a design lexicon.



Fig 3a. Manipulated image.



Fig 3b. Original image.

Level 2 operates on a conceptual level, metaphorically derived through the descriptive terminology bank, in this case to buzz, murmur, whisper, hurry, fly low, move fast over, flurry, vibrate, our preconceived understanding. An example is the Santa Claus hat with the coffee bean vibrating and the whispered hurry of old St. Neck. Level 2 is created through a purely semantic juxtaposition to create metaphoric interplay – related to the meaning of the objects and not the way in which they were manipulated. In this case, placing a coffee bean at the end of Santa Claus's hat creates the metaphor of a late night spent quietly delivering toys. Level 2 is created by twisting the true meaning of each object out of shape or condition. In order to create a visual metaphor there needs to be a preconceived understanding of the object and the context in which it is normally used. Without a preconceived understanding metaphoric interplay will not take place because the viewer cannot find the likeness between the objects.

The other type of level 2 is conceptually created through the apparent manipulation of an object or objects to create metaphoric interplay. An example is a United States Postal Service mailbox that has been squeezed in from two sides. One of the mailbox legs has been physically altered to suggest the leg is in the act of walking, to insinuate the mail is going to be collected and delivered (Figure 3a-b). In either type of level 2, metaphoric interplay is achieved by distorting our preconceived expectations.

In some cases, but not in the examples shown here, I take the metaphoric development one step further, I ask the students to create a catchphrase that will tie their illustration or photograph to the subject. In doing so, I set up a conceptual model that yields descriptive terminology based on the illustration or composite photographs each student has created. Again, four labels/posters are due at the end of the semester; therefore, each student works with four illustrations, photographs, or composites. I ask the students to create individual and group lists of descriptive terminology based on the emotional, social, political, physical, or cultural context and/or consequence. I also ask the students to think in terms of indexical and oppositional relationships to create metaphoric interplay. Each term above is used as a conceptual primer for the students to use with the descriptive terminology they have developed.

In the catchphrase exercise the most important advice I give is to avoid self-editing. *“Do not worry about what others think. Divorce yourself from this inclination. Do not worry about your idea appearing dumb or foolish.”* The worst thing anyone can do when working with this model is to self-edit in the midst of the process. Self-criticism can hamper the free flow of word association. If one is worried about how the catchphrase is perceived more than likely the phrase will not be written down. It is not that all catchphrases are worth using-- they are not-- but a poor catchphrase oftentimes is utilized as a conceptual primer to create a favorable one.

In my opinion, students and practitioners alike need explicit training when they are trying to improve their formal and conceptual design abilities. Simply because graphic design is associated with the visual arts does not mean there is no structure in the way that creative human beings foster ideas. Artists do not simply emit, naturally, creativity – this is a myth. I have not met an artist who is a natural phenomenon – although some would like you to believe it. Even the omnipresent intuitive designers have imbedded within them structured ideation, that when studied, will demystify their design abilities and yield repeatable methodologies, processes, and techniques. The demystification of self is not easy; one only needs to be brave enough to look.

Process

As part of the research for this assignment students are required to take/make 180 color images, 25 charcoal rubbings, 25 ink rubbings, 10 actual objects, and 25 drawings. The content of these images should be subject based. Stock photography is not allowed. It is considered plagiarism within the context of this assignment. Within the field of graphic design education many faculty members allow students to use photography that is not their own. This I believe is shortsighted. Within any photograph signifiers are found that convey an idea, a concept not owned by the student. These signifiers are direct, iconically based; indirect, symbolically based; or abstract, indexically based. Regardless of how students use the stock photography, the concept or

concepts were not originated by them. Most graphic design programs around the country require photography courses. Students in my class are required to use these skills.

Once the students have collected their imagery I asked them to pick 10 of their best and scan them. Each of these images is analyzed for signifiers. Once this task is completed, we can move on to the methodology utilized for this assignment.

In teaching each one of these methods the time is divided into three-week intervals, and the last two weeks are used to develop the typography for each poster/label. In the beginning of each three-week period I lecture on the methodology that governs each method. Since this is an image based class each lecture is typographically based in order for the students to realize that any of the methodological structures being studied work with image-based information, typographic-based information, or type- and image-based information.

I go over the rules that govern the method, in this case descriptive terminology, and then break down the definitions found within the descriptive bank in order to discover and discuss the formal/conceptual techniques/directions one can apply to typography. (This is done for each term.) In doing so, I have two students look up a dictionary Web site on the Internet, each student taking half the list. In turn, each student reads off the definitions found for each descriptive term. When a definition is read that I can visualize how to manipulate typographically, I discussed these formal/conceptual techniques/directions with the class. Once I have gone through one or two definitions, I asked the students to help by further developing the formal/conceptual typographic techniques/directions listed. As a class, we go through each definition, looking for descriptive terminology that formally and conceptually fosters ideation.

Once this typographic process is completed, I ask the students to go back over the list, one at a time and as a class, and translate the list into image-based techniques/directions. Once this is done, I asked the class to go back over the list and determine which techniques/directions can be applied for conceptual development. In this case, I give them examples to stimulate discussion. I also tell the students that other techniques and conceptual directions will arise as we move through the three-week period, and I ask them to add these to the list. In most cases, the majority of students are still confused, especially about how to generate conceptual directions using the terms lectured upon and the governing factors that apply to the method of descriptive terminology. Explicit instruction does not mean that an individual is not confused. Confusion is a sign of higher learning. It is natural for students to be confused when confronted with abstract forms of conceptual development. However, through explicit instruction, time, and repetition the state of confusion should subside. Typically this process takes three weeks for each method.

To help the students work through the three-week period, and to ensure good understanding and adequate image results, I ask for multiple manipulations/sketches each week for a total of 60. This allows each student to have four excellent illustrations, photographs, or composites for the final comprehensives.

In discussing the images with the students I suggest they work from simple to complex. If the student can control the signifiers, then more complexity could be utilized. If that works, use more, and so on until the student can no longer control the work. By working in this manner students begin to understand the level of complexity at which they can operate successfully. Most students attempt to work at a level entirely too complex for their experience. Therefore, the majority of their ideas are never fully realized, and are marred by over complexity. Keeping a watchful eye on the amount of information they add to the composite photograph will help them achieve better results.

To foster rapid integration of the methodologies being explored I conduct a structured critique. Each critique is broken down into two parts. The first part, I ask the students to critique another individual's work using the categories of composition, underpinning structure, color, and methodology, including the level employed. In the second part, I asked the students who created the work to tell the class how it was achieved technically.

In every curriculum program around the United States and abroad unique factors influence how a student learns or does not. In our program, students' understanding of composition and color is underdeveloped. For this reason, I integrate these topics into the critique model. Students learn or relearn the basic differences between symmetrical and asymmetrical design. In this assignment only asymmetrical composition is allowed. This is not to say that symmetrical composition is inappropriate, it is not. Symmetrical composition has its place, especially when a designer is intentionally trying to make the audience eye rest and create a stable, harmonious environment for viewing.

(An excellent example of this is the Japanese flag.) However, in our program most students want to plop an object in the center of the format. They have no understanding if it is an asymmetrical or symmetrical composition. Asymmetrical composition is inherently harder to achieve. It is an off-balance arrangement that typically, if done well, induces kinetic energy within the viewing eye; therefore, the harder path is chosen.

I give them simple tools to identify, during the critiquing process, if a composition is symmetrical or asymmetrical. Each piece being critiqued starts out this way. After the students have identified the compositional balance, I ask them to go over the underpinning structure found within the composition, including the focal points that naturally imbue the work, form/silhouette inherent in the work, including compositional techniques (scale, figure/ground relationships, oppositional relationships, etc.) and tone/texture, including oppositional relationships. At this point within the process, often I will stop the critique to go over the inflections found within the underpinning structure and talk about how to technically alter the "voice" of the work by decreasing or increasing one of the formal techniques utilized within the composition, or by applying another.

To help students understand how to utilize color effectively I supply a handout at the beginning of the semester that includes 10 color schemes (one hue with neutrals, monochromatic, simple analogous, analogous with neutral, analogous with complementary accent, direct complementary, near complementary, split complementary, triadic, and random hue color scheme) (Figure 4). In addition to the handout I lecture on different variations of each color scheme above: tinting (adding white and also adding small amounts of one hue); shading (adding black); simultaneous contrast and how to reduce or increase it; warm colors and cool colors; value; chroma/brightness; saturation; color purity; dirty colors and/or muddy colors; subtractive color theory and its primary, secondary, and tertiary colors; additive color theory and its primary, secondary, and tertiary

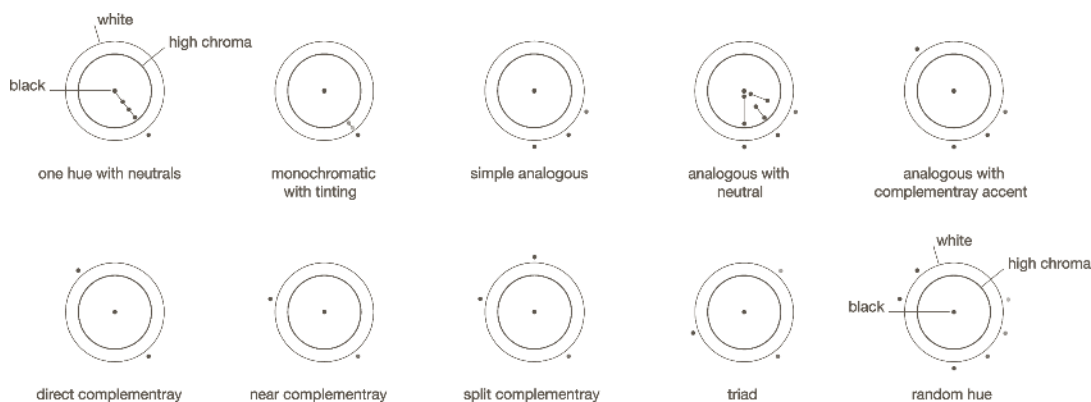


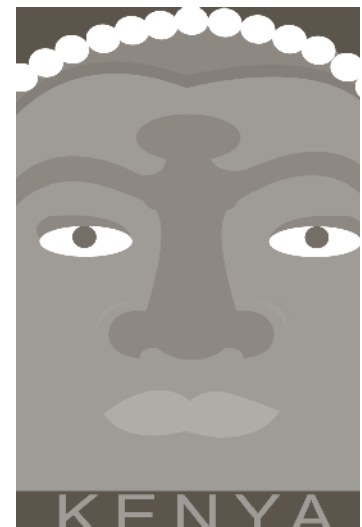
Fig 4. 10 color schemes.



colors; and three-dimensional color theory and its primary, secondary, and tertiary colors. I relate this information to print-based, Web-base, and environmental graphic design.

To reinforce the color information, in the critiquing process the student is responsible for identification of color scheme, and must describe (using color terminology) the effective or ineffective use of the color techniques found within the composition. At the beginning of the semester I help the students to identify the color schemes and color techniques being utilized. By the time the semester is near completion the majority of the students are color competent, and they can articulate color information with little or no help.

The forth category within the first stage of the critiquing process depends upon the method being explored. Each student doing the critiquing is required to identify the methodology – descriptive terminology or not – and what level is being utilized within the work and why. I make it clear at the beginning of the semester that each student, is to use the method being explored. For students to gain a deeper understanding of the methodology they must aim for purity. I tell the students that once the semester is over they are free to combine these methods, which is a rather easy thing to do.





After the first critiquing stage is completed, the author of the work articulates to the rest of the class how he or she technically achieved the attributes within the piece. In this case, Photoshop and Illustrator are used as a medium, and therefore each student demonstrates, articulates the step-by-step process on the computer.

In the last two weeks of the semester I give the students the practical information for the labels/posters. Four class periods are reserved for this task to work with the typography. For each of these class periods I ask the students to bring in full-size, black and white, tiled-out final comprehensives off the computer, for class review. This full-size process is designed to give the students the opportunity to show me how they plan to set their typography on their labels/posters. In many cases the typography is too large and the hierarchical structure is poorly defined. To help them understand how typographic hierarchy needs to operate for viewing at a distance I draw a diagram on the board and ask the students to identify the intended audience. I then ask the students where the information typically would be displayed. Finally, I ask them to imagine the size of that environment. The answers to those above contextual questions give the maximum reading distance for typographic information. I fill the distance in on the diagram and ask what is the normal reading distance for bodycopy. (Normal reading distance is 18" to 24" away). The bodycopy information is then indicated on the diagram. I then explain to the students that most typographic information that is applied to posters operates on a hierarchical scale of four, two of which are now identified. Spacing the other two distances out equally over the typographic visual range completes the hierarchical scale. I explain to the students that unless they are using large type for typographic impact they should use this method for determining the typographic hierarchical scale for posters. The exercise is then repeated for the labels.



To demonstrate how the students typographic information is operating on the poster, I ask them to pin their work up in the hallway, and as a class, we walk away from the posters in order to understand the design reading distance. (The hallway that is available to the class is over 300' long, well lit, and an excellent environment for testing.) Most students are quite surprised at the distance at which they can read the typographic information. Given this new insight the students make typographic adjustments to improve their hierarchy. I give them a basic rule for typographic legibility: 1" of letter height for every 50' of viewing distance. This is a crude rule that works best with black mono weight typography set in semibold or bold.

I also remind the students that each one of the methods explored can be used to create typographic configurations that may harmonize well with their imagery. Each of the remaining class periods is dedicated to the refinement of their typography. The steps above are repeated for the remaining class periods. Depending upon how fast a student can work he/she may repeat the exercise several times within the class.

Conclusion

In closing, every curriculum structure needs are different. In this assignment, basic conceptual development and understanding of how and why objects communicate are essential components of a student's design vernacular. It is important for our students to receive this explicit training prior to their capstone classes. I hope that through a semester long submersion in methodology and process students will realize how they can use this information in the development of their work throughout their career. For students, I hope the use of this system becomes fluent and natural.

Terminology

Denotative: To mark out plainly.

Convergent: Approaching a single point.

Signifier: A visual element that conveys to the mind ideas through the form of an icon, symbol, or index. Visually an icon, symbol, or index is usually conveyed through silhouette/form, tone/texture, color, or a combination of the above.

Syntactic: Relating to form, dealing with the formal relationships between signs or expressions in an abstraction from their signification and their interpreters.

Connotative: Suggest additional meaning.

Endnotes

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