

## “Unframing” as a Pedagogical Philosophy

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Murphy, M. (2023). “Unframing” as a Pedagogical Philosophy. In M. Murphy, S. Beene, K. Greer, S. Schumacher, & D.S. Thompson (Eds.), *Unframing the Visual: Visual Literacy Pedagogy in Academic Libraries and Information Spaces*. ACRL Press.



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### **Abstract:**

What does “unframing the visual” mean, and why was it chosen as the title for an anthology on visual literacy pedagogy inspired by the 2022 Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Framework for Visual Literacy in Higher Education: Companion Document to the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (VL Framework)?<sup>1</sup> Spoiler alert: The phrase refers to a certain philosophy for visual literacy teaching and learning. In this introduction, I will start by defining what visual literacy is, then explain how my definition relates to this pedagogical philosophy, eventually arriving at “unframing the visual” as an active praxis for academic librarians and information practitioners to embrace in their work with visual literacy learners

**Keywords:** unframing the visual | visual literacy | higher education | pedagogical philosophy | pedagogy | academic librarians

### **Article:**

**\*\*\*Note: Full text of article below**

## INTRODUCTION

# “Unframing” as a Pedagogical Philosophy

Maggie Murphy

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**W**hat does “unframing the visual” mean, and why was it chosen as the title for an anthology on visual literacy pedagogy inspired by the 2022 Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) *Framework for Visual Literacy in Higher Education*: Companion Document to the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (VL Framework)?<sup>1</sup> Spoiler alert: The phrase refers to a certain philosophy for visual literacy teaching and learning. In this introduction, I will start by defining what visual literacy is, then explain how my definition relates to this pedagogical philosophy, eventually arriving at “unframing the visual” as an active praxis for academic librarians and information practitioners to embrace in their work with visual literacy learners.

The editors of this book were all members of the task force that authored the VL Framework, which serves as a guidance document on visual literacy for academic librarians. We proposed this volume on visual literacy pedagogy as a way to illustrate VL Framework principles in practice, and in doing so, we knew we would be asked for our own definition of *visual literacy*.<sup>2</sup> As the lead editor for the book, I offer the following definition: Visual literacy is an interconnected set of practices, habits, and values for participating in visual culture that can be developed through critical, ethical, reflective, and creative engagement with visual media. However, if someone were to ask visual literacy scholars, educators, and scholars working in a range of fields and specializations for a definition of visual literacy—as we did as part of the research study that informed the VL Framework<sup>3</sup>—they will likely get an ever-expanding list of verbs representing exactly what that engagement with visuals should look like. These include, but are in no way limited to, *analyzing, assessing, attributing, citing, communicating with, creating, crediting, describing, discovering, evaluating, examining, experimenting with, finding,*



*interpreting, interrogating, making, modifying, producing, questioning, reading, remixing, searching for, and selecting* visuals.

It would be difficult for anyone to argue that there is truly an archetypal individual whose skills demonstrate the finite achievement of becoming visually literate, a status reached at the end of a linear learning journey, especially as our information landscape becomes more complex. In response to the institutionalization of visual literacy instruction after the “visual turn” in academia,<sup>4</sup> cultural critic and scholar Jonathan Beller writes that

visual studies will amount to little more than an accommodation to shifting conditions of domination and the intensification of global inequality unless it is also imbued with the commitment to demonstrate both the preconditions for the production of images as well as the consequences of different modes of reception of these images.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, approaches to teaching visual literacy in higher education must include a focus on context and not just content, process and not just product, impact and not just intent. Further, the specific abilities comprising visual literacy are contextual to different roles, relationships, communities, and disciplines—and are as much about what a learner is able to *do* with visuals as what they understand about how visuals function in the world. To this end, we can provide non-exhaustive *examples* of ways that visual literacy learning might occur across cognitive, affective, and embodied ways of knowing, many of which are identified and categorized in the VL Framework’s knowledge practices and dispositions.<sup>6</sup>

But who should be concerned with visual literacy teaching and learning in higher education? Twenty years ago, visual culture scholar Martin Jay noted, “We live in a culture whose technological advances abet the production and dissemination of such images at a hitherto unimagined level”<sup>7</sup>—and those advances obviously have only continued. With this proliferation of visuals, there has been “growing willingness to take seriously as objects of scholarly inquiry all manifestations of our visual environment and experience, not only those that were deliberately created for aesthetic effects or have been reinterpreted in formalist terms” while still making distinctions between “different types of images and experiences.”<sup>8</sup> This is ultimately what “unframing the visual” means: facing the metaphorical gallery wall and removing the frame that casts the visual as a particular type of visual work, created for a specific purpose. As we wrote in the VL Framework, “While some see visual literacy as a concern limited to the fields of art, architecture, and design, visual information is truly multidisciplinary in nature.”<sup>9</sup> Therefore, unframing is an approach to visual literacy pedagogy that acknowledges that visuals are a pervasive part of everyday life, as well as embedded into every scholarly discipline—and as a result, academic information practitioners need to expand our scope beyond fine art and art history (while also not ignoring them). Building on the work of others before us, most notably the task force that authored the 2011 *ACRL Visual Literacy Competency*

*Standards*, this is the strategy we took with our colleagues in writing the VL Framework, as well as the philosophy that guides this volume.

It should be noted that at the time this book was written, the VL Framework had been in official adoption by ACRL for less than a year. Thus, our goal with this anthology is to present a range of theoretical and practical approaches to visual literacy pedagogy that illustrate, connect with, extend, and criticize concepts from the VL Framework, all while knowing that visual literacy practitioners’ work with this document will continue to evolve. In exploring the discussions and engaging with the activities that follow in the chapters ahead, authored by librarians and educators working across the academic curriculum, we hope that readers will find new inspiration for how to unframe, adapt, and apply visual literacy pedagogy and praxis in their own work.

## How to Read This Book

As previously noted, *Unframing the Visual: Visual Literacy Pedagogy in Academic Libraries and Information Spaces* is a project that emerged from the five editors’ work on the *Framework for Visual Literacy in Higher Education*. However, the relationship between these two texts goes beyond sharing the same conceptual underpinnings: *Unframing the Visual*’s very structure mirrors that of the VL Framework. Thus, to best help readers navigate this volume, I will offer some brief information about the structure of the VL Framework itself.

Like *Unframing the Visual*, the VL Framework is organized into four sections—each representing a theme that emerged from our task force’s research on trends, obstacles, and opportunities for visual literacy learning in higher education.<sup>10</sup> These themes are

- 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.

The VL Framework presents these themes in alphabetical order, a practice we follow in this book. The themes do not constitute a linear sequence of learning objectives; all the themes are equally distinct and important concepts with which visual literacy learners should engage. In the VL Framework, each theme has a discursive introduction followed by a list of knowledge practices and dispositions. (You will find references to these introductions, knowledge practices, and dispositions throughout the book.) However, it should be noted that, in recognition of the task force’s belief that “social justice should not be siloed as a discrete entity for visual literacy learning” and that “the pursuit of social justice must be recognized as integral to all aspects of visual practice,”<sup>11</sup> the knowledge practices and dispositions that make up the final theme first appear in one of the three other themes. This approach is intended to reflect the fundamental role of social justice to visual literacy learning.

Similarly, each thematic section of *Unframing the Visual* consists of an introduction (written by that section's editor), followed by six peer-reviewed chapters. In these introductions, the section editors provide background and context for the theme as it relates to visual literacy teaching and learning, as well as giving a brief overview of the chapters in their sections. Chapters in each section were selected because they engage with crucial concepts from the relevant theme, as discussed in each respective section introduction. However, because the practices, habits, and values that visual literacy learners need to develop overlap between themes, many chapters in this book could have fit into more than one thematic section. Therefore, we ask that, in addition to considering each section individually, readers also engage with this book as a whole. By engaging with this anthology holistically and iterating on the ideas within, we hope that readers will forge new paths for an unframed visual literacy pedagogy in support of a lifelong engagement with visuals.

## Notes

1. Association of College and Research Libraries, *The Framework for Visual Literacy in Higher Education: Companion Document to the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2022), [https://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org/acrl/files/content/standards/Framework\\_Companion\\_Visual\\_Literacy.pdf](https://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org/acrl/files/content/standards/Framework_Companion_Visual_Literacy.pdf).
2. There have been many previous definitions of *visual literacy* offered by scholars and practitioners in a range of fields, beginning with John L. Debes, "Some Foundations for Visual Literacy," *Audiovisual Instruction* 13 (1968): 961–64. See Joanna Kędra, "What Does It Mean to Be Visually Literate? Examination of Visual Literacy Definitions in a Context of Higher Education," *Journal of Visual Literacy* 37, no. 2 (2018): 67–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1051144X.2018.1492234>, for an excellent discussion of visual literacy definitions that includes both Debes and the 2011 ACRL *Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2011), <https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/visualliteracy>.
3. Dana Statton Thompson et al., "A Proliferation of Images: Trends, Obstacles, and Opportunities for Visual Literacy," *Journal of Visual Literacy* 41, no. 2 (2022): 113–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1051144X.2022.2053819>.
4. The *visual turn* is the "shift in emphasis in the humanities and social sciences toward an increasing concern with the importance of the visible. It is usually seen as having gained prominence in the 1990s and as having succeeded the linguistic turn." Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday, "Visual Turn," in *A Dictionary of Media and Communication* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), Oxford Reference, <https://www.oxfordreference.com>. For a brief history on the visual turn, see also Martin Jay, "Cultural Relativism and the Visual Turn," *Journal of Visual Culture* 1, no. 3 (December 2002): 267–78, <https://doi.org/10.1177/147041290200100301>.
5. Jonathan Beller, "Visual Culture," in *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, vol. 6, ed. Maryanne Cline Horowitz (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2005), 2429.
6. The terms *knowledge practices* and *dispositions* as they appear in the VL Framework are derived from the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education*. See Association of College and Research Libraries, *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2016), 9nn3–6, <https://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org/acrl/files/content/issues/infolit/framework1.pdf>.
7. Martin Jay, "That Visual Turn," *Journal of Visual Culture* 1, no. 1 (April 2002): 88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/147041290200100108>.
8. Jay, "That Visual Turn," 88.

9. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Framework for Visual Literacy*, 2. See also Kristen Harrison, “What Is Visual Literacy?” *Visual Literacy Today*, June 3, 2021, <https://visualliteracytoday.org/what-is-visual-literacy/>; Frank Serafini, “Visual Literacy,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.19>.
10. Thompson et al., “Proliferation of Images.”
11. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Framework for Visual Literacy*, 3.

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