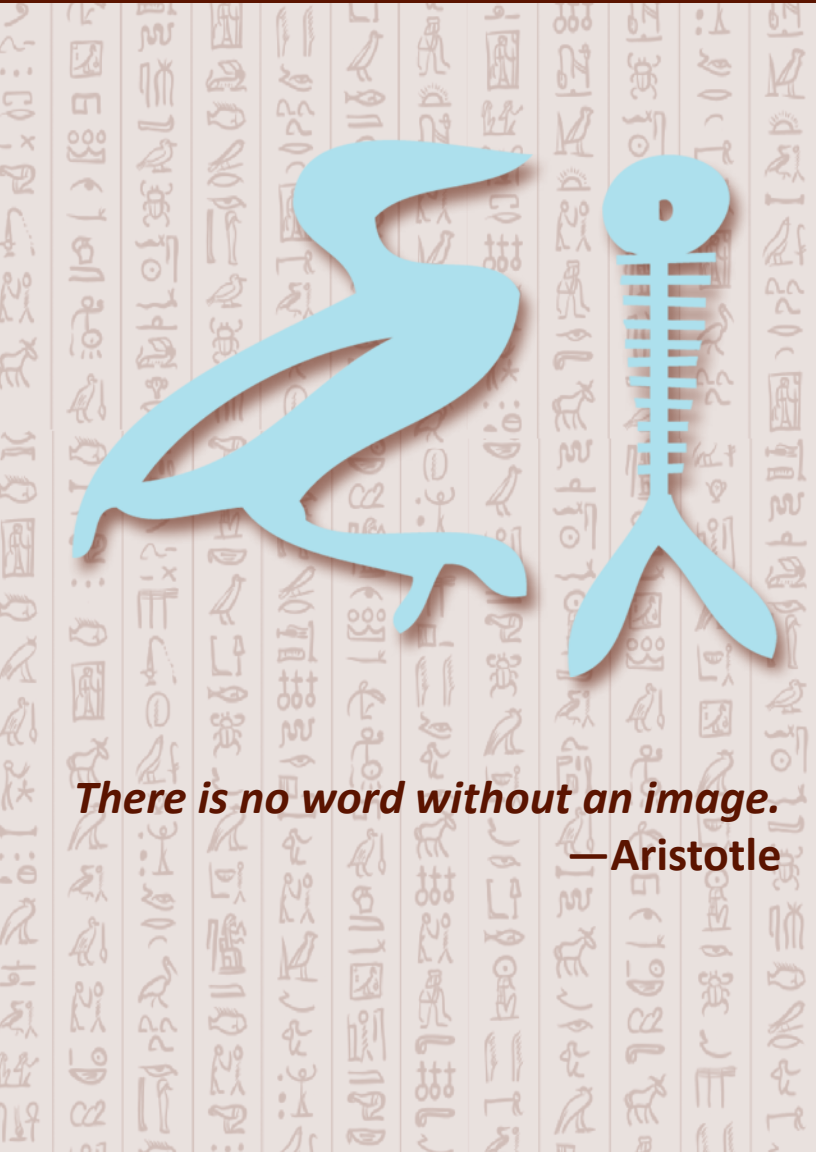




# VISUAL Language

Barb Manning  
Jeff Rollins  
Josh Rowe

## Why Words and Images Work Best Together



*There is no word without an image.*  
—Aristotle

**What is visual language?**  
Everyone remembers the image of the lone man facing down the tank during the student uprising in Tiananmen Square. Who remembers the headline or the photo caption? As visually oriented beings, humans store more pictures than text in their long-term memories. According to educational research, the average individual only remembers 30 percent of what they read, but nearly 80 percent of information presented with visual elements.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the photo of the lone student would not have as much impact without the words to place the visual image in context. This, in essence, is visual language. Visual language is a process of communicating a message or concept through images and text. It involves a tight integration of words and the images. If you remove the words or images, the remaining communication is unclear. Visual language has vocabulary, grammar, and syntax. The basic elements of design, such as line, space, shape, texture, and color are the vocabulary of visual language. In design, these basic elements are the tools of the trade. Without these tools, designers lack the fundamentals and leave the success of a piece to chance.

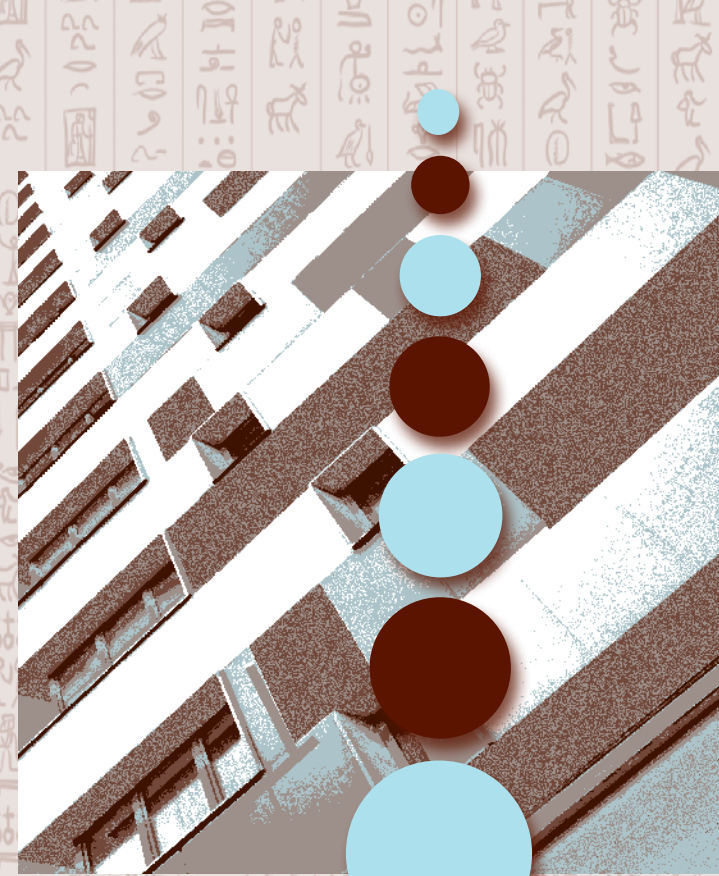
**Basic Design Elements**  
Line is the most fundamental element of design. Designers use lines to impart specific meanings within the context of a particular message. Diagonal lines suggest energy and vitality, while horizontal ones invoke calm and order. Vertical lines, on the other hand, seem elevating.<sup>2</sup>

The very existence of lines cuts space into shape. Space is the area between; designers do not create space. The shapes produced by designers positively affect space, while the background becomes negative space. Designers use other elements such as line and shape to influence it. The shape and placement of objects within a message also communicates. Shape can give a piece proportion and scale; it can be natural, geometric, and abstract. Line, shape and space can evoke texture, another basic design element. Texture can be actual or implied. It can instill messages with various emotional values. Color is the most dramatic element of design. There are warm colors and cool colors; there are exciting reds, calming blues, and cheery yellows. Designers use chroma, value, and hue, the three properties of color to provoke an extensive range of reactions with their messages.

**Principles of Design**  
The principles of design govern the way designers pair together basic design elements. Every design field uses these rules—from architecture, to industrial design, to fine art. Designers harness all of these elements with the grammar of visual language, the design principles of unity, variety, balance, rhythm, emphasis, proportion, and scale. Unity is achievable in a design through line, shape, color, or repetition. Using one color unifies a visual message. The way lines flow in a design can impart unity. Repetition of design elements can also unify a message. These same elements can engender variety with their placement, scale, and value. Contrast is the essence of variety. Light and dark colors, black and white shapes, straight and curved lines can all provide variety to a design message. If unity is the essential quality of a design, variety gives the design meaning. Contrast is also an important characteristic of how the design principles of balance, rhythm, and emphasis affect the basic elements of line, space, shape, texture, and color. These principles greatly influence the movement and impact of design.

When designers understand the vocabulary and grammar of visual language, they can employ them to create a visual syntax that communicates simple and complex ideas. For example, the simplicity of "M" in McDonald's golden arches, the Greek symbol for victory as the Nike logo, or the complexity of Frank Gehry's architecture. How well a designer communicates using visual language depends on his or her understanding of all the elements and principles of design.

Mark Walston, "When Words and Images Collide", AIGA, April 12, 2006  
Marjorie Elliott Bevin, *Design Through Discovery*, 6th edition, Harcourt Brace and Company, 1994



**“Visual language has vocabulary, grammar, and syntax.”**

