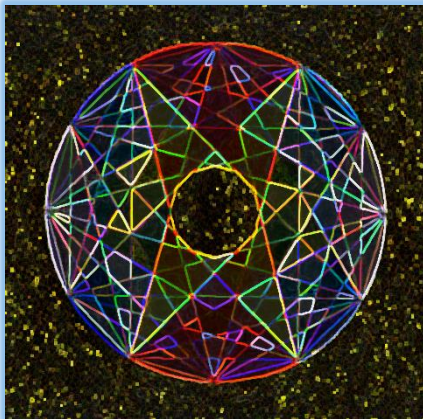


Fluid, elegant, even
beautiful:
academic writing as an artistic skill



What if there were a break
with tradition? What if
written language were
presented not as a stale and
immutable set of laws but
as a musical instrument: one that
students could shape and
refine and transform, to make
it sing and sparkle, to paint
with personality?



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Inspirations

The joys of **interdisciplinarity**:

- connections between writing, art, maths and science. Creating/presenting pattern from chaos.
- ‘Dance Your PhD’ contest: ‘All science should be explained with dance.’ See 2017 winner Nancy Scherich:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MASNukczu5A>

Language, like art and mathematics, is there to be played with, remoulded, transformed.

Resistance to academic writing

- ‘For in Calormen, story-telling ... is a thing you're taught, just as English boys and girls are taught essay-writing. The difference is that people want to hear the stories, whereas I never heard of anyone who wanted to read the essays.’

(From *The Horse and His Boy* (1954) by C.S. Lewis)

- ‘(Professors) demand dreariness because they think that dreariness is in the students’ best interests. Professors believe that a dull writing style is an academic survival skill because they think that is what editors want.’

Patricia Nelson Limerick (1993)

Writing as art

- Qualities of good writing ‘include passion, commitment, pleasure, playfulness, humour, elegance, lyricism, originality, imagination, creativity and “undisciplined thinking”...’

Helen Sword (2012, p.159)

- ‘...We do not always know to whom, or to what, we are reaching (...) sometimes people can write a whole essay without being able to say, or say entirely, everything they mean, or all they feel...’

Eric Hayot (2014. p.77)

Developing visual literacy

Video: 'What is Visual Literacy?'

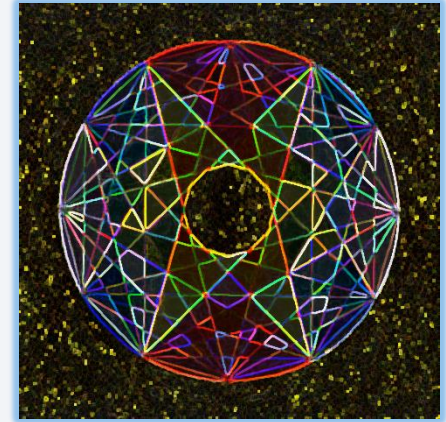
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O39niAzuapc> (10.00 – 12.15)

(Posted 19th November 2013)

Brian Kennedy, Director, Toledo Museum of Art

Visual literacy: i) Elements of Art

- line
- shape
- colour (hue/ intensity/ value)
- space
- texture



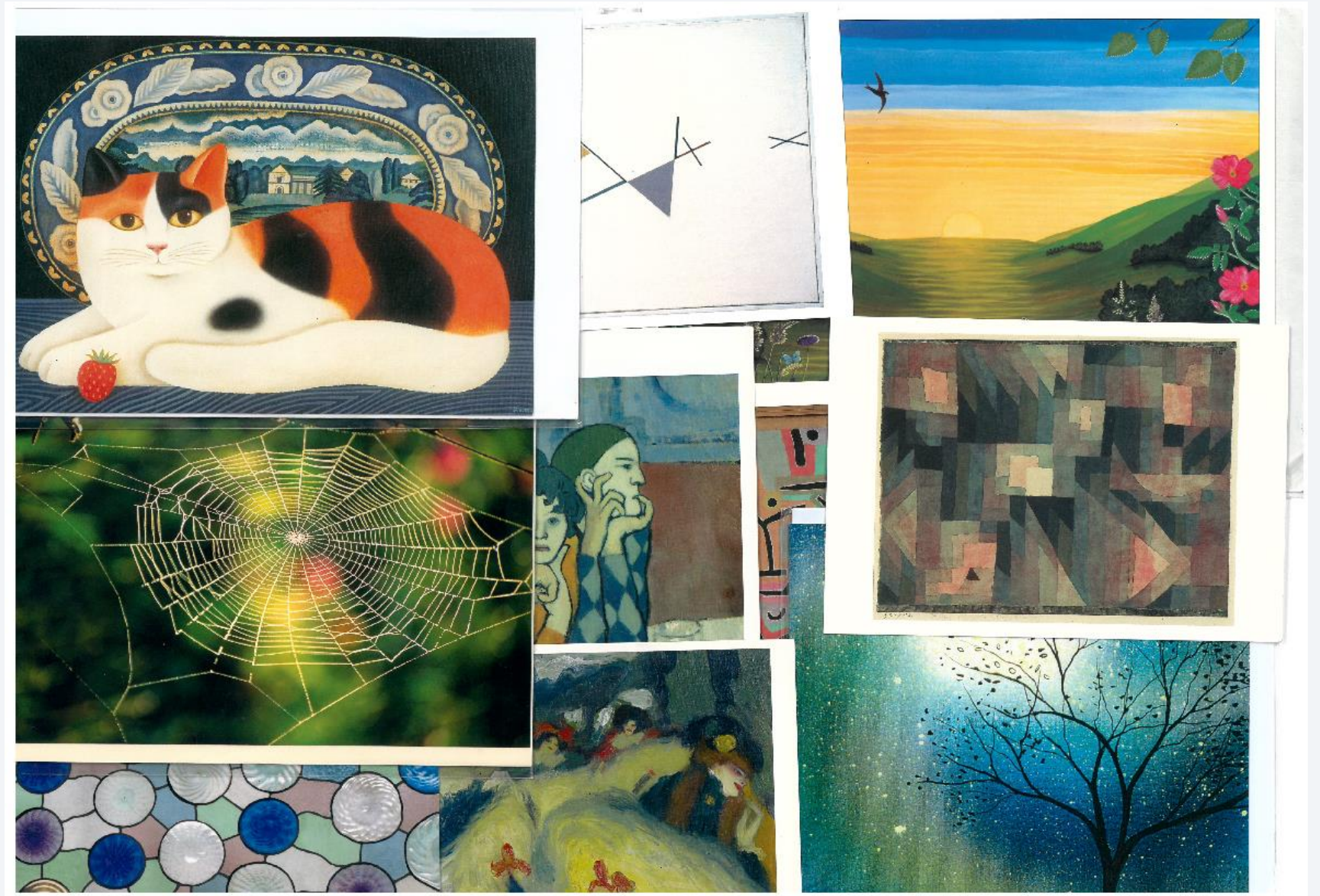
Visual literacy: ii) Principles of Art

- **emphasis** (points of focus)
- **balance** (sense of visual equilibrium)
- **harmony** (balanced use of singular elements)
- **variety** (use of different/ contrasting elements to create visual interest)
- **movement** (the way shapes, lines, colours, forms ... direct your eye around the composition, suggesting motion)
- **proportion** (the relative scale of objects and shapes in an image)
- **rhythm** (the path your eye follows: a regular repeating arrangement of shapes or colours, etc...)
- **unity** (overall coherence)

Class discussion:

Students each choose an image – and apply the elements and principles of visual literacy.

What works well?
What doesn't? Why
and how?



Applying it to writing...

- Can use all kinds of text in-class.
- Empowering.
- Enables stimulating discussions and deeper insights.

Guided online self-study:

- sample essay, with questions on how e.g. unity/ balance/ harmony are achieved
- 'Click and Reveal' PDF: student can compare own responses with the suggestions offered.

The poetry of academic writing

Read the following introductory paragraph.

Consider: How many sentences? Length? Rhythm? Why? Effect of the final sentence?

What elevates a piece of writing from being merely adequate into something which is fluid and elegant, even beautiful? Some key principles in art and design are relevant here. Unity and harmony, subtle variations and striking contrasts, tone and rhythm - all of these entice and guide the reader through the depths and shallows of the text. A writer is essentially an artist with words.

Furthermore...

What is the effect of:

- the trio of adjectives (in green)
- the pairs of words, joined with 'and' (in red)?

What elevates a piece of writing from being merely adequate into something which is **fluid** and **elegant**, even **beautiful**? Some key principles in art and design are relevant here. **Unity and harmony**, **subtle variations and striking contrasts**, **tone and rhythm** - all of these entice and guide the reader through the **depths and shallows** of the text. A writer is essentially an artist with words.

Not an amorphous blob

Activity: The shape of a text

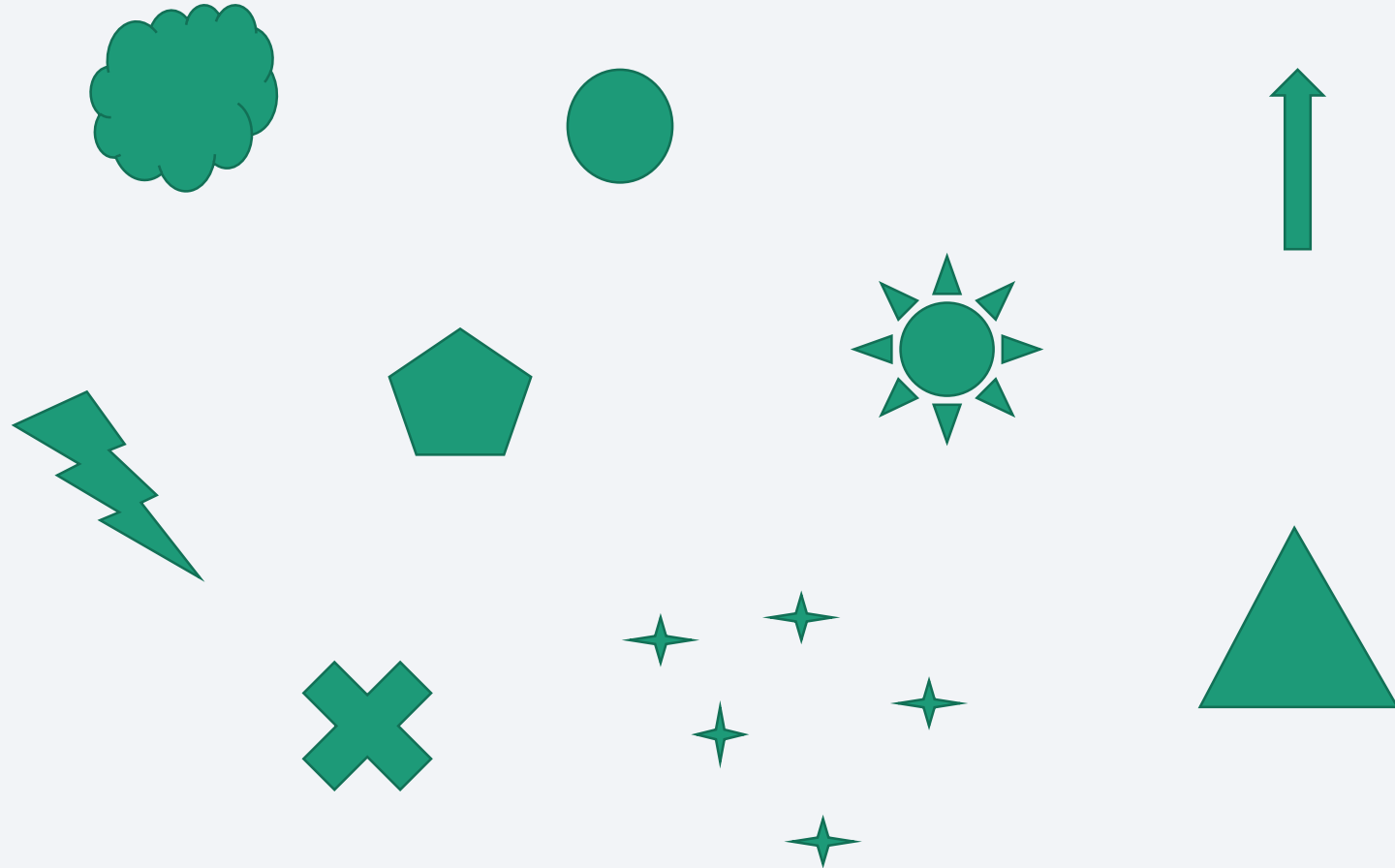
Take any text. What is the best visual metaphor for its shape?

e.g. a circle, doughnut, triangle, knot, braid, arrow, tree, firework, flower, constellation, others...?

- Students can compare/ contrast their ideas with each other – using texts written by themselves and by other writers.
- Discussion of “best fit” shape, depending on the content/ genre.

What might these shapes signify?

- circle
- doughnut,
- triangle,
- knot,
- braid,
- arrow,
- tree,
- firework,
- flower,
- constellation,
- others...



What 'shape' is this paragraph?

i) From an essay on how museums engage with younger audiences:

When it comes to engaging the interest of children, science centres are often a far more appealing proposition than conventional art galleries. The interactive equipment at venues such as London's Science Museum or the Glasgow Science Centre invites us to come and explore in a way that is tactile and playful, and involves our various senses -touch, sound, smell- not just the visual. This multi-sensual stimulation is in stark contrast to the somewhat staid "do not touch" atmosphere of, say, London's National Gallery or Tate Britain. It could be, of course, that this very staidness is an essential part of the gallery's atmosphere, giving us a sense of almost religious reverence. After all, some would argue, it is a place of serious learning and aesthetic appreciation, as well as a repository for valuable artworks – not a glorified toyshop. However, if such institutions are to arouse the interest of the next generation, with the same level of success that science centres are enjoying, they may have to challenge some existing preconceptions about what is appropriate and desirable.

What 'shape' is this paragraph?

ii) From an essay on the legacy of punk:

Punk iconography, in a 21st Century context, may still symbolise a rejection of mainstream values. Yet this is not always the case. Some people deliberately adopt aspects of punk imagery -purchased from a high-street store or even a designer label- as a kind of escapist fantasy, or simply because they feel it lends an aura of "edgy cool", while actually rejecting the underlying punk ethos of rebellion and anarchism. Thus mainstream consumer culture readily takes the aesthetics of a movement or counterculture, exploiting it for commercial or personal gain -while neutralising its anger, raw energy and the entire ideology that gave it political potency. In a sense, this is a particularly insidious form of cultural appropriation.

Next step

Try them out:

- Elements and principles of art – applied to writing
- The shape of a text

Key question to consider:

The writer has made many artistic choices here (even if some of these may be subconscious).

What effect might these choices have on the writer and their audiences(s)? And what if s/he had made different choices...?

Thank you!

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References

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- Limerick, P.N. (1993) 'Dancing with Professors: the Trouble with Academic Prose.' *New York Times*, 31 Oct.
- Sword, H. (2012) *Stylish Academic Writing*. Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press

Text examples throughout are the author's own.

Image credits

Slides 1 and 6

Karen Harris: Crystal Torus (2016); Arrow (2015)

Slide 8

Ken Clark: Moonshower

Neville Hill: Earth Spring (2003)

Paul Klee: Park near Lu (1938); Red-Green Gradation (Vermillion) (1921)

Martin Leman: Libra (1980)

Tomas Moldonado: Development of a Triangle (1949)

Johanna Mühlbauer: Spinnenetz

Pablo Picasso: Harlequin and Companion (1901); French Can-Can (1901)

Image from Casa Batllo, Gaudi Barcelona