



BEYOND WORDS



reading and writing in a visual age



John Ruszkiewicz

Daniel Anderson

Christy Friend

What details matter?

Books, articles, movies, photographs, buildings, and even ads—especially ads—must do more than just gain your attention. They have to hold it. If you've ever picked up a supermarket tabloid, you probably know what happens when the details of a story don't live up to a sensational headline.

Successful texts get you thinking beyond their first impressions by offering up rich details. You may not notice these details initially because they are deliberately secondary—like the separate stones that make up an arch. But remove one stone and watch what happens. In written texts, it's often the details that provide support for a claim or make a story plausible. In visual texts, the details enrich or complicate our initial experience and encourage us to look again and again. In music, the backbeat may be what defines a song and makes it memorable or tuneful.

LOOK CLOSELY Because of the sheer variety of texts, it's hard to provide general directions for paying attention to details beyond the obvious: Read, look, and listen carefully. Still, some habits might be useful in appreciating the details in a text.

- Don't trust first impressions. They may very well be wrong or misleading, especially when something you are reading is truly new or moves contrary to your expectations.
- Assume that more may be going on than you suspect. Read any text imaginatively and creatively. Take for granted that someone has paid careful attention while creating it and that all its elements serve a purpose. In particular, look for connections between the primary aim, theme, or thesis of the work and all the supporting details.
- Approach every text, especially a familiar or conventional one, as if you were encountering it for the first time. Sometimes we stop paying attention when the terrain we are covering seems familiar—like driving the same road every day.
- Examine how the graphic details contribute to a work. Study the lighting technique used by the photographer, the brushstrokes of a painter, the

similes and metaphors of a writer, and so on. Learn as much as you can about any texts you encounter often.

- Think about what the text has excluded or left out. Pay attention to the framing or cropping of an image, the topics not covered in an article or newspaper, the people whose names or faces aren't represented in a work. These omissions may prove to be more than a matter of detail.

EXAMINE THE POINT OF VIEW For example, **perspective**—the illusion of depth in paintings—is a detail you may not notice the first time you look at a work of art. Yet perspective contributes significantly to your experience. Artists can decide whether their subjects will imitate life in three dimensions or whether flattening or distorting these items better serves their ends. Similarly, **point of view**—what a photographer calls the “camera angle”—can give shape to a composition and highlight specific themes. Illustrator and painter Mark Ulriksen manipulates both perspective and point of view in his images of our canine friends. These elements in his paintings encourage us to see our relationships with dogs in new ways.



Mark Ulriksen, *Puppy Love* (2001): Distant, high angle



Mark Ulriksen, *Little Dog* (2000): Close up, low angle