

# 2a

## Basic Visual Language I: Three Building Blocks

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Because so much of today's communications, including the news, comes to us visually, it is critical students learn the basics of visual communication. This activity introduces three fundamental elements of visual language: *camera angle*, *lighting* and *composition*. As students photograph each other with different *lighting*, from opposite *camera angles* and in varied *compositions* they begin to see how these techniques influence the various meanings we can take from a visual message.

**Objectives:** Students will be able to...

1. Recognize choices that photographers make when taking pictures.
2. Understand how different aspects of a photograph can influence its meaning.
3. Use three basic visual techniques to take photographs – *camera angle*, *lighting* and *composition*.

**Correlation With McRel National Standards:**

Language Arts Standards and Benchmarks

- Grades K-2: (S9/B3)
- Grades 3-5: (S9/B5), (S10/B4)
- Grades 6-8: (S9/B2)
- Grades 9-12: (S9/B8)

**Materials/Preparation:**

1. Camera (any type will work but a digital camera is best)
2. Overhead projector or flashlight.
3. The teacher will need to find a way to get the pictures that the students will be taking printed or projected so that the class can compare and contrast the images. Digital pictures can be imported into most writing documents or PowerPoint software and then projected or printed. Reflection is best when students can analyze their *own* photographs.

**Teaching Strategies:**

**I. Introduction to Visual Images**

- Begin by creating awareness for visual images through brainstorming about the places where visual images can be found, such as photographs in magazines, books, and newspapers, TV, videos, and movies, even clothing and cereal boxes, etc. Ask students:
  - ? Where do we see messages that are not made up of words?
  - ? Do non-word messages have their own special kind of language?
- In order to understand visual language students need to learn three of the basic building blocks of visual language: *camera angle*, *lighting* and *composition*. They will take photographs and compare and contrast the differences they notice between each set of pictures.

**II. Photo Exercise #1: Camera Angle**

- Ask the tallest and the shortest students to be the first models. Choose three other students to be photographers.

- Have the shortest student stand carefully on a chair and have the first photographer *sit on the floor* to take a picture looking up at him/her (low angle looking up).
  - ↳ For younger children, use the analogy of a *worm* looking up from the ground.
- Have the tallest student sit on the floor and help the second photographer *stand on a chair* to photograph looking down at him/her (high angle looking down).
  - ↳ For younger children, use the analogy of a *bird* looking down from the sky.
- Finally, have the third photographer shoot a picture from eye level of both students standing side by side.
- Compare the photographs to discover how camera angle influences our perception of the person being photographed. Discuss when different camera angles are used on TV news, popular movies, or newspaper photographs.

### III. Photo Exercise #2: *Lighting*

- Choose a volunteer to be the model and two students to be photographers. Have the model sit in a chair and use a bright light (an overhead projector works well or a flash light) to shine up from below the model's face. Turn off the classroom lights to make the room darker. Lighting from below is called "monster lighting" and is often used in scary movies. The photographer should take the picture of the model's face at eye level.
- Next, change the light to come from above. Turn on the classroom lights since they also give light from above. Take this picture from the same camera angle as the last.
- Encourage students to compare the extreme differences in lighting and reflect on when they have noticed lighting in movies or photographs and how it makes them feel.

### IV. Photo Exercise #3: *Composition*

- Choose one student as the model and two students to take pictures. Have the model sit in a chair at the front of the class. The first photographer should take a photograph that is an extreme *close-up*. This means getting so close to the model (prefer to use a camera with a zoom lens because some cameras cannot focus closer than three feet) that his/her entire face fills the frame and you can only see the eyes.
- Next, have the other photographer take a picture of the same model but from as far away as possible so we can see the model in the context of the whole room. This is often referred to as a *wide shot*.
- Have students compare these two compositions to see the differences between very close and far away. Often the *close-up* conveys intimacy, intensity or strong emotions while the *wide shot* gives context and space. Challenge students to reflect on how they would use composition to convey different emotions for different parts of a favorite story.



### **Assessment Tip: Learning Transfer**

During discussions or reflective writing, higher-level understanding may be reflected in students' ability to transfer these ideas to other situations such as TV, movies, advertising, news photos, etc.