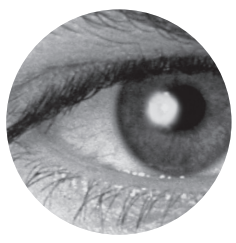
Semiotics
Form and Meaning

Also called semiology, semiotics concerns the study of signs and how viewers interpret them. The goal of semiotics is to understand how signs communicate concepts—artists and designers apply that understanding to convey their ideas to their audiences.

Sign / Stimuli that may include written (typographic) language, spoken language, icons, symbols, and so on. A sign consists of two parts—its visual form, or the signifier; and the meaning or concept that it calls to mind, the signified.



Pictorial sign

Non-pictorial sign

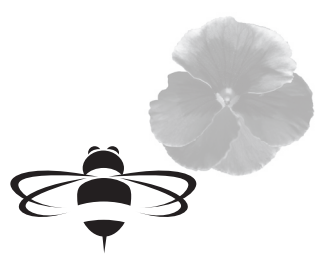
Typographic sign

Syntax / The formal relationships (composition, texture, tone, color, structure, arrangement) within an image or set of signs that creates a visual system. Syntactic properties have to do with what it looks like, rather than what it means: In the examples at right, the idea or meaning "eye" is represented by signs of very different syntax.

Semantics / The linguistic, conceptual, and symbolic relationships between a sign and the object or idea that it signifies. Semantics have to do with what the sign means, not how it looks. The syntax of these signs is very similar, but their meanings, or signifieds, are very different.

Mode / How a sign works to communicate is called its "mode", or "modality." Sometimes, a sign represents the thing it looks like; this kind of sign is called an **icon.** More often, a sign represents an idea that is associated with what it looks like; that is, the sign's form "points to" what it means indirectly; this is called an **index,** or indexical sign. Last, a sign can also represent something completely unrelated to what it looks like—that people have come to agree that the sign's visual form means something specific, regardless of what it looks like; this kind of sign is called a **symbol.**

Icon
Bee = Bee



Index
Bee = Pollination

Symbol
Bee = Industrious

Context / Any sign, whether pictorial or abstract (non-pictorial), will mean something different when combined with other signs or inserted into a different environment. This contextual relationship is usually reciprocal—meaning that the sign influences the meaning of its context and vice versa.

Star = Celebrity

Star = Achievement

Supersign / A complex sign that superimposes more than one sign (and often more than one type of sign) in a single combination where all the signs included are visible and accessible immediately—logos, for example, are often supersigns, involving icon, symbol, index, word, and /or abstract forms.

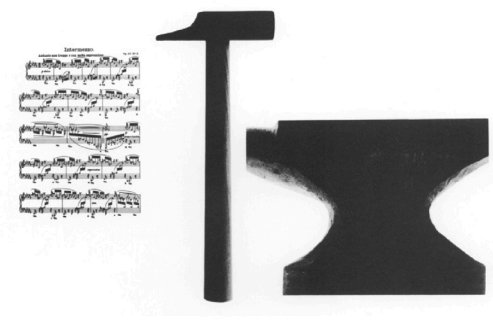
Parity / Apparent similarity between two signs. This similarity may be syntactic (having similar form, left) or semantic (having similar meaning, right).

Syntactic parity

Semantic parity

Narrative / An interpreted meaning in the mind of a viewer that results from the accumulated perception of signs, whether in actual sequence or as a group. Narratives may be linear (providing an understanding that depends on reading signs in a specific order) or non-linear (providing an understanding that does not depend on the signs' order).

Linear



Non-linear

Semantic Gap / The degree of difference in meaning between juxtaposed signs. The more similar the signs are in meaning, the smaller the gap (and so, the more literal or denotative is the narrative). The bigger the semantic gap, the more conceptual, connotative, or symbolic is the narrative.

Small semantic gap

Large semantic gap

Narrative Momentum / Within a sequence of signs, the growing expectation of a resulting meaning created as each successive sign evolves the information presented by previous signs—driving the viewer toward a particular conclusion that is validated by the final sign in the sequence.

The narrative momentum in this sequence concludes with assumptions that you've made that aren't necessarily true. The rubble in the last image is not, empirically, that of the building shown earlier in the sequence. What other assumptions have you made that cannot be proven true?