

Basics

Sometimes, when we are given a text to read and understand, we just look at the text and start reading immediately. This is not usually the most effective way to read. Texts are very often accompanied by images or other graphical information, and these images can make understanding the text both easier and faster. The first stage of reading a text might be to look for any images around the text and try to interpret them. The ideas the images give you will help you while reading.

The academic context

Many academic texts are supported by images, and they may be both at the beginning of the text and on later pages. In academic texts, the images are there to help you understand a text by inspiring you to think about the text before you read it.

Key features

- Always check for images on the first page of the text before you start reading.
- If there are some, take time to analyze and interpret them.
- Look very carefully at the images – don't miss any details.
- When you start reading, look carefully at any images inside the text.

Some ways to interpret images:

- Look quickly – what's the first thing you think of?
- Ask yourself some *Wh-* questions about the image: *Who?*, *What?*, *Where?*, *When?*, *Why?*
- Look at colours and shades – do they give you any clues?
- Before you read, what do you think the text might be about, based on the image?

Challenges / difficulties

- Some images are very hard to interpret – asking another student's opinion may help you.
- Some people are better than others at understanding pictures – do your best.
- Some images are just for decoration and will not help your understanding.

How can I develop this skill?

Try to find some collections of historical or scientific photographs in your library or online – ideally on a topic related to your own subject. Practise by giving yourself two or three minutes to look at a photo and make notes. Use the advice from the Key features section. Then read the caption or accompanying text. Remember: images often have multiple interpretations or areas of significance, so don't worry if your interpretation isn't always right. The main thing is to train your critical thinking skills so that you can get better at making inferences about the subject matter.

Learning outcome

Students will be able to demonstrate that they can use image interpretation to help their reading comprehension.

Theory to practice

Look at this picture. It appears in a text called 'Architecture – form and function' from the Faculty of Design.



Here are some questions about the picture and the building in it:

What type of building is it?

Why?

What type of building isn't it?

Why?

Could it be something else?

What do you think the text is about?

Read the text below quickly and see if the image and the questions helped you understand the text.

Architecture – form and function

Most buildings are designed by architects for a particular purpose, and looking at the building will often tell you what it was designed to do. Of course, sometimes this is easy because the purpose of the building is written outside, for example, *City Hotel*, *Central Station*, *General Hospital*. Sometimes, the shape or design of the building helps us to understand what the architect designed it for. For example, schools will often have a playground or sports fields outside, shops are quite obvious because of the large windows on the ground floor, and fire stations are very obvious because of the fire engines parked outside.

However, some buildings are more mysterious, and it's not immediately obvious what they were designed for. It's interesting to try to get inside the head of the architect. Why did they make it that shape? Why does it have very small windows? Why does it have a chimney at the back? These clues can help us to understand.

The building in the picture on the previous page is a real mystery, as it's a futuristic building. Maybe the architect is giving us a clue there. A futuristic building may contain something modern or innovative, and if you look carefully, you can see some kind of equipment inside the windows on the left-hand side. The windows are very large, suggesting that whatever activity happens there needs a lot of light. The building in fact is a scientific research centre, and when you look at it for a few moments, it's fair to say it looks as if it was designed for that purpose.

Ways to get more practice

- Every time you look at an image, try to analyze and interpret it.
- Discuss pictures with friends and see what their interpretation is.