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## Pictures of Words: The Importance of Visual Strategies in Tutoring Writing

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# **Pictures of Words**

## **The Importance of Visual Strategies in Tutoring Writing**

**By Kylie Smith**

**Abstract:** An estimated 65% of people are visual learners. Additionally, research suggests that most people are more likely to remember learned concepts when those concepts are attached to visual aids. Unfortunately, Writing Center tutors often forget the importance of using visual strategies when tutoring writing concepts. The implementation of quick and simple visual strategies in tutoring sessions will help students retain information and help them become independent writers for life.

**Key words:** memory, visualization, visual aids, color, shape, learning styles, creative tutoring

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The entire building smelled like Windex. I could catch the scent every time I turned my head, so strong that I almost couldn't breathe, let alone speak to the tired-eyed student sitting beside me in The Science Writing Center. It was my first week working as a tutor, and I was terrified that I wouldn't know how to combat students' concerns. Still, I faked confidence with smiles and nods as I listened to Nick describe his struggles with his Chemistry paper.

"I just don't understand what the professor means when she says I need a clear thesis statement," Nick said with frustration. Relief washed over me. Of all the writing questions he could have asked, surely this one was the easiest to answer.

"Well, for an effective thesis statement, you need a what, a how, and a because," I said boldly. Nick's eyes widened in confusion.

"What?" He asked.

"You want your reader to know what your claim about the topic is and why it's important right from the beginning," I continued.

"What?" Nick repeated, confirming all of my deepest fears about my tutoring abilities. With rose-petal cheeks and a racing heart, I continued explaining. I talked, I asked questions, I turned to examples of thesis statements in books of essays, but nothing worked. Nick, it seemed, just wasn't destined to understand the delicate art of the thesis statement.

Luckily for me, a wiser, more experienced tutor overheard our struggles. Ella rolled her chair over and smiled. Without hesitation, she picked up a piece of paper and a handful of highlighters and wrote:

what + how + because = Thesis Statement.

Ella then proceeded to underline parts of theses in model essays using the corresponding colors. I watched, amazed, as the light switch turned on in Nick's head. "Thank you," he almost shouted, "This makes sense to me now. I need equations and graphs to understand the world." As soon as I understood the power of visual aids in helping Nick, the session flowed. I thanked him for coming as I contemplated his words.

As a writer, I have always used words and stories to understand the world. As a new tutor, I assumed that everyone else did too. In *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*, Ryan and Zimmerelli state that, "We tend to assume that others learn that way we do and are sometimes mystified when explanations or approaches that make perfect sense to us do not click with them." (Ryan & Zimmerelli 54). As a writing tutor, it is easy to forget that the rest of the world may not have the same relationship to words as we do. Students may need us to use more than words to describe writing concepts. Of course, student needs will vary from session to session, but the implementation of visual aids is most likely helpful for the majority of people.

While an estimated 65 percent of people primarily learn through visual cues (McCue 2013), Dr. Haig Kouyoumdjian argues that all of our brains are actually wired to recall images easily. (Kouyoumdjian 2012). To test this theory, we might think of our hometowns. Our minds likely start forming images of buildings, friends, and landscapes long before they can begin labeling these things with vocabulary words. According to Kouyoumdjian, this is because most of our sensory cortex is devoted to vision, and the part of the brain used to process words is much smaller than the part of the brain used to process images. We must, therefore, think of our minds as image processors and not as word processors (Kouyoumdjian 2012).

Knowing this, it is logical to assume that a student is more likely to remember a tutoring session or writing concept if they can associate the new information learned with an image, one

that they will hopefully be able to conjure up months or years into the future. While this information is exciting and interesting, it can also feel terrifying for those tutors who feel that they are artistically challenged. As someone who often messes up stick-figure drawings and tic-tac-toe boards, that the task of explaining abstract ideas with concrete visual representations feels daunting. With limited time and recourses, how can we implement visual stimuli into an average tutoring session?

While many wonderful tutors have crafted masterpieces in forms of diagrams and tables, most research indicates that simple visual cues can be just as effective as the most elaborate drawings. Two simple strategies for visually stimulating the brain during a tutoring session are using color and writing words in different shapes.

According to a study conducted by The University of British Columbia, the use of color in a learning setting can help with concentration, attention span, and can facilitate memory retention and learning (“Colour Boosts Brain Performance”). After showing subjects red, blue, and blank backdrops, researchers asked them to complete various tasks. This particular study found that the color red boosted the performance of detail-oriented tasks, while the color blue boosted the production of creative assignments. With this in mind, it might be helpful to keep colored pencils or markers by tutoring stations and to write or underline things as you go through a tutoring session. While knowing the psychology of different colors can be helpful for specific types of assignments, any color is better than no color, as colors will create associations in the brain. Just like it did in my session with Nick, color can change the entire trajectory of a session and can cement a writing concept in a student’s brain.

In addition to using color, the implementation of different shapes can help students learn concepts by forcing them to re-examine the information presented. According to Neuroscientist

Russell Poldrock, “The brain is built to ignore the old and focus on the new.” (Poldrock 2012). Because most students have seen words typed and written so many times, the brain is likely to skip over them. However, if they are presented in a different way physically, several brain systems will activate in response to the new image. Most of us have come in contact with students who struggle to identify issues with their sentences. Because they have likely read their own words many times before bringing their paper in for a tutoring session, their brains have probably numbed to repetitive words or misplaced modifiers. As silly as it may feel, having the student write out their sentences in bubble letters or in a new formation will signal their brains to pay attention to the words. The same principle applies to students who struggle to understand writing concepts such as how to write a thesis statement or the difference between passive and active voice. Students have likely seen these concepts explained online or in grammar textbooks, but have they ever seen them described in the shape of a cat chasing a bird? I would argue not.

Visual variety in a tutoring session not only stimulates the brain of the student, it also keeps the tutor thinking in new and fresh ways. Because visual cues help most people retain memories, the use of color and shape in tutoring sessions can help both the student and the tutor to embed writing concepts in their brains. Hopefully, years into the future, both parties will be able to recall these created images and then remember the nuances of comma placement and the subtle tricks in recognizing passive voice. The use of visual strategies can truly help to create independent writers for life. While tutoring is not a perfect science, it can be an exciting art.

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