

# What Journalists Should Know About READERS

**Visuals are central to the reading experience.** Photos, graphics and illustrations are read at much higher rates than text in a newspaper. In one study by Poynter, three groups of regular readers absorbed 80 percent of the illustration and graphics in the paper, 75 percent of the photos, 56 percent of the headlines but only 13 percent of the stories — and many of those were only half-read. For the majority of readers, “reading the paper” means looking at the paper.

**Readers don’t live by visuals alone.** Most photos and illustrations require words — a headline, a dropped, a cutline — to be accurately interpreted. Effective graphics without text are quite rare. Visuals are usually impressionistic; they are dependent on words to be understood. It’s critical to readers’ understanding that conspicuous display text (headlines, cutlines, graphic text, etc.) be written with accompanying visuals in mind.

**Readers want clarity, and they want it now.** Visual perception research shows that the human brain relates words with adjacent images; it strives to see relationships between the two. When the relationship is not clear — as when a picture and headline seem to contradict or ignore each other — readers may be frustrated and turn the page. Readers, especially impatient readers, don’t like to struggle to make sense of the messages that come their way.

**Engaging readers is a several-step process,** much of it unconscious. Poynter’s 1991 *Eyes on the News* study found that the vast majority of readers begin with the largest visual on a page and then move quickly to the accompanying headline (especially if it’s big), presumably to confirm the impressions made by the image. If those two elements speak in harmony, the reader looks for another tidbit (cutline, box, graphic), as part of the process of committing to reading text. Text is literally the last thing readers see.

**Photos carry more emotion than graphics.** In the late 1980s, Poynter’s Pegie Stark Adam tested several prototypes of a plane crash story package on groups of readers. She tested for two things: comprehension of the facts of the story and emotional engagement. She found that a crash story accompanied by an information graphic yielded the highest comprehension scores but the lowest emotional engagement scores. Photos pulled at emotions, but didn’t help readers understand the facts. The best scores came from readers who looked at a package that combined a graphic, photo and text.

**The more focused the story idea and packaging, the better.** If the reporting, writing, headlines, visuals and other accoutrement are specific, readers are more likely to be engaged. Specific is more interesting than general. It’s not enough to report on artichokes; the best packages come from a shared, cross-discipline understanding of a well-defined story idea: the rising cost of artichokes, dramatic presentation possibilities for artichokes, artichokes as a main course, etc.

**It matters what your paper looks like.** Smart typography, judicious use of color, adherence to a grid, skillful rendering, expert photography — these are production values for the newspaper. Good visual work, like good writing, takes time and skill but adds credibility. People judge a newspaper in part on its looks. If it looks competent, readers are likely to assume that the content is competently reported and edited.

**Poynter.**

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