Of the many press images following the September 11, 2001, attack on New York City's World Trade Center, Thomas Franklin's photo of three firefighters raising the American flag against a backdrop of gray dust and twisted steel may be the best known. Many compared it to Joseph Rosenthal's 1945 Pulitzer-Prize–winning picture of American marines raising the U.S. flag on Mount Suribachi, Iwo Jima. In the days and weeks following the Trade Center attack, those two photos appeared side by side in newspapers and magazines, on posters, Web sites, and office walls. To some, the photos together represented hope in the face of disaster. For others, the two images identified that moment in 2001 as a declaration of war and New York City firefighters as new soldiers in that war. Still others saw the comparison as a distortion of the events of September 11.

Even if it had not been placed next to Rosenthal's photo, the image of the firefighters very likely would have become central to what the U.S. press called the "nation's mood" following September 11. Franklin has said that he knew he had an important shot even as he was taking it. How one picture can make such an impact—how an image carries and conveys meaning—is the subject of this chapter.
As we read a message, most of us don’t think much about how it was put together. This is especially true of visual messages. They seem to communicate naturally, even simply. Yet, as we have seen in Chapter 1, visual messages have much in common with verbal ones. They consist of a complex of elements, including how and why the image was made, who made it, how an audience reads it, and where it appears. We call these elements the immediate and the broader contexts; they influence the creation of a message and how audiences receive it.

**Immediate Context**

The **immediate context** is anyone or anything that has an immediate role in forming the message. As with verbal texts, visual texts have an author (or authors), an audience, a subject, and a purpose. Whoever made the image had to decide what technology to use (medium) and what kind of image it would be (genre). Visual messages, also like verbal ones, present a point of view and involve a conscious selection of materials, as well as decisions about what to emphasize or focus on and how to arrange or organize the information.

**Broader Context**

The **broader context** includes larger questions about the cultural, economic, social, and historic circumstances in which the image was produced and, later, read.

Most of us don’t separate the immediate from the broader context when we read. If you are to understand how images communicate meaning, however, you will want to look closer—think about both. Notice how such an analysis might work with the two photos that open this chapter.

**Who is the Author?** For some images, this question is a simple one. For example, Thomas Franklin took the photo of firefighters raising the flag at the World Trade Center site. At the time, Franklin was a photographer for New Jersey’s Bergen County Record. Joseph Rosenthal, who took the photo at Iwo Jima, was a World War II war correspondent. As photojournalists, each was looking for newsworthy images. For both Franklin and Rosenthal, then, the photos began as events related to their work.
Other images are not as easily identified with an individual author or a particular event. Billboards, postcards, stamps, logos, book covers, and product labels are images we see and read every day. We rarely know who created them, but even when we cannot name the individual responsible for a text, we can identify something about that author. We can guess, for example, that a CD cover was probably created by a graphic designer, a digital artist, or a team of designers hired by the recording company to make a message that will attract attention and suggest the type of music on the CD.

In many cases, it matters less whether or not we can actually name an individual author than whether we can identify purpose and point of view. For example, most readers don’t think much about an individual author when they look at a commercial for ESPN, but everyone knows that it is an advertisement for a sports network told from the point of view of that network. A commercial for PBS is likely to have a very different look because it has a different point of view and targets a different audience.

**WHAT IS THE PURPOSE?** Asking about purpose might also seem like a straightforward question, but you will quickly discover that most communication has more than one purpose and that the purpose shifts as a text is placed in different contexts. It is obvious, for example, that the Franklin and Rosenthal photos were initially taken as visual representations of news events. It is the job of photojournalists to report the news through pictures.

However, once the firefighters photo is reproduced on a T-shirt by a designer, for example, the purpose shifts. It becomes a kind of memorial, a way of identifying loyalties, and even a fashion statement. That same photo is presented in this textbook as an example of a familiar and complex piece of visual communication. It is the same image, but it takes on additional meaning as its purpose changes with use and reuse.

The same can be said of the Iwo Jima photo. Almost immediately after it was first published, it was being used for a number of different purposes. Only five months after the picture first appeared in newspapers, the U.S. Post Office issued a stamp featuring it. By 1995, when a second
version of the stamp appeared, even those Americans who knew nothing about the image had probably seen it in countless versions, including the memorial statue that now stands in Washington, D.C.

In 1945, the stamp was produced as a memorial representing courage under fire. In 1995, it was a piece of history. For stamp collectors, the image is an artifact. A postage stamp itself is simply a proof of purchase, but an individual stamp design either survives—becomes popular—or not, depending on how many people decide to buy it.

The Iwo Jima photo remained a familiar image throughout the twentieth century, even showing up in folk art, such as this cigarette machine triptych purchased in South Carolina in 2000.
Whatever else the artist had in mind in placing Rosenthal's photo in this particular triptych, it is certain that reporting the news is no longer the purpose the photo serves in this context.

**WHAT ARE THE MEDIUM AND GENRE?** The way a message is created as well as what kind of message it is affects the way we read. For example, a letter seems different depending on whether it is received as an email message or a note in a greeting card, whether it is handwritten on delicate stationary or typed as a formal memo with a company logo printed at the top. Each of these involves a different medium, set in a different genre.

When we use the term medium, we are talking about the technology used to create and communicate a text. Movies, television, film photography, digital photography, watercolor painting, and charcoal drawing are all examples of different visual media. They all use different technologies. The Franklin and Rosenthal images, though both photographs, were produced using different media. Franklin's photo is digital; Rosenthal's is film. Both, however, are the same genre (or type) of photo: news photos.

The meaning we take from an image has as much to do with its genre—what kind of an image it is—as with the technology used to make it. News photos, for example, are typically read as objective records (whether they are or not), whereas paintings are considered interpretations. A film or television drama is a fiction, an interpretation of reality—though it might look very realistic. An advertisement is selling you something. Knowing the genre helps readers identify what the message is supposed to be. For example, not many readers would look at an ad for toothpaste and mistake it for a scientific report, but the advertiser tries to give it as much truth value as possible, perhaps using some of the conventions of the genre of scientific reports (charts and graphs, for example), so that readers think about the science in the ad more than its commercial purpose.

**WHAT IS THE SUBJECT?** Look again at the Iwo Jima photo. Two days after its publication, Congress already was talking about it as a model for a memorial statue. Somehow, in addition to recording a single moment in time, the photo also carries a symbolic and emotional message. The same is
true of Franklin's firefighter photo. Within months after it had appeared, the photo was being talked of as a model for a future memorial. Its symbolic significance was obvious to everyone who saw it.

How is that possible? To begin with, the subject of both photos was newsworthy. The public wanted to see the real people, places, and events depicted. Many news photos are significant solely on the basis of what they depict and the context in which they depict it. As press photos, then, both simply showed people at the actual scenes of events of international significance.

In addition, the subjects of these photos carried a powerful emotional impact. Both depicted a moment of triumph after devastating defeat. The 1945 battle that ended with a marine victory on Mount Suribachi had gone on for four days in some of the fiercest fighting of World War II. By the time Rosenthal took his picture, 40 percent of the company engaged in this battle had been killed. Similarly, the firefighter photo was taken on the evening of September 11, 2001, at the end of a day of national tragedy. In Franklin's words, the photo "had drama, spirit, and courage in the face of disaster."

So, the subject depicted by each photo and the significance of that subject are key elements we need to consider as we read these images.

Both photos carry strong symbolic meaning. The U.S. flag, an easily recognized symbol of U.S. patriotism and nationhood, is at the top and is the focus of both images. The individuals in each photo also carry symbolic significance: marines and firefighters are historically associated with courage and self-sacrifice.

Not everyone who sees these images will have positive associations with patriotism, the flag, or marines and firefighters, however. That is why it is very important to consider the audience when you think about how an image communicates meaning.

WHO IS THE AUDIENCE? You can sometimes identify the intended audience for an image very precisely, but that is not always the case, and it might not be necessary. It is necessary, however, to think about how an author might expect an audience to receive the work. A photojournalist expects the audience to be readers of the news publication in which the photo
appears. Ideally, that audience will accept the photo as a piece of news—a faithful reproduction of something that actually happened. The news photo allows readers to witness an event they would not be able to see for themselves.

Of course, no designer or author can control audience response. The best you can do is know something about the audience you are aiming for and make choices based on what you know. That is what happened when the Franklin and Rosenthal pictures were placed side by side on posters after the World Trade Center attack. These posters were designed for an audience that would see the two moments (1945 and 2001) as corresponding—not just in the way the photos looked but in their reference to war and tragedy and triumph. Those who did not see the correspondence or who did not agree that the September 11 attack was analogous to World War II very likely dismissed the message of the poster as overly simple—even manipulative.

**How is it arranged?** When we talk about arrangement, or composition, we mean the way an image is organized within its frame or visual space. In the case of these two photos, the arrangement is a classic and stable triangle, with the flag forming the apex and the figures below forming the base. Like verbal composition, visual composition is a process of selection and emphasis—what is included in the space and what is left out, what is placed in the foreground (at the front of the picture) and what is relegated to the background. In other words, the way a text is arranged or organized suggests what the author believes is important about the subject and influences the way the audience reads the text.

Designers and visual artists must choose between a closed or open form when they compose an image. With a closed form, the entire image is inside the visual frame and the viewer's attention is focused within the picture. The Rosenthal and Franklin photos are arranged in very similar ways and both are closed forms. As you can see in this diagram of the Rosenthal photo, the men at the base seem to be moving in a mass toward the flag, which then forms the top of the closed triangular form. A similar form is made in the composition of the Franklin photo on page 99. An open form is one that suggests that there's something more outside the visual...
.frame. The image might be cut off at the edges, or a person in the image might be looking at something outside the image—even at the camera, making it seem as though the viewer is a part of the world of the image. We see this kind of composition quite often in contemporary advertising such as this Nike ad, in which the model is literally stretching out of the frame. We know he is moving. He isn’t looking at the camera but concentrating on what’s ahead—and outside—of the frame.
An open form suggests that the image is not completely self-contained, that there is something more beyond the visual space that viewers should be thinking about. Even a memorial statue, like the one shown here, can be arranged in an open form, when it directs our attention forward, beyond the artwork itself.

Advertisers are very careful about how they compose their visual texts because they need to make sure their message comes across. In the Nike ad, for example, the most important part of the message is the suggestion that wearing Nike products gives us energy, speed, and a great body. Readers of ads generally know that they are dealing with a message that is carefully constructed in order to put the product in the best light.

Most readers don’t think of news photographs as carefully arranged. News photos are assumed to be moments in time captured just as events happened, with little thought about composition beyond the quick decisions a skilled photographer might make while looking through the viewfinder. And yet even here composition is rarely a matter of chance.
The Iwo Jima photo, for example, was cropped from its original longer shot, which had much more sky and landscape, making a tighter, more closed composition—and a greater visual impact.

WHAT IS THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT? All texts are created at a time, in a place, and sometimes in response to specific events or feelings. Visual texts, like all others, derive their meaning partially from their historic context. We have already seen some of that in our discussion of two photographs. To read either the Franklin or Rosenthal photograph, it helps to understand events in history, but, again, the historic context will not guarantee a single reading of these photos.

On the one hand, many Americans know that the Iwo Jima photo was taken during World War II. However, because most of us do not know the details of the event depicted, the image has come to be understood as a generalized reference to Americans at war, perhaps to heroism or to the horrors of war. The firefighter photo, on the other hand, is still current. Most of us know some details of the events of that day, and that knowledge affects the way we read the image.
Not all images have such an easily defined historic context, but all are created at a particular historical moment and all are read at particular moments in time. The way readers understand an image will depend on when they read it, when it was made, and what was happening in the world at the time.

**WHAT ARE THE CULTURAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS?** In addition to having historical contexts, images take on meaning within certain cultural and social contexts. Our two photos are good examples. Firefighters have traditionally been considered heroes in U.S. culture, which is why television producers and filmmakers often position them at the center of the action willing to sacrifice themselves to save others. In that way they are like soldiers—or, at least, like the idealized soldiers of movies and novels.

Moreover, the firefighter photo takes on much of its meaning because it reminds viewers—especially once it is compared to the Iwo Jima photo—of World War II and other battles that Americans have fought. Once the reference to World War II—a war some have called America's last "good war"—is made, the image evokes some of the pride that Americans felt at winning the war with Hitler. The meaning of the photo, then, begins to shift from an inspiring moment at the end of a long day of catastrophe to what the press quickly began to call “America's New War.” All of the films and photos and novels that we have seen and read about World War II and especially about Iwo Jima influence how we understand this new image. It might even bring to mind John Wayne in the 1950s film *The Sands of Iwo Jima.* Of course, if you are not familiar with the Rosenthal photo or have never thought of World War II or of any war as a "good" war, or if you are from a different culture entirely, the meaning you take from the firefighter image will differ. You will still very likely see it as a patriotic image, but patriotism in this form might not appeal to you.

Considering cultural and social contexts is especially important in analyzing advertisements. Beauty products, for example, often focus on ideal male and female forms. One way to read the image shown here would be to consider how ads often distort female beauty or promise the impossible, featuring close-ups of models airbrushed to conform to cultural ideals of perfection.
WHAT IS THE ECONOMIC CONTEXT? Thinking about the economic context can help you more fully read a text. Consider, for example, how powerful news photos help to sell newspapers. That is one reason the two photos we have focused on here have been reprinted so often. A photo with wide distribution can affect the way that the public sees or understands an event—something we need to keep in mind when thinking about what such an image means.

The economics of advertising seems obvious: advertisers spend money to influence our purchases. But what if an advertiser doesn’t seem to be selling us something? What if an advertiser seems to be presenting a message about hunger or human rights or violence in the streets? United Colors of Benetton has become famous for “message” ads such as the one reprinted below featuring dying AIDS activist David Kirby. This image is shocking; it forces readers to think about what is going on in the picture and perhaps even to become more aware of issues surrounding AIDS. In fact, this particular ad is part of the United Colors of Benetton’s institutional campaign, not their product campaign. Yet it is still an ad by a company that sells clothing. If we think of them as a socially responsible company, will we think it socially responsible to buy their clothes?

Not all texts are as richly complex as the two we have focused on in this chapter; but they all can be understood in terms of author; purpose; audience; composition; medium; genre; social, cultural, historical, and economic contexts; and so on. When you analyze a visual text, you will likely begin with your personal response and then consider the text's immediate and broader contexts.

WHAT IS YOUR PERSONAL RESPONSE? Images often evoke memories or quick reactions. Take a moment to write about your response to Franklin's photo and then compare your response with fellow students. Although there are likely to be many similar responses to a photo such as this one, there will also be responses that differ significantly from yours. The fact that people have different reactions should not be surprising given that the way we read or react to a text depends on what we bring to it. For example, if you live in New York City, if you are a firefighter, or if you lost friends or family in the September 11 attack, your response is likely to be very different from the response of someone who does not have your experience.

Think, as well, of your response to the Iwo Jima photo. Is it the same as your response to the firefighter photo? If you were to ask a World War II veteran for a response to Rosenthal's image—which, of course, you could do—how would his or her reaction differ from yours? Very likely, the veteran would know a lot about the Iwo Jima photo—and would, of course, have different memories and thus a different response to the photo than you do.

Most of us have some response to everything we see—even if that response is indifference. We are not likely to know immediately how an image evokes that response, however. In order to account for how an image conveys a message or evokes a response, you will need to understand how different elements come together as a visual language. Some of those elements are embodied in the image itself, whereas others come from outside the image.

HOW DOES THE TEXT WORK? To read any text, a reader pulls meaning from a system of signs: letters, words, sentences, paragraphs, shapes, colors, pictures. In verbal texts, even the typeface and page design contribute to
meaning, but here we will focus mostly on visual texts—photographs, postcards, advertisements, and so on. When we examine how a sign carries and conveys meaning, we are engaging in analysis. Visual analysis, like any analysis, begins with a single question: How does it work?

Take, for example, our analysis of the firefighter photo (on p. 99). As we wrote about that image, we noted its subject matter: three firefighters raising the American flag at the wreckage of the World Trade Center on the evening of September 11, 2001. We noticed the composition, how the arrangement of the men and flag contributed to the photo’s meaning. We could also consider the medium by which it was produced (digital photography) and the fact that digital imaging can be easily manipulated and so does not carry as much truth value as film photography traditionally has.

We made a point to identify the genre as a news photo. Genre is important in this case because a news photo carries more authority than an art photo or a studio portrait. Think, for example, about your high school yearbook photo. If you had your senior picture taken at a studio, you were posed in clothes you chose for the occasion. You were prepared to be photographed so that your parents could send the picture to friends and put it up on the wall. The photo might have been airbrushed to remove any blemishes. That is a very different kind of photo from one that a friend might have taken of you at a party later that same day. You are the same person in both photos, but the two are read differently—the first as an ideal portrait of you, the second as a candid snapshot.

As a news photo, the Franklin image promises to show us the truth about an event. We don’t expect it to be posed or retouched. We count on photojournalists to show us “the real story.” But, put the photo on a T-shirt or in a textbook, and it takes on additional cultural meaning as a national icon, a piece of history, and a photo significant enough to reprint in a school book. Each time the photo shifts from one medium and genre to another—and especially when it is reproduced thousands of times—it takes on additional meaning.
The list of questions on the following pages provides a good start for a written analysis. You may wish to make notes in response to them. But remember that notes are just the beginning of your work. To complete your analysis, you will have to go back through your notes, decide what to focus on for your analysis, and choose the information and ideas that will support your conclusions.

When you write up an analysis, you won't be able to pay attention to all of these elements for every image, but you can focus on several of them to explain how an image works—how it conveys meaning, or how it is possible for you and your friends to have different responses to the same image, or why some images are easy to read while others take more time and seem difficult to understand.

Social, cultural, historical, and economic context help shape the way we read all visual texts, even the most casual family snapshots. Locate old photos of family or friends or just ones that you can find in magazines like Look or the Saturday Evening Post in your local library. Notice how details in the photos “date” them or suggest a certain level of income or a particular event (like graduation or prom or a family picnic). Then, take your own snapshot of family members or friends. In a one-page discussion of the photo, point out what details in your snapshot will, eventually, “date” it.