

METTE STENTOFT



# VISUALIZE THIS



CONSTRUCTIVE  
INSTITUTE



## **METTE STENTOFT**

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# VISUALIZE THIS

THE WRITER'S GUIDE TO MAKING  
AN IMPACT WITH VISUALS

Often it is obvious which photo, figure or illustration we should use for an article: the reportage photo from a sports event, the archive photo of the Prime Minister, the map that shows differences in income across the country.

This book is about all the other times. The times where you can't find a good archive photo, where you don't have the opportunity to take the right photo, where the subject is difficult or strange and you don't know what to do. Should you pull a mediocre stock photo from the archives, consult an AI image generator, or initiate a bigger collaboration with the graphic department or an illustrator?

Hopefully this book will make your life a little easier. And, more importantly, better use of visuals will increase your audience's motivation to read your story and help them (better) remember what you are trying to communicate.

This is a min version of my fellowship project which can be read in its entirety at [www.constructiveinstitute.org](http://www.constructiveinstitute.org)

Mette Stentoft

Aarhus, May 2023

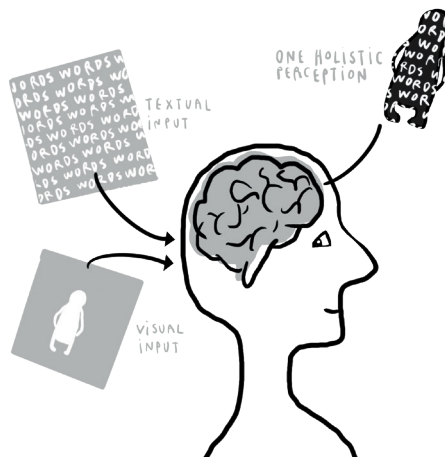
We know that images and illustrations can capture attention, enhance understanding, and make a story easier to recall. But in a busy everyday life, we can't spend time nursing the visuals of every single story. And so, an important step to increase the visual quality of your work is to become better at choosing how and when to spend your limited resources.



## Visuals and words aren't all that different...

... at least not if we look at the brain's perception: the overall message the brain perceives when encountering a combination of text and image. We – especially those of us who work in written journalism – tend to regard text as the central part of our product. It's what we spend our time and energy on. The image, on the other hand, is a peripheral element that we've only found (or had people find) after writing our text.

Only, it doesn't work this way in the head of the person spending time with our journalism. In the brain, the messages and moods of words and pictures are blended into one single impression. This means, at best, that we can miss a chance to make the most of the great communication potential in strong visuals. At worst, we hinder the exact message or experience we want to communicate.



## ... and then again

Regardless of whether we are out to capture people's attention in a sea of pictures, breaking news alerts and loud headlines, or if we are on a constructive journey to communicate hope, protective instinct and human connectedness, the visual offers us unique opportunities.

Most of us know it intuitively: That the picture, the painting, the child's drawing, the photo, and even the meme can make us feel something.

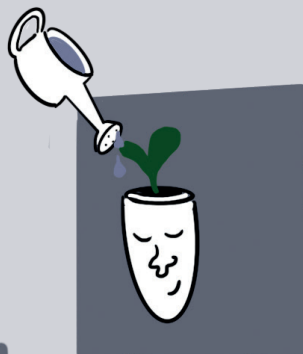
That this is the case has been established in many, many studies: Visuals can, quickly, immediately and without us necessarily being aware of it, touch us and fascinate us. The clear gaze of the person in the portrait. The pregnant woman on the stretcher in the ruins of a Ukrainian hospital. The satirical drawing of a politician. The rolling cornfield, the butterfly up close...

At the same time, it is clear - not least from research into how humans learn - that visuals offer something unique when it comes to generating understanding. This is especially true when it concerns processes, connections, and complex phenomena.

# VISUALS HAVE THE POTENTIAL TO...



... CATCH OUR  
ATTENTION



... HELP US  
UNDERSTAND



... EVOKE EMOTION



THE HAND-DRAWN IMAGE  
HOOKS OUR EYES AND SLOWS  
US DOWN. WE RECOGNIZE IT  
AS BEING MADE BY ANOTHER  
HUMAN, AND WE CONNECT IN  
A WAY WE DON'T DO WITH  
ANY OTHER MEDIUM.



*Wendy MacNaughton makes handdrawn visual journalism for e.g. New York Times, and she has published heaps of (visual) books.)*

# Clickbait and picbait

## Reflexes and stereotypes

Regardless of whether we like it or not, our journalism is a prism through which the public views reality. Each article with its accompanying visual may be just one tiny drop in the vast sea of information people sail through every day. But each piece is important. And it is worth remembering that the public sees the image before the headline.

Although we as journalists aim to tell our audiences the best obtainable version of the truth, we constantly and reflexively make decisions - small and large - about image use, subheadings, quotes. Decisions that influence the feelings of the audience, their understanding, and ultimately their view of reality.

If we aren't aware of how much our choices, especially our visual choices, actually matter, we might inadvertently pass on your own prejudice. Like when we illustrate stories about diabetes with headless pictures of severely overweight people. Or stories about climate change with a nice trip to the beach. In other words, just as clickbait shapes people's perception of reality, regardless of how nuanced the body of the article may be, picbait - the sunny beach, the anonymous, obese people - conveys part of the message. The audience gets a small emotional impulse (e.g. of joy: ah, sunshine!), And this feeling becomes a co-narrator of your story - even though that wasn't at all what you were aiming for.



Photo: Stig Nygaard, CC BY 2.0

*Imagine this headline:*

*Global warming is accelerating, according to climate report. Would you pick this photo to illustrate it? And how would this choice co-narrate your story?*

## SEVEN STEPS TOWARDS BETTER VISUALS

### 1 Say goodbye to the worst stock photos

Use your limited resources to replace what looks most artificial and out-of-context.

### 2 Pick your battles

Make an overview of what works – what you can safely continue doing – so you have the time and resources to change what doesn't work.

### 3 Think in metaphors

Let associations and imagery run free; which analogies and metaphors can describe the essence of the story?

### 4 Use your source

Remember to ask for private photos, graphs, and ideas. And ask what images and metaphors the source uses to explain a difficult phenomenon.

## **5 Involve designers early on**

By consulting with visual experts in the beginning of your work process, the result will be much better – without either of you having to spend more time than usual.

## **6 Cast a critical eye... on yourself**

Look at your recent stories. Where are you falling into old traps? Where could the source have helped you? What could you have done better?

## **7 Play around!**

Experiment with new formats.

Read more about each step on the following pages.



# Say goodbye to the worst stock photos

What is the lowest hanging fruit? What is the first, easiest step on the path to better visuals?

If you often use glitzy, generic stock photos from international image libraries, the answer is simple: Find alternatives to the worst of these - the ones that your audience hardly notices, or that they only detect as a passing annoyance. Eye track research is an excellent diagnostic for this. It's about **photos...**

**... that appear artificial**

Do the people look like photo models; does it look too glossy?

**... that appear posed**

Would they seriously smile this much at each other in the situation in question?

**... that lack a connection with the article**

Was the photo obviously taken abroad, though the story takes place locally?



ARTIFICIAL?

YES- IT LOOKS  
LIKE A COMMERCIAL

POSED?

HAVE THEY  
WANDERED OUT-  
SIDE WITHOUT COATS?  
HARDLY!

CONTEXT?

THE PHOTO  
HAS AN 'AMERICAN  
ROM COM' VIBE, UNLESS  
THAT'S WHAT THE STORY IS  
ABOUT, IT LACKS CONNECTION

Foto: [www.dryattfisher.com](http://www.dryattfisher.com)

*We know that humans are attracted to visuals of humans, especially smiling human faces. But this is only true if the person is depicted in a fairly authentic setting.*

## Pick your battles

We need to find lots of pictures for lots of stories... and we can't spend the same amount of time and energy in every single case. The question, then, is how to know when the visual element we've chosen is good enough.

If you're a part of a larger editorial team, you can quickly get an idea about this from those who are most involved with data and social media: What stories are being shared most, and which ones are being read most and longest? Do the data and SoMe people have an idea of what role the pictures play in that?

Create an overview of the most popular stories: Do any of them work regardless of the image quality (because the headline is great, say, or because of the topic itself)? And are there any stories where a qualified guess could be that the picture plays a role in the popularity?

In other words, identify what works well enough and spend your energy on what really needs improvement.





*In 2022, the American media house KQED tested which stories and which visuals evoked the best response with their audience. The conclusion was clear – and by no means surprising: People love images of cute animals!*

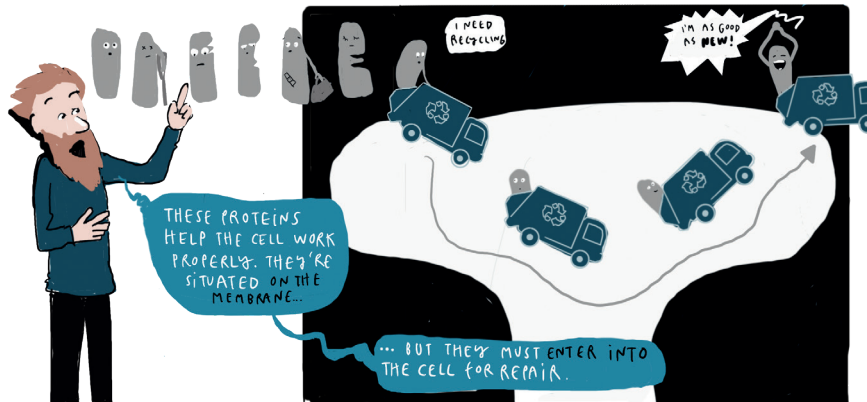
## Think in metaphors

A good approach to finding the best possible illustration is to think in metaphors and analogies. This applies to both the intangible, complex stories, and the times you have difficulty finding an alternative to artificial archive photos.

For instance, how might we illustrate a story about the dangers of driving while texting? One option is of course to choose an archive photo of a smartphone (really boring), or of a hospital or an ambulance (slightly less boring but not something that helps us tell the story or engage our audience). Might we instead come up with a metaphor for a driver who checks her phone? Or for the car she is driving? Maybe the car is a moving skull?



The more intangible our stories are, the more important it can be to use metaphors - whether this calls for a search for an image in a database, a conversation with a graphic designer/ photographer/artist or writing a precise prompt for an AI image generation program. At the same time, there is a great deal of research pointing to the fact that metaphors can play an extremely important role in people's understanding of a difficult topic, especially when we are dealing with complex or invisible phenomena from the natural sciences.



How might we for instance illustrate a complex biological process that's central to a specific disease or specific type of medicine? In this example, it's the metaphor RECYCLING that plays a central role in explaining how a certain protein on the cell's membrane must enter the cell to keep working and helping us stay healthy.

## 4 Use your source

It seems obvious to ask your sources for help but it is a low-hanging fruit that many of us forget to pick during a busy work day. Consider adding a few new inquiries to the (more or less conscious) list of standard questions:

- › **Do you have a photo** that I can use?
- › **Do you have a figure or graph** that illustrates your point that I (or my graphic designer friends) can make a version of?
- › **What metaphor** would you use to describe this?

An added bonus of these last questions is that even if they don't end up providing a visual, they usually help the journalist better understand the source and the subject – and thus write a better article.

If you meet your source face-to-face, you might get some surprising results if you ask them to draw what you're talking about. Even if you just use a bad ballpoint pen and a napkin so nobody needs to stress about their lack of drawing skills.

## Involve designers early on

In many places, journalists and graphic designers have moved into the same newsroom. Yet the old patterns of division still dominate: journalists discuss their stories with other journalists, then they get busy writing and editing and... only then do they realise what they needed the graphic designer's help with.

In this way, the visuals become an afterthought. And the end product does not benefit from the captivating, arresting, emotion-provoking potential of really well-thought out visuals.

Physical proximity in the newsroom is not enough to change ingrained workflows and habits. Neither are our good intentions, our knowledge about the importance of visuals, or our momentary motivation ("we really need to do something about this!").

At the same time, it's hardly ever realistic to make large changes or suddenly add resources to new and exciting collaborative projects across graphics and editing departments.

It almost sounds like a catch-22.

So what should we do?



## **Start small but systematically**

Write down these four questions and put them somewhere annoyingly visible:

1. What important questions does the reader have?
2. Could any of these questions be answered visually?
3. What concept is the hardest to understand and communicate?
4. What can I do myself, and what do I need help with?

Does this sound familiar? These are versions of the same fairly obvious questions that are taught in journalism courses in many countries. For example, they are part of the American story planning model known as the **Maestro Method**.

The key to success, then, is not asking highbrow or genius questions. Instead, the key is a systematic approach: answer the same four questions for every story. In the (frequent!) cases where it is relevant, share your answers with the graphic designers. Find a way that makes sense in your work context.

Should you invite a graphic designer to your daily editorial meeting?  
Should you share your answers in a daily email, or in a weekly five-minute coffee meeting with someone from the graphic department?

It all depends on how your deadlines, stories, and workplace look. As long as you share the answers systematically, you're good to go.

## Cast a critical eye... on yourself

It takes (at least) half a precious hour, and it's not necessarily much fun, but, as with anything we want to be better at, there's no way around evaluating our own efforts. Especially if we lack a daily sounding board or some friendly critics to criticise our visual choices.

### **Experiment with raising the quality of the visuals - and then stop and ask yourself:**

- Has it gotten better since you started the experiment? Why (not)?
- What's the worst photo or visual you've used? What makes it bad?
- What's the best? What makes it good?
- What's the lowest hanging fruit in terms of making it BETTER going forward?  
Eg. fewer stock photos, more infographics, talking to the designer or illustrator earlier...



## Play around

Maybe someone in the graphic department has a new idea. Maybe someone in the editorial team can draw. Maybe you know someone who can teach you how to make infographics easily, or put you in contact with an upcoming illustrator...

When you have the time, energy, and (or) ideas, **PLAY** with the formats. With **illustrations, infographics**, and data **visualisations**. Or with the more unconventional formats, like those you'll see examples of on the next pages:

**Visual abstracts** are brilliant at summarising a larger story or capturing the essence of an outreach activity.

**Comics** are demanding to produce, but we know they will be read, remembered and valued.





VISUAL...  
WHAT?

AN ABSTRACT  
COMMUNICATES  
THE KEY FINDINGS OF EG  
A SCIENTIFIC  
JOURNAL  
ARTICLE.



THE TWO CLOSEST RELATIVES  
OF THE VISUAL ABSTRACT.

NORMALLY  
with lots of  
words words  
words words  
words words  
words words  
BUT INCREASINGLY  
WO/ WITH  
GRAPHICS

FIND YOUR STYLE...

... JAUNTY,  
SPONTANEOUS,  
CHAOTIC,  
PLAYFUL?

Formal  
Well-organised

WHATEVER  
SUITS YOUR  
PREFERENCE

[JUST LIKE THE  
EXAMPLE  
YOU'RE LOOK-  
ING AT NOW]

THE ABSTRACT IS A GREAT



IF YOU'RE HOSTING EVENTS  
OR TALKS



PARTICIPANT

THE ABSTRACT  
CAN ALSO GIVE AN  
OVERVIEW OF A  
SERIES OF ARTICLES.

...OR PRO-  
VIDE A RE-  
ENTRY TO  
AN 'OLD'  
TOPIC.

JOURNALISM  
WISF

THE VISUAL  
ABSTRACT CAN  
SUM UP THE ESSENCE  
OF A COMPLEX STORY



THIS IS AN EXAMPLE OF A

VISUAL  
ABSTRACT





SO LET'S ALL  
LIVE HAPPILY EVER AFTER  
WITH COMICS JOURNALISM...  
WELL, NOTHING IS THAT  
SIMPLE, OF COURSE. COMICS  
PRODUCTION IS VERY TIME  
CONSUMING. AND WHAT ABOUT  
OBJECTIVITY?! READ MORE ON  
THIS IN THE LONG VERSION OF  
THIS BOOK ON [www.constructiveinstitute.org](http://www.constructiveinstitute.org)



# The Core Principles of Constructive Journalism

This guide is part of a series on constructive journalism produced by fellows at the Constructive Institute.

It either covers different topics or approaches to journalism that aim to do more than just report. All of them are based on the core principles of constructive journalism, which the Constructive Institute in Aarhus has helped define and shape.

Constructive journalism is bridge-building, critical, and balanced, and its focus is forward-looking and future-oriented. It is based on facts and mainly covers bigger societal problems.

Constructive journalism is not a promotion of heroes, governments, or civil society organisations. It is not simplistic, trivial, or happy news, and the journalist should never become an advocate for one solution over another.

The Constructive Institute essentially operates with three types of constructive journalism: Solutions-focused, covering nuances, and promoting democratic conversations.

# The three pillars of constructive journalism

## Journalism for Tomorrow

### The Ambition

To contribute to democracy through critical, constructive journalism

#### Focus on Solutions

Not only expose  
the problems, but  
also look for possible  
solutions

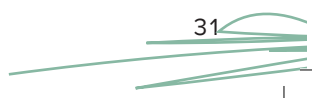
#### Cover Nuances

Strive for the best  
obtainable version  
of the truth.  
See the world  
with both eyes

#### Promote Democratic Conversation

Engage and facilitate  
debate, including  
people in the  
community







# CONSTRUCTIVE INSTITUTE

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