

Illustration Concepts

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In any illustration project, there are two basic decisions to be made regarding the image: 1) What style (which includes technique) will be used to execute the image, and 2) What concept is to be shown. Concept is a different consideration from style or media.

Of all the millions of individual illustration concepts that have been created over many centuries, there are only four different categories or kinds of concepts. We can call these the four basic Conceptual Approaches and will refer to them using the following terms:

Narrative Approach

This concept shows an event, a situation or a scene that actually happens in the story or subject being illustrated. This is the oldest and most common form of illustration. We see it on the walls of Egyptian tombs and other ancient art: King Narmer about to whack an enemy king with his war mace; King Akhenaton playing with his daughter while his wife, Nefertiti looks on. Narrative is the most common concept used for children's picture books.

The key to distinguishing Narrative concepts from other concepts is that the interaction or event shown really occurs in the story. Think of it as a single freeze-frame from a movie. It is not editorializing about the story, just showing some important moment in the story. In fact, for a narrative approach to be successful, from a marketing point of view, it should show a moment that is particularly pivotal to the story.

A book cover for Moby Dick could picture the body of Captain Ahab wrapped up in harpoon ropes around the white whale. Since this actually takes place in the story (sorry if I spoiled the ending for you) it is a prime example of a Narrative concept.

A poster for the comic opera, La Gordona Canta (The Fat Lady Sings), could show the leading character, Porkanella, singing to the poor, squashed Thinetto who she has pinned against the wall. Since this scene actually happens in the plot of the opera, it is a legitimate narrative approach.

In a magazine article about harmonious divorces, a narrative concept might show a couple sitting amicably at a table with a lawyer.

Cast or Character Approach

This approach merely shows the persons and/or objects and/or places discussed in a story or subject without reference to events in the story. The key to the Cast or Character approach is that the visual elements do not interact in the picture plane.

A Cast or Character approach on a cover the novel The Brothers Karamazov could show the four brothers' faces side by side and even add the family mansion in the background; but Cast or Character approaches show no action and no situation from the story. It just shows the characters from the story.

A magazine article about "burned-out housewife syndrome" could show a woman with a worn, somewhat depressed and hollowed-out look.

The cover of a book on Archaeology could simply feature the facemask of Pharaoh Tutankhamen.

To the novice, cast or character approaches sometimes don't even seem worthy of the term concept. After all, it is just showing the Character or Cast of characters from a story. But in the hands of a skillful artist, a Cast or Character illustration may be the most effective for a particular use.

Most of the illustrated covers for Cyrano de Bergerac have certainly shown just Cyrano with his huge nose and little else. Album covers for the opera Boris Goudinoff often show a portrait of the troubled Czar Boris without any other reference to the story.

Movie posters are very often done in a montage approach, which is just a variation of the cast or character concept. One of the more famous posters for Star Wars (there were several different posters used in different cities) shows Luc and Leia, R2D2 and C3PO, Darth Vader and the death star. None of the characters are interacting with each other. Often characters are shown in different visual scales so that it is obvious that they are not being shown in the same three-dimensional space; they are in montage space.

Allegorical Approach

This concept may use invented characters to show an underlying principle or moral of the story. Conversely, real characters may be shown in an unreal situation. Sometimes even emotions or inanimate objects may be personified. The key for this kind of concept is that these situations don't really happen in the story, but represent the concepts, feelings or morals of the story by using humans as the allegorical objects.

An illustration for an article on US-Canada trade relations could show Uncle Sam (representing the USA) chopping with an axe the crutch that a beaver (representing Canada) is leaning on. We know that there is no real Uncle Sam, he is an allegorical personification of the American state. Likewise there is no real beaver that is Canada's mascot in the same way a real groundhog, Punxsutawney Phil, is the "official" groundhog for Groundhog Day. Uncle Sam and our beaver are allegorical.

An article on the misuse of power in government agencies (FBI, CIA, Department of Homeland Security, etc.) could show an average looking couple and their children shrinking in fear underneath a large man's menacing shadow.

A different poster for Star Wars showed a large Darth Vader holding a smaller Princess Leia and Luke Skywalker in his menacing hand. Since Vader is the same general size as Leia and Luke, this concept is showing an unreal situation, one that represents the power of Vader compared to the other characters. It is an allegorical approach.

Symbolic Approach

Symbolic concepts are similar to Allegorical in that real characters from a story are not used. But symbolic concepts use non-personified, nonhuman or inanimate symbols to represent ideas. Symbolic approach elements are often graphic in nature and are extremely simplified. The key is that they are inanimate symbols and remain so in use.

A symbolic concept for an article on the erosion of the American society might show an American flag with large portions missing as if worn or eaten away.

A book on investments might have a coin planted in the ground with a hundred dollar bill sprouting from it.

A poster for the orchestral concert Love Themes from the Movies, could show several movie projectors, all shining overlapping heart images on the moon.

Left Brain, Right Brain

The two hemispheres of the human brain have distinct domains. The left side generally takes care of the verbal, mathematical and analytical functions, whereas the right side provides spatial, esthetic and visual abilities. It is as if we each have two brains, each with their own particular specialties. Generally, only one hemisphere can be dominant at a time.

Many illustrators have developed the right sides of their brains, which is to be expected. By deliberately thinking of an illustration assignment in terms of the four conceptual approaches, we are using the left side of the brain, which, for many illustrators and designers, is underutilized when they work. As you consider each of these concepts, make a written list or do quick thumbnails to record your ideas. By deliberately considering the subject in this analytical way, you are getting the left side to collaborate or jump-start the right side. Two brains are better than one.

By deliberately using each of the conceptual approaches, one can increase, not only the total number of concepts generated, but, with practice, the quality of concepts as well. With a basketful of ideas, the artist can turn off the idea stream and put on another hat. Now each idea can be examined for its individual merits.

An illustrator who approaches this evaluation process from a position of wealth in concepts, not poverty, will more likely come through with a fine solution in the end. If an art director or an illustrator only has one or two ideas, the task of being honest in evaluating those few ideas in the creative mix becomes more difficult. How can you reject an idea because it isn't quite right if that's the only idea you have?

Ideally, a designer or illustrator should come through the conceptualizing phase with a wealth of ideas, not just a hand-full. Learning this conceptualizing process can help to find the idea that is--not just OK, or even good--but the very best for the project at hand

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