

**HOW TO READ IMAGES**

**(ACCORDING TO TYLER)**

1. Look for  
components

Images are made up  
of parts that we might  
call components

There are few types of components.

Each does something different.

Each type raises  
distinct questions that  
you can ask.

# These are types that I pay attention to.

This is not a comprehensive list. And this is just my terminology, not necessarily a standardized definition.

# ICONS

Icons are components that symbolize something else.  
They are like nouns in a sentence.

It can be helpful to  
think about the image  
as a story.

Is the icon protagonist of the story?

Is the icon in a conflict with something?

Is the icon taking action? Or is someone else acting?





Jasper Johns, "Three Flags" (1958)

# ATMOSPHERES

Atmospheres are components that provide context. Maybe it is a physical location or a time period. Maybe it's an emotional context. It can even be a style.

Atmospheres are like the setting in a story.

# Atmospheres can be literal or abstract.

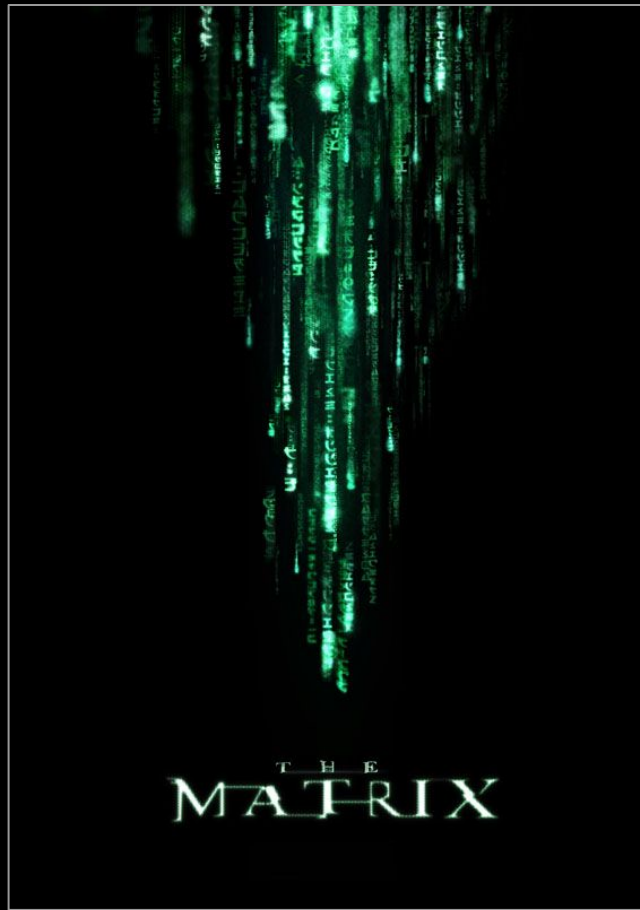
That can make it somewhat challenging to identify an atmosphere. But as a general rule of thumb, they affect the overall image.

Here are some  
questions you might  
want to ask:

What is the overall tone or emotion of the image?

Does the action normally happen in this kind of place?

How does the context affect the image's meaning?



“The Matrix” movie poster



Authorized reproduction of Bob Dylan's image in poster, included in the 2007 "Bob Dylan: Greatest Hits" album from Columbia Records.

Bob Dylan poster by Milton Glaser (1966)

# REFERENCES

References are components that relate an image to history or contemporary culture.

References let the designer piggyback on things that have already been said.



# Some questions:

How did the world originally react to the reference?

Does the image agree with the reference?

Does the image contradict the reference?



Marcel Duchamp (as "R. Mutt")  
"Fountain" (1917)



Sherrie Levine  
"Fountain (After Duchamp)" (1991)



**Do women have to be naked to  
get into the Met. Museum?**

Less than **5%** of the **artists** in the Modern  
Art Sections are women, but **85%**  
of the **nudes** are female.

**GUERRILLA GIRLS** Box 1056-Cooper Sts. NYC NY 10276  
CONSCIENCE OF THE ART WORLD

Guerrilla Girls (1989)



Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, "La Grande Odalisque" (1814)

2. Look for structures  
and gestures

# Is there an internal logic system?

I'm not (only) talking about a design system like a type scale or a grid. I'm talking about patterns that very specific to this particular work.

# How do you spot them?

Try to describe what different components have in common. Are icons always the same size? Do they always exist in pairs?

# Then interrogate the meaning.

How do the rules of the logic system affect the  
image's meaning?



# 3. Look for origins and provenance

This can be difficult  
because we literally  
know who made the  
image.

It's like watching a movie. You know it's fake but you pretend it's not.

This is called “suspension of disbelief”

Pretend you don't  
know your classmate  
made the image.

# Where did it come from?

Did we find it on the street?  
Is ripped out of a book?

# Who made it?

What kind of person would make this image?

How might we describe them?

Are they righteous? Insane?

Were they a common person? Or a professional?

# Why was it made?

Did this image have a function in the world?

What were the maker's goals?

Is it fragment of something larger?

4. Add it all together