

Visual Vocabulary



Learning to think in visuals is a lot like learning a foreign language: an important part is memorizing the vocabulary.

A visual vocabulary is an English-to-visuals dictionary. It's a mental collection of simple icons that can be used to represent concepts, words, and ideas.

Practice. Think of an abstract concept, like "risk." How would you draw it? Maybe it's a worried swimmer and a shark fin. Or a steep cliff. Or a falling anvil. Or a round bomb.

Make it iconic. When at all possible, draw images with broad symbolic and social awareness. Comics and cartoons, especially Looney Tunes and the Sunday funnies, have rich symbolism. For example, "attraction" is a magnet. "Progress" is a 1950's rocket ship. "Conflict" is a boxing glove. "Fear" is a Pac-Man ghost.

Make it simple. The simplest drawings are the best. Use only the barest amount of detail necessary to convey the meaning of the object.

Sometimes, you may need to bend this rule. For example, a modern phone is a nondescript rectangle of metal and glass. Adding an antenna helps viewers see it as a phone.

Reverse Practice. Go from icons to idea. Scan the icons above. What could you use them to represent? To challenge yourself, select your a few icons that you'd like to make a part of your own visual vocabulary, and try to come up with five unique concepts that each one could represent.

Add Your Own. Got a few favorite icons of your own? Draw them in the space to the right!