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The Face on Mars

A 1976 photograph, official wording, and bit errors in an eye.

A NASA Science page dated 31 July 1976 says the picture is one of many taken in the northern latitudes of Mars by the Viking 1 Orbiter, in search of a landing site for Viking 2. "The huge rock formation in the center, which resembles a human head, is formed by shadows giving the illusion of eyes, nose and mouth."

The official story	Official wording
The hill	"The picture shows eroded mesa-like landforms." Official wording calls the centre formation a resemblance and an illusion, not a carving.
A size, in 1976	"The feature is 1.5 kilometers (one mile) across, with the sun angle at approximately 20 degrees." It "was taken on July 25 from a range of 1873 kilometers (1162 miles)."
Bit errors	Official 1976 wording: the speckled appearance "is due to bit errors, emphasized by enlargement of the photo." Official PIA01141 wording, kept apart, says bit errors are missing data in transmission, and "comprise part of one of the 'eyes' and 'nostrils.'"
Natural processes	Official PIA01141 wording: "Planetary geologists attribute the origin of the formation to purely natural processes."

A short quiz

1. What, officially, forms the illusion of a face in the 1976 caption?
2. What official 1976 size is given?
3. Do official pages treat the speckles as part of the landscape?

Answers. Shadows. 1.5 kilometers (one mile) across. No — official wording calls them bit errors, and one official caption says they comprise part of an "eye" and a "nostril."

Wording from NASA Science, "The 'Face on Mars'," 31 July 1976, and "Geologic 'Face on Mars' Formation," PIA01141. Checked 18 November 2026. pareidolia.illusions.im is independent of NASA and JPL. Typographic sheet: no photographs inside.