How Do I Assess My Students’ Multimodal Work?

Most of us who teach writing have been trained in the composition of words. Although that education often includes attention to rhetorical and genre considerations, transitioning into the teaching and assessment of multimodal texts leaves many people feeling ill-equipped. Not only are we responsible for evaluating how the words (if there are any) communicate to a given audience, but we’re having to consider the role of images, sounds, colors, typefaces, layouts, navigation, and more. Many instructors we’ve talked with have voiced concerns about consistency, fairness, and expertise in evaluating the diversity of projects students may develop. While Writer/Designer will support your curriculum and instruction, the section below will provide some concrete strategies on how to tackle the grading of individual and collaborative multimodal compositions.

Peer-Reviewed Grading Tutorial

One of the goals of a rhetorical genre studies approach is to teach students to transfer processes of genre analysis, composition, and revision into any kind of writing situation. This process of transfer is true whether students write only in words or in multiple media—they need to learn how to assess and evaluate how well (or poorly) they’ve succeeded in meeting their audience’s needs at any particular point in the design process. This is where students’ analyses of rhetorical situations and genres (e.g., the texts they’re working on in class for particular audiences) intersect with the peer-review process. This brief tutorial describes how to implement a genre-studies approach to evaluation so that students learn to assess their own and each others’ work and have more fruitful peer-review workshops.

Instructors are always looking for better ways to evaluate their students’ learning in class, and multimodal projects present a particular challenge for teachers accustomed to assessing only students’ written content in essays, research papers, and the like. However, multimodal assessment doesn’t have to present obstacles if teachers rely on the same principles of rhetoric that apply to all communication, whether it’s based in writing, speech, video, audio, live performance, or anything else. These rhetorical principles—such as understanding the rhetorical situation (of any text), including analyzing for audience, purpose, context, and genre—provide teachers with a mechanism for the kinds of grading we do, including formative assessment (in-progress feedback) and summative assessment (evaluations on a final product). For more scholarship on the state of multimodal assessment in writing studies, see the Annotated Bibliography in this manual.
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Using the Write/Design! assignment from Chapter 3 (pp. 83–85) on “Analyzing Genre Conventions for Your Project,” students will have made a checklist of genre conventions specific to the kind of text they’re designing. Use this list as a preliminary set of grading criteria—that is, ask yourself: what conventions does a text need to have in order to meet its audiences’ needs? These conventions should appear on the students’ lists. (If students are all working on the same genre or genre set, it’s ideal to have the students brainstorm this list in class or on a discussion forum.) Help the students shape (and perhaps shorten) the list into something manageable, for your sake and theirs. Suggest any conventions they might have missed. Students can use the genre conventions list as a formative and summative assessment checklist as they compose and revise their designs. It can be referenced again during the “Pitching Your Project” section in Chapter 4 (pp. 89–90).

By the time students are ready to workshop their rough drafts, they will have had practice doing multiple genre analyses and also analyzing for the rhetorical situation, including audience, purpose, and context (which might include venue, delivery medium, etc.). The “Giving Feedback on a Rough Draft” Touchpoint activity in Chapter 5 (p. 127) asks students to analyze the rhetorical situation surrounding their draft. The “Getting Feedback on Your Rough Drafts” section in Chapter 7 (pp. 197–98) also prepares students to submit their projects for peer and stakeholder review. We recommend that classmates perform these analyses to prep themselves to serve as evaluators of their classmates’ texts. Once they’ve practiced these analytical processes again (which also helps them to transfer that practice to other/new writing situations), they can serve as stand-in audience members for their classmates’ texts. This process serves the purposes of

- giving students more practice in their analysis and assessment techniques that transfer to other writing situations;
- freeing the teacher from being the only authority on assessment in the class because students learn, through this process, that assessment and evaluation have real-world stakes (i.e., they won’t get a grade for writing done outside of the classroom, but it will be evaluated in other, perhaps even harsher ways—a life lesson and writing lesson that rhetorical genre studies supports and helps students adapt to);
- encouraging students to take more responsibility for their learning while giving them the tools to take leadership and ownership over their own writing.

For an extended version of this practice, please see Ball, 2012, in the Annotated Bibliography in this manual (beginning on p. 71), which outlines why you’d want to turn assessment over to your students and how it benefits both them and you as the teacher. Also see Ball, 2013, which outlines—using examples from one class—how students write assessment letters from the point of view of clients/stakeholders/audience members. Both articles are available for free at http://ceball.com.
Example Assessment Materials
To showcase just how to go about assessing a multimodal project, we’re going to run through an example Touchpoint activity as well as the Write/Design! assignment for Chapter 2: “Designing A Rhetorical Analysis.”

Assessing Low-Stakes Activities
Touchpoints are intended to be shorter, smaller-scale activities that function as part of a larger unit or multimodal project in a class, but that doesn’t mean that teachers should approach the assessment any differently than a larger unit project. Laying out expected objectives and specific details of any assignment is key in thinking through how to assess a multimodal activity.

Consider the Touchpoint activity titled “Analyzing a Website’s Rhetorical Design Choices” on page 50 of Writer/Designer. In asking students to choose a particular website to analyze (or assigning the whole class a genre to pick from), develop a questionnaire using the key concepts of Chapter 2 (listed on p. 36 of this Instructor’s Manual). Ask students to identify the enactment of these terms on their chosen website, specifically to define the rhetorical situation. As an assessment tool, develop a key with the definitions so that you can point to any areas of inaccuracy or confusion. Remember, smaller-scale activities are meant to reinforce particular concepts or skills that build toward a larger demonstration of that content. As a result, it’s important to build in assessment that checks for comprehension in the multimodal texts we’re asking students to analyze and identify rhetorical principles within—especially before they create their own for a grade.

Assessing Higher-Stakes Assignments
As the Write/Design! assignment for Chapter 2 suggests, a good way to take the Touchpoint just described to the next level is to ask students to make a larger claim on the analysis of a website. Asking students to assert whether or not a website is rhetorically effective also means asking them to support their claims using evidence, much like a traditional research paper would. In fact, as students design multimodal rhetorical analyses of their own, guiding questions for assessment might be similar to a traditional analysis paper. Below, we suggest slight modifications to these questions to approach a multimodal project:

• Has the student effectively introduced the website in their analysis by identifying the writer/designer of the site, briefly describing or summarizing the site, and explaining its rhetorical situation?
  ◦ What modes do they use to do so? Do they include images? Sound?
• Can you identify the student’s thesis?
  ◦ What mode is the thesis presented in?
• What rhetorical elements of the site does the student cover?
  ◦ Does the student show these examples as they’re demonstrated in the text? Do they offer a linear approach to the analysis? Something else?
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- How well does the student support their ideas on rhetorical principles with evidence?
  - Do we get screen shots? Narration with screen-capture software? A storyboard?
- Does the student present—and refute—any counter arguments?
  - How do the potential levels of audience (primary, secondary, stakeholders, etc.) demonstrate different perspectives?
- Does the student cite sources responsibly?
  - Have assets and sources all been cited properly and in the correct genre for the project?

In addition, you will likely also want to add questions about form, such as these:

- Is the project opening properly in the correct program or software?
- Does the medium of the project allow the audience to follow the argument?
- Is the project accessible? Are there captions? Transcripts?
- How are the colors and fonts working together to convey a particular tone or mood? Is it effective?

Developing assessment materials that analyze both the content and form of a multimodal project is one way to stress the value of thinking through how the form of a project should be planned and organized in addition to what kind of material you’re expecting students to cover in a unit or larger assignment within a course. Take a look at your own assessment materials for projects that you’re thinking about modifying to be multimodal. Can you revise your assessment materials to look at both the content and form of a project? What kind of changes need to be made? How can you modify an already existing unit plan so that you can scaffold multimodal projects into your class?

For more of a discussion on the importance of combining form and content when we talk about rhetoric, media, and web-based texts, see Arola, 2010, in the Annotated Bibliography in this manual.

A Sample Grading Policy for Multimodal Projects

Note: The following grading criteria are excerpted from Cheryl’s undergraduate Multimodal Composition syllabus at Illinois State University. Students designed collaborative webtexts for online scholarly journals (like Kairos) as the major course project. The full syllabus is available at http://239f11.cebball.com/.

Grades: What I Expect and Value

In this class, you are authors, and I will treat you the same as I treat the authors who submit to the journal I edit, Kairos. That means I expect you to learn about and follow the social and cultural conventions of professional academic behavior, which I will help you learn during the semester. (These behaviors aren’t specific to academia—this is just the context in which we
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will discuss them.) Because this class focuses a great deal on professional development, writing/authoring, and digital publishing, my grading schema reflects that professionalism. Assigning letter or number grades does not improve your learning, just as telling an author that the journal rejects her work for publication—without any explanation as to why—does not make her a better writer in the profession. I have set up this class so you can achieve the learning outcomes and excellence by providing structured assignments that enhance your critical and creative thinking, and by offering a lot of informal and formal feedback on your in-progress work. For these reasons, your grade is based 100 percent on your participation.

What “Feedback” Means and What to Do with It

Feedback often comes in the form of informal in-class discussions about your assignments and individual or group conferences. For instance, when your peers and I offer critiques of your draft projects, we assume that you will implement those revision suggestions into your drafts. When you don’t, you should have a very good reason in relation to the purpose of the text for not doing so. Otherwise, when I am reviewing your final project, I should be able to see your progress on the text from the time it was workshopped as well as from informal, in-class feedback or conferences with me. I hope that this grading system will allow you the freedom and flexibility to take risks in your assignments while also providing time for you to re-envision and revise those drafts into more usable, sophisticated, and polished texts by the end of the term.

Your Grade Is Based on 100 Percent Class Participation

Participation includes the following:

- **Attendance**: You are required to attend every class session unless the schedule specifically indicates that class is canceled that day. There is no such thing as an excused versus an unexcused absence—if you’re not here, I don’t much care why. If your absence is caused by a funeral or similar extenuating circumstances, I will take that into consideration when I consider your grade. If you miss more than one class, consider your grade in jeopardy. If you miss a workshop, you’ll be doubly in jeopardy. Also, attendance at out-of-class conferences with me is considered the same as class time. If you miss a conference, you will be counted absent.
- **Timeliness**: If you show up late or leave early or disappear (or fall asleep) for fifteen minutes in the middle of class, it will affect your participation. Timeliness also refers to the time-sensitive nature of completing assignments and turning in equipment on time. Late work is completely unacceptable, and I will not give you feedback on it. If you do not have a major assignment ready in time for our workshop days, it is your responsibility to get feedback from your classmates outside of class upon (or before) your return. If you return borrowed equipment late, consider your participation grade in jeopardy. If you fail to return borrowed equipment at all (e.g., you lose it or break it beyond repair), you are responsible for...
replacing the equipment with the same kind, and I will hold your final grade submission until it has been replaced.

- **Readiness:** Readiness is different from timeliness in that it relates specifically to being prepared by the start-time of the class period (and having any outside-of-class work prepared). All homework must be completed *before* class starts. For instance, printing of assignments or uploading of files after the class period has begun will result in a delay of class, which will negatively impact your grade. This bullet also refers to workshop participation and group work participation in that if you do not have a draft ready on workshop day, you are unprepared to provide feedback to your workshop peers, or you are unwilling or unable to perform the responsibilities of your group work, your grade will suffer.

- **Thoughtfulness:** Thoughtfulness translates to critical awareness during and participation in all class activities. These activities may include having useful, productive questions or discussion items based on homework (readings, assignments, or peer-review work), collegial work completed with your group mates, or thoughtful work demonstrated in the major assignments themselves. In addition (a note for those of you who like to talk a lot), thoughtfulness means that if you constantly need to share in class, but your sharing is largely off-topic, disruptive, or unhelpful, your participation may be more distracting than useful. I will probably talk to you about this before your grade suffers.

Everyone in this class starts with a B/C. How you participate changes that grade higher or lower. Students in previous classes have earned As (see tips below), Bs (for mediocre participation in class, usually related to group work), a few Cs (usually related to multiple absences), and Fs (for failure to turn in a large number of assignments or for skipping out altogether). If you have questions at any time about your grade potential, please make an appointment with me. If I believe that you are on a trajectory toward a C, D, or F, I will let you know by mid-term. If you’re participating in the basics of the class, then you’re probably passing and should only be concerned with your individual goals for earning a B or A, described in more detail below.

**Tips for Earning an A**

The grade of A is reserved for excellent work. Excellent work does not equate with showing up every day, participating once in a while, and turning in completed drafts on time or turning the final portfolio in with the revision basics done. Those are the average requirements of any class setting, and average equates to a C in this academic setting. Here are some ways to earn an A:

- **Produce excellent assignments.** What constitutes excellence? Doing more than simply completing the terms of the assignment. An excellent assignment may meet any number of qualities, depending on its purpose and genre. We’ll spend much time analyzing possible qualities for your work, which means you’ll be creating evaluation criteria for your own work. If your texts live up to your own criteria, it’s likely your work will be excellent.
• **Participate excellently in class.** Excellence in class participation means not simply speaking frequently, but participating in all of the ways I mention in the class participation section. As some examples, you should contribute in an active and generous way to the work of the class as a whole by asking questions, offering interpretations, politely challenging your classmates, graciously accepting challenges in return, and being a productive group member.

• **Be an excellent citizen-scholar.** Specifically, be able to demonstrate to me (through discussions, group work, and assignment drafts) that you (a) understand and can reflect on the content of this class and show progress toward that knowledge in your final portfolio; (b) reason logically, critically, creatively, independently, and consensually, and are able to address issues in a broad and constantly shifting context; (c) recognize different ways of thinking, creating, expressing, and communicating through a variety of media; (d) understand diversity in value systems and cultures in an interdependent world; and (e) develop a capacity for self-assessment and transferable learning.

You might be an excellent student if you

• have a collegial attitude.
• wait for me to get settled when I walk into class by holding all questions until I give the ready signal (which we will vote on during the first class period).
• bring your materials to class every day.
• ask for help well in advance of a deadline.
• accept responsibility for late or incomplete assignments.
• ask your classmates for missed content if you are absent.
• are attentive in class so that I avoid needless repetition.
• provide me assignments on-time and in the medium I ask.
• ask your classmates (or Google) for help during open-lab sessions, then...
• ...if stumped, raise your hand, call me, and wait patiently for help.
• use email, appointments, or some other agreed-upon conferencing medium for private or involved questions.
• accept that I respond to emails quickly, except after 5 p.m. or on weekends.
• understand that strategic (and sometimes maximum) effort results in excellent work.
• add your thoughts to the question, “What would you require to earn an A?” We will discuss this question during the first class period and add to this list.

**Grading Collaborative Projects**

Most students hate group work. I promise you’ll think differently about it after this class!
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First, I know most of you work outside of school and that it’s hard to find time to get together. This course is specifically scheduled in blocks so that you have time in class to do a majority of your group work (usually in the second half of the semester, when we really start working on your projects).

Second, there is no such thing as a “group grade” in this class. You’re an individual and you’re responsible to yourself and to others. I am not going to penalize you for having a slacker partner or for having a super–Type-A, know-it-all partner. (Unless, of course, you are the slacker or the Type-A takeover personality.) Given the kinds of projects we’re working on in this class (e.g., webtexts), which have a specific set of stakeholders (e.g., editors, journal readers, etc.) with their own guidelines for authoring, submitting, and evaluating, you will have to work with your groups to complete a successful webtext.

In this case, “successful” means that a webtext is submittable to an online journal (one of several we will discuss in class). In other words, the webtext has to work—to function technically (as far as computer coding and multimedia codexes go)—and has to fit the basic rhetorical needs of the journal you choose, as outlined in their submissions criteria, which you will research beforehand. Most webtext submissions don’t get accepted for publication without a lot of revision. In academia, we call this getting a “Revise and Resubmit,” which means a webtext is good enough to be of use to the journal’s readership but that it’s not ready for publication yet and needs more work. That’s a pretty good level to shoot for, and most new scholars get R&Rs their first time submitting somewhere. So you’ll be in good company.

How do you get there? You get there by working together, playing to each of your strengths, and living up to your team contract from the start of the collaborative project. Editors (your rhetorical stakeholders) don’t care who slacked on the article or who did most of the writing. They only care that you submit and do the revisions needed to perfect your work, as is the case in this class. While I (as your teacher) do care about who slacked or who unnecessarily took over—and I will know, because a teacher always has eyes in the back of her head—as a stand-in for your editor/stakeholder-reader, I am expecting you to learn about and live up to the professional expectations of being an author in this rhetorical situation. I will teach you all about those as we proceed in this class, and by the end I think you’ll have a newfound respect for doing group work the good way, the professional way.