

# Discourses Surrounding Multimodal Media in the First-Year Composition Classrooms

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## Abstract

This article uses Foucauldian discourse analysis to explore ideologies on multimodal media in first-year composition courses compared to multimedia composition practices in the workplace. In doing so, it highlights intersecting discourses at play, with the beliefs about acceptable or common writing products that parallel the writing students will do in other courses while adhering to grammatical correctness and firm essay structures being central in impacting the roles of multimodal media in the classroom. This article seeks to understand how discourses on multimedia composition within the teacher-professional continuum (TPC) on the topics students should write about, such as argumentative subjects or personal writings, limit the effectiveness of multimedia and digitalization often becomes an additional process to represent these topics instead of a method to perform the complex relationships that writings create with specific contexts. To better understand how this discourse impacts the composition process of multimodal media in the classroom, three first-year composition syllabi are analyzed through content analysis to learn how these discourses cause multimodal media to digitize these two topics and how comprehending multimodal media within this limited lens may differ slightly than the multimedia composition process in the workplace. The results of this analysis explicate how academic discourses limit the communicative abilities of multimodal media while portraying it as a technological process instead of a complex rhetorical one.

## Keywords

Academia, Workplace, Industry, Undergraduate Students, First-Year Composition, Rhetoric, Multimodal Media, Multimedia, Digitalization, Argumentative Essays, Personal Writings, Kairos, Context, Discourse, Communication Strategies, Digital Rhetoric, Pedagogy, Composition Theories, Visual Rhetoric, Technological Literacy, Critical Thinking, Writing Practices, Visual Literacy, Audience Awareness, Genre Theory, Social Media,

## 1. Introduction

Multimodal media has evolved over centuries, and with recent technological advances in digital media, where individuals receive and interpret information almost immediately, multimodal media has expanded even further. While relying on multiple senses to make meaning of different occurring activities, multimodal media is now present in undergraduate first-year composition classrooms. In his book chapter, “Kairos and the Public Sphere,” Sheridan discusses the presence of multimodal media in everyday lives, stating that:

*By rhetorical education, we mean the totality of experiences that prepare a rhetor to act effectively within any given situation. In this sense, rhetorical education begins early... School settings encourage various kinds of rhetorical practices, from drawing pictures to writing essays to giving oral presentations. At the college level, rhetorical education is potentially distributed across the entire curriculum.* (Sheridan, Ridolfo, & Michel, 2012: pp. 10-11)

For Sheridan, the classroom seems to focus on a multimodal finished product as the initial method to teach students. Following this concept, Jody Shipka states in her book *Toward a Composition Made Whole* that when instructors express doubts about how multimodal products depict college-level writing, it is because they only see and focus on the product and not the “final product *in relation* to the complex and highly rigorous decision-making processes the student employed while producing this text.” (Shipka, 2011: p. 3) For scholars like Sheridan and Shipka, the discourse surrounding multimodal media within the college classroom causes the focus on the material product while it neglects the invisible structural system that forms these products. With multimodal media products visualizing traditional first-year composition assignments of argumentative essays or person-writings, the multimedia exemplifies that regardless of the topic, the media creation still enables the writer to respond to a given context or situation effectively. The discourse about what constitutes college-level writing, which causes doubt that multimodal media products truly represent higher-education writing skills, neglects how effective rhetorical multimedia operates and reacts to a given situation, which may be why students may not realize the effectiveness of multimodal media within the classroom or, later, the workplace.

Even with individuals constantly engaging with digital and multimodal media, creating and conceptualizing that media as part of their employment responsibilities requires seeing multimedia in a new light. Different job positions are writing-adjacent, such as social media managers or content coordinators who balance effective writing with digital media creation (Lauer & Brumberger, 2019: p. 635). In their article, “Redefining Writing for the Responsive Workplace,” researchers Claire Lauer and Eva Brumberger state, “rather than the originator of content, the

writer is becoming a sort of multimodal editor who revises, redesigns, remediates, and upcycles content into new forms, for new audiences, purposes, and media.” (Lauer & Brumberger, 2019: p. 634) For the present, the workplace values the multimodal product and its communicative values in response to specific situations since the media is evolving; but, the discourse surrounding multimodal media in the college classroom seems to focus too much on the finished product and neglects situational systems that form the media and truly establishes its rhetorical effectiveness. To better understand how students conceptualize the rhetorical abilities of multimodal media, the discourse surrounding multimedia in first-year composition courses will be analyzed, and the primary research question is: does the academic focus on the finished product of multimodal media possibly cause students to neglect its rhetorical effectiveness?

With the importance of digital literacy and the ability to create and edit multimodal media, college classrooms are integrating them into the coursework. However, classrooms seem to rely on the traditional essay to integrate multimodal media since, often, students create multimedia after creating their thoughts and ideas through the textual structures. For example, Joohoon Kang discusses examples of multimodal projects. He states, “generally, students first write print-based scripts (text-based writing). Subsequently, they add images and sounds and record their audio scripts using editing software to complete a digital story (DMC). Thus, digital storytelling is suitable and valid for exploring students’ composition.” (Kang, 2022: p. 7) For Kang, when students use multimedia through a constricted lens, such as re-representing a textual essay, their initial exposure to multimodal media allows them to begin exploring the structural systems that form effective multimodal media. For Kang, when classrooms embrace digital media, even with restrictions through the representation of a written text, students slowly begin to see how multimodal composition differs from textual-essay composition while being college-level writing. This effective composition is demonstrated through the study by Kang since it generated positive effects, such as “writers can agentivity and creatively use diverse semiotic resources based on both contextual/rhetorical and individual/idiosyncratic factors.” (Kang, 2022: p. 13) Despite the discourses in the classroom possibly placing too much value on the finished product, the agency that is needed to communicate effectively is present.

To further analyze the gap in multimodal composition processes in the classroom and the workplace, this project will use a Foucauldian Analysis Discourse (FDA) to understand how the discourse surrounding multimodal media in a college classroom shapes how students comprehend its effectiveness. FDAs do not focus on generalizations but on how and why certain ideologies work together or against each other. The purpose of an FDA is to select a common societal belief that is generally not questioned and to deeply analyze it while determining who in power is perpetuating that notion and why and to find an alternative set of ideologies, not from the power structure, to possibly reverse or modify the ideology set by those in power (Boulton et al., 2022: p. 2). As noted by Foucault, capi-

talistic systems of power establish normal or socially acceptable behaviors that people must abide by. The norms aim to achieve an intended goal for the masses. Norms are established by those in power for workers to operate within the capitalist system and perform (perhaps unknowingly) within the system; however, FDAs allow individuals to recognize notions that do not fit within the established norm (Boulton et al., 2022: p. 2). Therefore, an FDA in this project dissects how ideologies about what constitutes college-level writing shape the rhetorical understanding of multimodal media.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. The Discourse Surrounding Composition and Writing Topics in the College-Classroom

Even before the technological revolution of digitalized and multimodal media, there was a shift in academia to accept more personal forms of writing and narratives, and eventually, this shift would lead to the different representational aspects that media could perform. Shipka discusses these evolutionary changes and states:

*One could argue that providing students opportunities to create texts based on personal interests and experiences represent the most **profound** shift in this regard... Although the final form of students' writings remained largely fixed for the next one hundred **years** (that is, texts based on personal experiences and interests were often print-based and linear, and so, visually speaking, resembled the research-based, argumentative texts students **were** also expected to produce), in the mid-1960s there **began** to appear a number of publications that pointed to the potentials of providing students **with** increased representational options. (Shipka, 2011: p. 4)*

For students, academia maintains a limited representational lens with both argumentative and personal-themed essays, and this representational restriction impacts multimodal since it often re-represents the previously written textual essay. For Shipka, when the discourse in academia expanded to include personal writings, even with the limited representational difficulties, the expansion into the personal later enabled the expansion into the multimodal. Shipka emphasizes that composition expresses different relationships, and multimodal media completes the same task. Shipka explains how multimedia also depicts the composition process through:

*writing on shirts, purses, and shoes, repurposing games, staging live performances, producing complex multipart rhetorical events, or asking students to account for the choices they make while designing linear, thesis-driven, print-based texts can also broaden notions of composing and greatly impact the way students write, read, and perhaps most importantly, respond to a much wider variety of communicative technologies—both new and not so new. (Shipka, 2011: p. 9)*

For Shipka, the current discourse in the classroom focuses on the final product of the multimodal creation, which is often why the media re-represents a previously written text. However, even if there are limitations with a restricted repre-

sentational lens in the classroom, the multimedia does represent college-level writing since it shows complex choices involved when creating something that communicates ideas or thoughts based on a context and a desired audience. Even with the academic discourse debating on embracing multimodal media unless it represents the traditional text-based essay, the media does represent the composition process since it involves choices and relationships within a given context.

## 2.2. Multimodal Media in the Workplace

Despite academia's discourse and debate on whether the product of multimodal creation truly represents college-level writing, the workplace recognizes multimodal media and its compositional abilities. As previously highlighted by Shipka, if composition includes representing relationships while maintaining situational structural awareness, multimodal media in the workplace responds to those needs. In their study, researchers Lauer and Brumberger states

*The delivery of writing—by which we mean the channels through which it is distributed and consumed—has been evolving so rapidly in the past decade that our fundamental assumptions about writing in the workplace must also evolve. We call this evolving workplace “responsive,” borrowing from the practice of “responsive web design,” which is the now-standard approach to designing websites so their appearance and usability adapt to various screen sizes, resolutions, and device types. A “responsive” workplace is one in which writers must adapt to making meaning not just through writing, but across a range of modes, technologies, channels, and constraints. (Lauer & Brumberger, 2019: p. 635)*

For the workplace, multimodal media represents an advanced compositional process since it adapts to different situations. As their study suggests, workplaces have embraced multimodal media, recognize their compositional abilities, and see the media beyond its final product. After observing nine communication-related employees perform their daily job responsibilities, their study concluded that:

*Advances in social media and other composing technologies and distribution channels have engendered a workplace in which writers are not tasked with “writing” as it is typically taught in the classroom—where students are asked to produce complete documents through a process that begins with invention and drafting and extends through revision and delivery. Rather, our study suggests that many writers actually act as multimodal editors—people who work with a myriad modes of content—often encountered in medias res after the content has originated by coworkers or consultants... Multimodal editing often involves shaping pre-existing content that has been sourced from a variety of people and modes and distributed across a range of channels and uses. Multimodal editing requires rhetorical agility and adaptability. Based on our research, we argue that multimodal editing has, in many ways, become the writing of the responsive workplace. (Lauer & Brumberger, 2019: p. 637)*

Professionals in the workplace have already adapted to the technological advancements multimodal media provides and learned how to use these modes to

engage with their audience. The workplace solely focuses on engaging with multimodal as its communicative form, and that form of media still meets all standards to be considered adequate for the professional standards of the workplace.

### 3. Methodology

In this article, the selection of samples for analysis is purposeful, with a focus on first-year composition courses and multimodal assignments that represent diverse instructional approaches within the context of academic writing. The syllabi from Prairie View Texas A&M University (PVAMU), Texas Tech University (TTU), and Clemson University were chosen due to their representation of different institutional settings and their inclusion of multimodal media components within first-year composition courses. These universities were selected because they incorporate multimodal media into their writing curricula to varying degrees, allowing for a comparative analysis across these institutions. The inclusion of these three syllabi provides a broad yet specific context to explore the integration of multimedia and its impact on students' rhetorical awareness and writing development.

The selection of the two studies—Shin and Cimasko's study of ESL freshman composition students and Kim and Belcher's study of EFL students—further reinforces the goal of analyzing multimodal assignments across different student populations. The studies were chosen based on their clear focus on student experiences with multimodal compositions in academic settings, where students' abilities to understand the rhetorical and communicative potentials of multimodal media are tested. The studies involve assignments where students have opportunities to create multimodal projects that extend beyond traditional text-based essays, allowing for an exploration of students' understanding of multimedia beyond the conventional essay format. These two studies were selected because they provide insight into the evolution of students' engagement with multimodal media and how their understanding of the rhetorical possibilities of these media may be shaped by academic discourse.

Moreover, the specific criteria for selection of the syllabi and studies are grounded in the broader research question of the article, which seeks to examine whether academic discourse limits students' understanding of multimodal media as a rhetorical tool. The research is focused on argumentative essay assignments, as these assignments present clear opportunities for analyzing rhetorical decisions and their relationship to the use of multimedia. Both the syllabi and studies chosen provide examples of how students engage with multimodal media in argumentative contexts, thereby contributing to the exploration of whether the discourse surrounding these assignments constrains or broadens students' recognition of multimodal media's rhetorical power.

The criteria for selecting the samples in this study are rooted in the following factors:

- 1) Institutional variety: The syllabi are selected from three different universities, representing distinct academic settings and approaches to incorporating multi-

modal media.

2) Assignment focus: The study specifically examines argumentative essays with multimodal components, making the selected syllabi relevant for analyzing the integration of multimedia into persuasive writing.

3) Student demographics: The studies include ESL and EFL students, allowing for a diverse exploration of how multimodal media is understood across different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

4) Relevance to research question: The studies and syllabi directly address the core research question about students' understanding of multimodal media and its potential as a rhetorical tool.

These criteria ensure a comprehensive and comparative analysis of how multimodal media is integrated into academic writing instruction, and how this integration may shape students' perceptions of its rhetorical capabilities.

#### 4. Analysis

With current first-year composition courses, some classes have begun including multimodal media and highlighting rhetorical awareness through specific audiences. This objective is present in the Prairie View Texas A&M University (PVAMU) first-year composition ENGL 1301 course, with the description stating that “the course emphasizes rhetorical awareness in writing essays for a variety of audiences and purposes,” (Prairie View A&M University, 2020: p. 1) and with the goals being to “refine awareness of different rhetorical modes; practice writing as a recursive process; produce essays with strong purpose, content, and organization; improve proofreading and editing skills; ...improve sense of audience in reading and writing.” (p. 1) Within this syllabus, Shipka's theory about composition needs to be responsive and a representation of different relationships from different contexts is strongly present. However, one concern is that there is no multimodal assignment since the major assignments for the semester are three written essays. (Shipka, 2011: p. 2) These composition capabilities are also present in the first-year composition course (ENGL 1301) at Texas Tech University (TTU), which includes multimodal components. In this syllabus, the goals for students are to “identify, discuss, and analyze various rhetorical strategies and elements of the writing process... [and to] synthesize ideas presented in a variety of works and present those ideas in a coherent essay.” (Texas Tech University, 2020: pp. 1-2) Like PVAMU's goals, this syllabus also aligns with Shipka's claim that composition includes situational awareness and adaptation, but the course at TTU includes direct multimodal components. Students in this course are asked to “develop, apply, and express appropriate form and content in written, visual, aural, and oral communication.” (Shipka, 2011: p. 2) With these assignments, students see a finished multimodal product but also analyze and recognize that multimedia and textual essays operate within given structural systems and contexts to communicate specific information. This is reflective of showcasing recent advancements in technology as students use digital platforms to combine visual, auditory,

and written elements for more comprehensive communication.

Finally, the first-year composition (ENGL 1030) at Clemson University also emphasizes these compositional components in a direct multimodal assignment. Their syllabus states that “we will learn how rhetoric works through attention to persona, audience, and persuasive appeals (such as pathos, logos, ethos, kairos).” (Clemson University, 2019: p. 1) These rhetorical goals emerge in an assignment that is entirely multimodal. The assignment description states:

*This assignment requires students to develop an extended argument using (visual, textual, audio, tactile) about the history of Clemson University. We will all complete videos created using Adobe Premiere Rush. Students will create group videos arguing an idea about Clemson’s diversity and individual videos documenting your creative process. It will be important to decide on your approach to this topic, create a plan, then organize, and structure your project according to effective argumentative writing and design principles you are learning in this course. The project also requires a Works Cited, or video credits, etc., that documents all sources used. Projects will be evaluated on the overall quality of the argument, the production quality, as well as the creativity and effort needed to produce a final product comparable to a 2000-word traditional essay. (5)*

This use of Adobe Premiere Rush demonstrates how showcasing recent advancements in technology can enhance students’ ability to create and communicate complex arguments in dynamic formats. For composition courses that include multimodal assignments, students begin to see the creation process as a series of choices for given information to be presented in a finished product. However, a possible flaw of this assignment is that students evaluate the complexity of the multimedia against a traditional essay, which limits creativity through the textual lens. When students view multimodal media as an additional representation element of traditional text-based essays, they tend to gravitate towards a text-based essay that they are comfortable with rather than adding more creative processes by designing their finished product into multimedia. Students’ hesitation is present in the Shin and Cimasko ESL study, where ESL students gradually increased their use of multimedia throughout the semester. First, students created a personal webpage to serve as their e-portfolio, which allowed them to gain knowledge on the online creation process. However, in the first half of the semester, or the first three rhetorical projects, students only created traditional print-based texts, and they were uploaded as Word documents onto their web pages after completion. Only after students had established a level of comfortability with traditional essay models did the class expand to incorporate multimodal media. The fourth project offered (but did not require) students the option to utilize and create multimodal media for their essays. But, “no one in the class accepted that invitation. Even those students who had clearly established that they were comfortable and capable web designers chose to write and post-traditional essays.” (Shin & Cimasko, 2008: p. 380) Once students understood composition practices as text-based formats, they did not wish to compose rhetorical messages through

other media. Importantly, students learned that the most important aspect of composition is writing clear textual messages, while multimodal media becomes an additional creative aspect.

Multimodal media as a tangent to composition practices becomes evident again in the fifth project. This assignment required students to compose a traditional written argumentative essay before transforming it into a multimodal form. The students received guidelines, such as to utilize any mode they find useful and comfortable. He [the instructor] noted in class discussions that good arguments were complex and took time to construct; an effective approach to constructing a good argument would be to begin with modes that were more familiar to them, working gradually into less familiar ones. He also pointed out in one class discussion that successful arguments, such as advertisements featuring photographs and little or no writing, can be made through primarily non-linguistic modes... The instructor informed the students that the non-linguistic modes of their final drafts were to be graded based on the ability to complement and enhance the argument contained in the written text and on the quality of the overall multimodal design. (Shin & Cimasko, 2008: p. 381) For this assignment, the primary goal was a completed strong written text, and then a coherent multimedia mode could follow. These ESL students comprehended that the most crucial aspect of the composition process is the finished textual product. With their ideas already well established, the multimedia forms only represented the argument in a different manner. Within the academic contexts, the discourse surrounding multimodal media causes students to focus on the written text instead of recognizing multimodal media as a rhetorical device that represents college-level writing and composition since it represents a series of choices that effectively communicate within a given structure.

Within an EFL classroom, students continued to write traditional text-based essays before constructing digital multimodal composition (DMMC) pieces, except for instances of storyboarding. In another study, EFL first-year composition students wrote a process analysis essay and a compare-contrast essay before completing their assignment of an argumentative essay. However, for the argumentative essay, students were divided into two groups: one that first completed the DMMC model and then the traditional essay, and the other group completed the traditional essay before the DMMC task. Both assignments asked students to select various writing topics on aspects of society (such as free subway fare policies), including two or three argument points, two or three counterargument points, and a rebuttal of the counterargument. (Kim & Belcher, 2020: p. 91) The study found a “significant difference between the traditional essay and DMMC in terms of the two complexity measures... Overall, the traditional essay writing was significantly more syntactically complex than the writing done for the DMMC task.” (Kim & Belcher, 2020: p. 93) When students had previously composed traditional essays earlier in the semester, their higher level of comfort with the task was evident in the argumentative essay since they engaged with more complex rhetorical syntax in a familiar format. However, writing and composition processes should

allow the student to understand the real-life similarities to the material, and in this assignment, students favored the DMMC task. With the DMMC task, a student mentioned that he was able to write with interest. Another student acknowledged that DMMC offered a chance to pay attention to the audience. Out of 18 students, a total of 13 students picked DMMC as more interesting than traditional essay writing. Six students stated that DMMC offers various experiences such as looking for sources and creating videos. Two students also appreciated creating a tangible project outcome, that is, a visibly and audibly creative product. (Kim & Belcher, 2020: p. 95) Students who engage with multimodal media appreciated the creative process of their assignment while “in terms of generating anxiety, the majority of the students picked traditional writing as causing more anxiety than DMMC. Students stated that traditional writing requires more formal and accurate writing, and they had to create meaning only using language.” (Kim & Belcher, 2020: p. 95) The EFL students found multimedia to be more of a creative process, but that creativity was present in other modes of media rather than the text in the storyboard. Meanwhile, students found the traditional essay to be creatively restricting, and although there was more complex syntax present in the text-based essays, students often became so involved with the language (since it was their only tool) that they neglected the process of writing and focused on a precise product of text. Within the academic context, students often find the discourse surrounding traditional textual essays too focused on text-based forms of writing while not realizing that multimodal media equates to the same rhetorical communicative abilities also valued in professional contexts and other classrooms.

The writing and communicative process in the workplace with multimodal media follows a different process than that of the classroom. In Lauer and Brumberger’s study, they observed multiple writing career practices, such as Social Media Strategists, Technical Editors, UX Writers, and UX Designers. They found that:

*Some key differences from more traditional professional writing practices... They edited verbal content (e.g., for audience, voice, tone, emphasis, and word count); video content (e.g., modifying scripts, audio, and video, and versioning video for different purposes/audiences); images (e.g., framing, modifying, and cropping for emphasis, transforming static graphics into motion graphics, and using emojis); and even code (e.g., modifying website and app code for specific functionality). We came to call this work writing-as-multimodal-editing because it was framed as writing but included the adaptation of multimodal content within a range of constraints. It didn’t fit within traditional notions of writing, but it also extended well beyond traditional notions of editing. (Lauer & Brumberger, 2019: p. 644)*

For the workplace, the writing process often includes modifying information already present and adapting it to new platforms instead of drafting their ideas and representing them through different multimedia. Additionally, it is unclear how well-versed students become in these software programs or if the multimodal media they produce within the classroom is through low-level programs often not

found in the workplace. Finally, Lauer and Brumberger's study concludes that:

*Much of the content with which our participants worked originated not with them but with others in the company or with clients. The participants rarely started with a blank page. And yet, that is how we often teach writing. In the classroom, we typically approach writing as an activity that begins with invention and proceeds through drafting, revising, and, finally, production of a text. (Lauer & Brumberger, 2019: p. 647)*

Within the workplace, writing practices become an editing and modification process to represent the message. However, Lauer and Brumberger highlight the drastic difference between multimodal media in the classroom and the workplace, which is the invention aspect of composition. Even when attempting to show students the rhetorical capabilities of multimedia, the students only understand composition through a text-based lens, where the creation process happens on the page while the multimedia merely represents the text. Contrarily, the invention process in the workplace heavily relies on multimodal media components while using small text fragments for reference to shape the media. Within the academic context, the discourse surrounding multimodal media prioritizes the invention through the text, while the discourse in the workplace prioritizes the adaptive abilities of media to communicate widely.

## 5. Conclusion

The discourse surrounding professional writing and communication within the classroom interferes with students' multimodal media creation. In the classroom environment, the priority is often placed on a text-based essay as the final product. As a result, students often perceive effective communicative multimodal media as an extension of text-based products. This perception can hinder their ability to transition to creating multimodal media outside the classroom since they may not recognize that the creation process for multimodal media differs from the text-based essay format. However, in the professional world, the focus is not on a finished written product; instead, workers receive small amounts of information and transform these fragments into coherent multimodal pieces. Due to this gap, students may struggle in the workplace by expecting a complete, text-based product to be provided, rather than learning to use multimedia to generate and finalize ideas.

The structural and historical conditions of what constitutes college-level writing influence the understanding of communicative abilities in multimedia. As technology has evolved, so has the ability to communicate through various modes, but academia's discourse—focused on the textual product—limits students' ability to recognize the broad rhetorical and communicative potential of multimedia. Students often fail to see multimodal media as a finished product in its own right, believing that it must always be paired with a textual piece to be effective. Although the academic discourse surrounding composition processes and multimodal media is neither inherently ethical nor unethical, students need to understand that the process for creating multimodal media differs significantly from

traditional text-based formats, especially when comparing academic settings to the workplace. Future research could focus on how multimodal assignments are integrated into higher education curriculums and how this integration can better align with industry practices. Instead of viewing multimodal media as an adjunct to writing or design, there should be a concerted effort to recognize it as a distinct rhetorical form that may be more effective than traditional text-based writing in certain contexts.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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