What Are Multimodal Projects?

1

Academic essays, biology posters, PowerPoint presentations, memes . . . what do all these texts have in common? They are all **multimodal**.

The word *multimodal* is a mash-up of *multiple* and *mode*. A **mode** is a way of communicating, such as the words we're using to explain our ideas in this paragraph or the images we use throughout this book to illustrate various concepts. Multimodal describes how we combine multiple different ways of communicating in everyday life.

For instance, Internet memes such as lolcats, as well as many Instagram posts and Snapchats, are multimodal. Lolcats combine photographs of cats with Internet speak (words written in humorously incorrect grammar) to create a text that uses both visuals and language—*multiple modes*—to be funny.

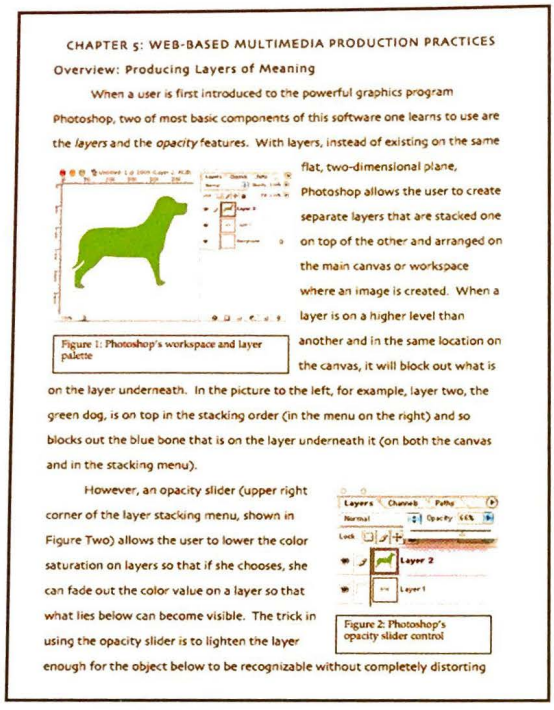
You might be saying to yourself, "Wait, is a lolcat really a text?" Yes. ***Text*** traditionally means written words. But because we want to talk about the visuals, sounds, and movement that make up multimedia, we use the term *text* to refer to a piece of communication as a whole. A text can be anything from a lolcat to a concert tee shirt to a dictionary to a performance.

The following figures all depict multimodal texts:

Figure 1.1 Lolcat Meme

Michelle Tribe, https://www.flickr.com/photos/greencolander/4299692892/

Figure 1.2 A Website



CHAPTER 5: WEB-BASED MULTIMEDIA PRODUCTION PRACTICES

Overview: Producing Layers of Meaning

When a user is first introduced to the powerful graphics program Photoshop, two of most basic components of this software one learns to use are the *layers* and the *opacity* features. With layers, instead of existing on the same flat, two-dimensional plane, Photoshop allows the user to create separate layers that are stacked one on top of the other and arranged on the main canvas or workspace where an image is created. When a layer is on a higher level than another and in the same location on the canvas, it will block out what is on the layer underneath. In the picture to the left, for example, layer two, the green dog, is on top in the stacking order (in the menu on the right) and so blocks out the blue bone that is on the layer underneath it (on both the canvas and in the stacking menu).

Figure 1: Photoshop's workspace and layer palette

However, an opacity slider (upper right corner of the layer stacking menu, shown in Figure Two) allows the user to lower the color saturation on layers so that if she chooses, she can fade out the color value on a layer so that what lies below can become visible. The trick in using the opacity slider is to lighten the layer enough for the object below to be recognizable without completely distorting

Figure 2: Photoshop's opacity slider control

Figure 1.3 A Dissertation

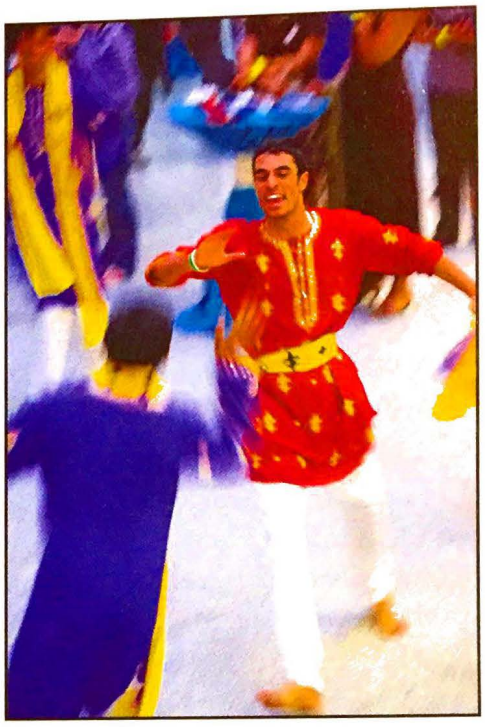


Figure 1.4 A Performance

Timothy J. Carroll, https://www.flickr.com/photos/tjc/5763847134

What Is Multimodal Composing?

Writers choose modes of communication for every text they create. For example, the author of a lolcat chooses the cat photo (usually based on what is happening in the photo and whether that action might make for a good caption) and decides where to place the caption and what color and typeface to use. Sometimes these choices are unconscious, like when an author uses Microsoft Word's default typeface and margins when writing a paper for class. Sometimes those choices are made explicitly by an author, and that's when **design** becomes purposeful. To produce a successful text, writer/designers must be able to consciously use different modes both alone and in combination to communicate their ideas to others.

A text does not have to include bright colors or interesting videos to be multimodal (although it can). Even a research paper, which is mostly words, is a multimodal text. Let's take **Figure 1.3** as an example. It might seem that an audience could understand this text's argument just by reading the written words. In fact, to understand the full message being communicated in the text, the audience has to make sense of other elements as well. They must also look at the images and read the captions that explain what the images contain. Even the font choice is an important but often subtle visual signal to the audience. (Are you using a font that screams traditionalism like Times New

Roman or one that invokes levity and youth, such as Comic Sans?) The format of the text—a single column of black printed words on a white background, with a margin on either side—also tells the audience something important: this text is probably an academic work of some kind. (In fact, it's a page from Jenny's dissertation.) Knowing what kind of text it is will influence the way the audience reads it.

Why Should Multimodal Composing Matter to You?

Multimodal projects are fun! But they're not *just* fun. They're useful and flexible and timely—just as writing is—while also doing double or triple the communicative work of writing due to the multiple layers of meaning that the modes of communication carry.

Take, for example, **Figure 1.5**. Artist Katherine Young was unhappy with the way girls' magazines portrayed their needs and goals in a way that only emphasized fashion and friends. The original cover of *Girls' Life* uses color, font size, and capitalization to draw readers' attention to the magazine's features, all related to appearance or relationships: fashion, kisses, "dream" hair, and "Wake up pretty!" An arrow and curved line just under the title connects the cover model with what the magazine deems valuable: her style. Young redesigned this magazine cover to emphasize girls' needs and goals

Figure 1.5 The Original *Girls' Life* Cover (left) and Young's Redesign (right)

involving career, health, and community. By reusing an existing design for the teen magazine genre and making smart choices for text, font, color, image, and layout, Young made a multimodal feminist statement—without needing to explicitly state the issue or her stance.

In the world, in your everyday life, texts are never monomodal, never *just* written, but are always designed with multiple media, modes of communication, and methods of distribution in mind. Learning how to analyze and compose multimodal texts prepares you for that kind of writing—the kind you will use every day of your life. Whether you work from home, in a large corporation, in a small nonprofit organization, or in some other professional or personal setting, you *will* need to write. And writing in the twenty-first century is always multimodal.

This whole book is about the *what* and *how* of multimodal composition, but the *why* is the motivation for it. We draw inspiration from a group of multimodal communication scholars (called the New London Group) who explain the *why* this way: Multimodal composition allows us to become **makers of our social futures**. That sounds exciting, doesn't it? But what exactly does it mean? By learning to compose multimodal texts instead of rehashing the limited use of written essays, writer/designers can communicate in more globally aware, digitally driven, ethical, and accessible ways, making our society a better place. The magazine cover redesign in **Figure 1.5** is a great example of using multimodality to (re)make our social futures.

Research-based writing typical of academic essays is important, but it's only one part of learning how to write. Authors need to be flexible and draw on any possible way to communicate that might be effective. In that way, the fundamental goals of writing and designing are the same:

- To think critically about the kinds of communication that are needed in any given situation
- To choose sources and assets that will help create an effective text
- To work within and fulfill your audience's needs and goals
- To improve communication through the finished text
- To create change or encourage positive action through a text

While these aims for multimodality might seem grandiose if you're just learning how to design a text, they can be implemented in even the smallest ways. Using an image speaks volumes towards a designer's goal of being globally, ethically, and accessibly aware through multimodality. There are more than seven billion people in the world

Figure 1.6 Using Images for Social Justice

A woman stands in front of an advancing police barricade during a Black Lives Matter protest. How does the image convey meaning differently than written text could?

Jonathan Bachman/Reuters/Newscom

and thousands of languages. But writing and designing through multimodality, with visuals that are more universal, can help us be mindful in how we represent or collaborate with those who are not exactly like us. Multimodal texts, such as the photograph in **Figure 1.6**, can be shared or used ethically to promote social and racial justice and remind us that we are all on this planet together.

All the examples used in this book are meant to provoke discussion as to how texts work through the media and modes they use. Sometimes the way a text works is unexpected and funny, such as a parody, but texts can also be hateful and mean-spirited. (Don't worry: We won't be showing any hateful texts in this book!) One of our goals is to help you understand that every text has an audience, but you might not always be a willing audience member. There may be images in this book that you don't like—such as the lolcat on the first page that two authors of this book dislike (Jenny and Kristin are dog people). But it behooves you to think critically about how such texts are made and how they make meaning so that you can (1) listen to and appreciate the perspective of others and (2) learn how to make your own multimodal arguments for the good of all. This book helps you do that, whether you're a student, a teacher, an entrepreneur, a mom, a Snapchat fanatic, or all of the above.

Writing/Designing as a Process

Whenever an author begins writing a text, it is always a **process**, even if that process has become so implicit through practice that the author no longer recognizes the multiple steps she may take to complete a text. She begins from scratch, thinking about what she needs to say and the way she needs to say it to communicate to her audience. (This part of the writing process is called *analyzing the rhetorical situation*, which we will discuss in Chapter 2.)

The Typical Writing Process

Writing a research paper doesn't begin with the moment of inscription—putting words on a page. A lot of thinking, talking, brainstorming, and research needs to be done before a topic can even be settled on. But once an author has begun drafting a paper, it will probably go through multiple rounds of writing and revision, particularly if it is a high-stakes project like a research paper, thesis, or business report. For instance, drafting might involve preliminary research on the audience, topic, and delivery method required (such as types of sources or citation systems needed). This work is often done to prepare for writing, but when a paper draft is due, the author might work more closely to format the report with the correct spacing, grammar, punctuation, citation styles, and so on. Any necessary revisions require the author to revisit the drafting and formatting stages before presenting the final text to the audience. This writing process is called *recursive* because writers interact with audiences at several parts of the process, get oral or written feedback from sample audiences or stakeholders, and revise—this is a typical process enacted in writing classes.

The Multimodal Composing Process

When we write texts that are more overtly multimodal than a research paper, we use the same recursive process just outlined: different levels of drafting, revising, and more fine-tuned drafting until we only need to polish the final text. Just as authors choose from available words and genres to create their new texts, designers choose from existing examples and assets, working recursively to create a new multimodal text suitable for a new audience. **Figure 1.7** shows how this recursive process works in design. Designers get feedback from audiences just like writers do to help them create better and more effective multimodal texts. (This feedback process will be described in more detail in Chapter 5.)

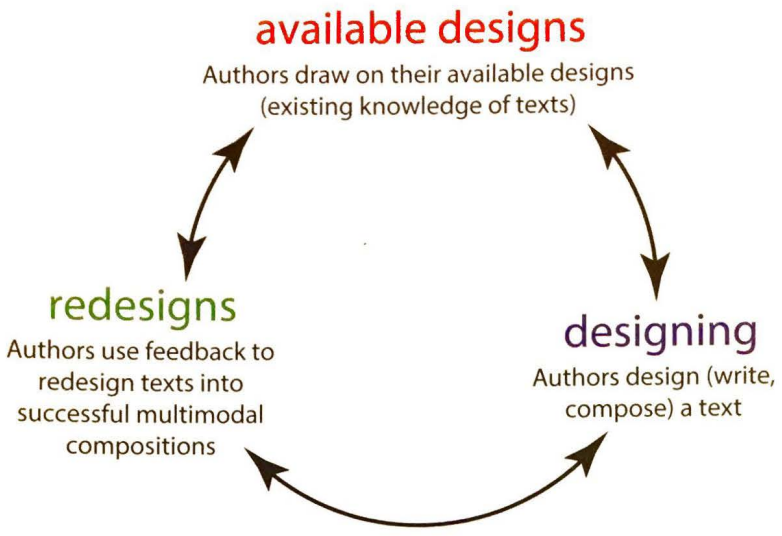


Figure 1.7 The Recursive Writing and Design Process

The user feedback loop is discussed more in Chapter 4 (pp. 94–95).

During the design process, multimodal texts may take several different forms. Although some people assume multimodal texts always have to be digital, that's not actually true. A multimodal text may be designed using digital methods (such as a word processor), a mixture of digital and analog methods (such as note cards to draft a PowerPoint presentation), or may be totally analog (such as a pen-and-ink drawing or collage). All these design decisions are based on what the audience needs during the drafting and feedback process and what modes and media will suit those needs from drafts to final product. For instance, the dissertation in **Figure 1.3** was created on a computer but then was printed and bound into a book for the library. No matter whether a text is created on a computer, on paper, or in some other medium or technology, writer/designers can still use the multiple combinations of words, photos, color, layout, and more to communicate their information.

Sometimes designers pick the wrong medium and have to start over from scratch with the "inscription" part of the process. Although writing-heavy texts can be more easily revised using cut-and-paste methods, more heavily multimodal texts that combine audio, visuals, and other modes of communication can be more challenging to revise. Each mode of communication and each medium used in a multimodal text necessitates a new layer of revision. That's one reason why the multimodal composing process often involves different forms at different stages of the process. Starting with a storyboard with paper and stick figures to lay out a short film, for example, makes it easier to make a pitch to investors or quickly (and cheaply) change a sequence; revising a recorded and edited film with visuals, audio, and text overlay is much more complex and better suited to later stages of the process.

Touchpoints

Touchpoints are important to the design process for multimodal projects because they are how designers pinpoint, assess, reflect, and redesign all the different steps in a situation or text as the potential audience will encounter it. The term *touchpoint* comes from the discipline of design, where it refers to ephemeral or real points of interaction between stakeholders (users, service providers, etc.) in a designed experience. Points of interaction vary depending on the kind of experience designers are working with.

For example, one kind of experience might be a tourist using an interactive map on her phone. Touchpoints in that experience could include an app store with information on downloading the map, the tourist's surroundings as she is downloading the app, her phone connectivity source (data or wireless), the map interface and how she interacts with it, the way directions are stored (offline or online only) as she begins her trek, and so on. There are hundreds of touchpoints possible in a single experience, and touchpoints ensure that designers understand the full scope of work they need to create to effectively reach their audience and fulfill a particular need.

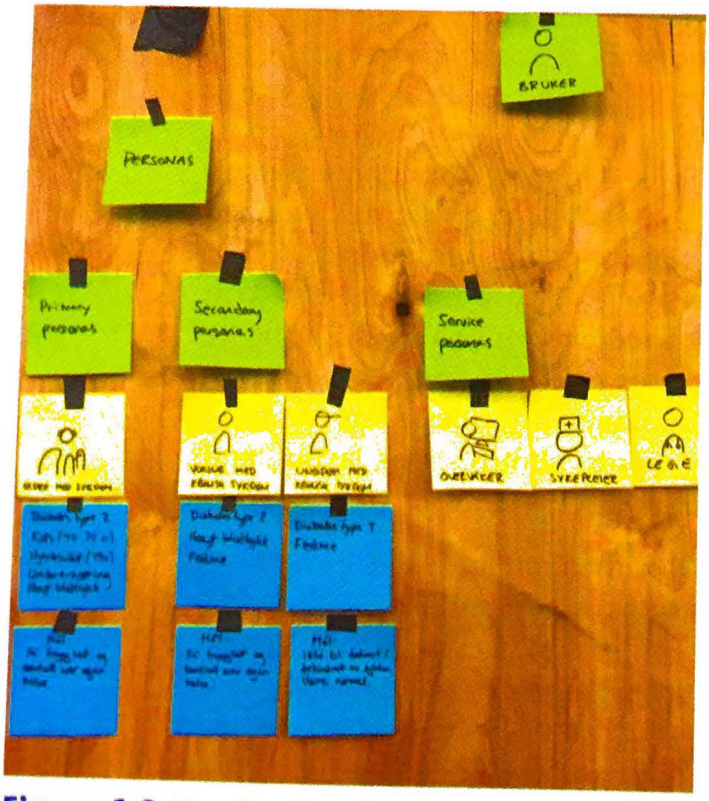


Figure 1.8 Touchpoints for a Medical App

Quick sketches on sticky notes depict different audiences (user groups, or personas) for a medical app. In yellow from left to right: the infirmed elderly, adults and adolescents with chronic illnesses, and the service personnel (technicians, nurses, and doctors) who interact with the Web app.

Photo by Cheryl Ball with permission of Hans-Martin Erlandsen

Assessing touchpoints can be a large or small endeavor, depending on the size of the multimodal project. In one major study, a team of designers at a university hospital in Norway evaluated and mapped the dozens of touchpoints (and waiting times) that a breast cancer patient needed to engage with, from her first appointment with a general practitioner to her diagnosis, and then redesigned the four-month process down to a four-day process. The sticky notes in **Figure 1.8** represent

a small portion of the touchpoints for a customer-service journey through a hospital rehabilitation Web service. This example, created by Norwegian design student Hans-Martin Erlandsen, represents a half-meter (approximately 1.5 feet) section of a wall in a larger mapping of touchpoints that spans a 3-meter (roughly 10-foot) wall space, all covered with various sticky notes, printouts from a medical website prototype, clippings of articles, and arrows that label and point to important parts of the interaction process that need redesigning.

We introduce the concept of touchpoints here because we will use it throughout the book to assess your understanding of making multimodal projects—either through a short analytical exercise (such as the one that follows) or through application to your own project.

Touchpoint: Understanding Multimodal Processes

Imagine describing all the points of interaction that an airline passenger must encounter to book a ticket, get to the airport, go through security, find her gate, board the plane, and upon arrival, disembark, find her baggage, and so on. (If you've never flown before, a bus or train service can be substituted, or some other mode of transportation.) How would you redesign such an experience to make it easier and more enjoyable for that passenger, from start to finish? Consider how an app might work: from booking to using the same app at the gate to board, then using the app to map your location in the new airport and get directions to the correct baggage carousel. How would that app work regardless of your user's ability, race, creed, color, religion, orientation, or other social or cultural status? Are they a non-native English speaker? Blind? In a wheelchair? Deaf? Elderly? Transgender? A parent with a toddler? Traveling with pets? These questions help designers think about how multimodal projects can reach audiences both similar to and unlike themselves:

- How would touchpoints be different for each set of these potential users?
- Which touchpoint would be the first to create a diversion from the suggested route for any one of these groups of users?
- How would the app be designed to accommodate *all* of these potential users? What elements might you incorporate that go beyond written text? How should it operate?

Consider how touchpoints might work in your own writing and designing projects as you move through this book.

How Does Multimodality Work?

All kinds of texts are multimodal: newspapers, science reports, advertisements, billboards, scrapbooks, music videos—the list is endless. Consider, for example, all of the modes at play in a simple TV commercial—there usually is music, the voice of an announcer, video showing the product, text on the screen giving you a price or a Web address, and often much more. Each of these modes plays a role in the advertiser's argument for why you should buy its product. The music is selected to give the product a certain feel (young and hip, perhaps, or safe and reliable). The gender of the announcer and the tone, volume, and other qualities of his or her (or their) voice reflect whom the advertiser is trying to reach. The choice of whether to use video or animation, color or black and white, slow motion or other special effects, are all deliberate *modal* considerations based on what the advertiser is trying to sell and to whom. Although each mode plays a role in the overall message, it is the combination of modes—the *multi*modality—that creates the full piece of communication.

To help you think through the different modes that may be present in a multimodal text, we're going to introduce you to five terms from the work of the New London Group, a collection of education and literacy scholars who first promoted the concept of multimodal literacies. They outlined five modes of communication—linguistic, visual, aural, gestural, and spatial—which they found could be applied to any kind of element in a text.

Every text is made up of individual **elements**. Elements in a text might include specific words or phrases, colors, and individual images that are used—all of which audiences can read individually—to form an overall, cohesive meaning for the text. Although *element* doesn't seem much more specific than *thing*, it is the placement and relation of the elements in a text that offers meaning for the whole.

The photograph in **Figure 1.9** can be split into individual elements: the beach, the trash on the sand, the garbage can, and the sign on the side of the can. Each of these elements can be broken down and categorized to add up to one ironic whole. Although this is a static photo, it is also easy to imagine adding sound to this image. As an element within this multimodal composition, sound could play an important role in guiding our reading of a

Figure 1.9 Elements Combined to Create an Ironic Image
sdominick/Getty Images

text. If this photo were set to the sound of a cheering crowd, it would read differently than if it were accompanied by the sound of chirping birds. The next section will help you better understand how different elements use individual modes of communication to make meaning.

Linguistic Mode

The linguistic mode refers to the use of language, which usually means written or spoken words. When we think about the ways the linguistic mode is used to make or understand meaning, we can consider:

- word choice
- the delivery of text as spoken or written
- the organization of writing or speech into phrases, sentences, paragraphs, etc.
- the development and coherence of individual words and ideas

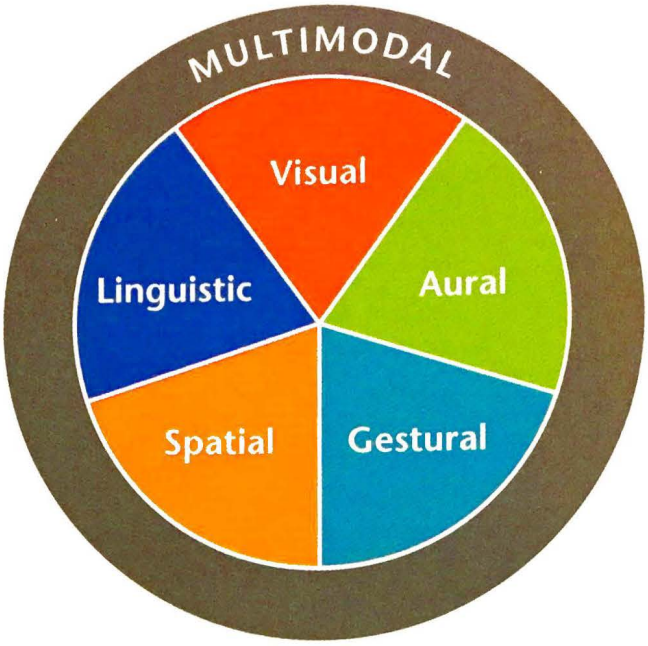


Figure 1.10 The Five Modes of Communication

This chart of the modes is based on a diagram created by the New London Group.

While these aren't the only possibilities for understanding how the linguistic mode works, this list gives you a starting place from which to consider how words and language function. And although we've listed it first—and although it's the mode you probably have the most practice with—the linguistic mode is not always the most important mode of communication. (Whether it is or not depends on what other modes are at play in a text, what kind of text it is, and many other factors.)

The linguistic mode and the ability to use it carefully matter very much in contemporary communication. For example, consider a widely criticized comment made by Carl-Henric Svanberg, chairman of the global oil company BP, following the 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. After meeting with then-President Barack Obama, Svanberg announced that his company was committed to the cleanup and stated that BP "care[s] about the small people." Although he likely was referring to BP's commitment to helping individual citizens, his choice of words—"small people"—infuriated the public because it demeaned those impacted by the spill and implied that the disruption to their lives was not of great concern.

Visual Mode

The visual mode refers to the use of images and other characteristics that readers see. Billboards, flyers, television, websites, lighted advertising displays, and even grocery store shelves bombard us with

visual information in an effort to attract our attention. We can use this mode to communicate representations of how something looks or how someone is feeling, to instruct, to persuade, and to entertain, among other things. The visual mode includes:

- color
- layout
- style
- size
- perspective
- framing

Many of the ways we can talk about the visual mode, such as color and size, seem fairly straightforward, but perspective and framing might need a bit more definition here. **Framing** positions a viewer to see a visual text from a certain perspective and offers a way to describe how a visual text is presented—both its literal frame, like a window or picture frame (the lines around what we see), and the sight lines within it that draw our focus. Focusing on how something is framed helps us think about what is important in a text.

If you look at the photo "Self in Waiting" in **Figure 1.11**, you will see several different frames that serve to group elements, direct the viewer's attention, and otherwise communicate the photographer's purpose. The woman's arm in the foreground creates a horizontal frame with the bottom of the windowsill, thus emphasizing what we see above this line. The left edge of the windowsill creates a vertical frame, with the woman on the left side and the window on the right. The woman's left arm is a diagonal line against the vertical and horizontal lines of the window and her right arm. Where these three lines come together (the horizontal, the vertical, and the diagonal) we see the telling position of her right wrist, and a focal point of the image. What might the location of this focal point indicate to viewers, gesturally? Spatially? (Read more in the following sections to find out about these and other modes.)

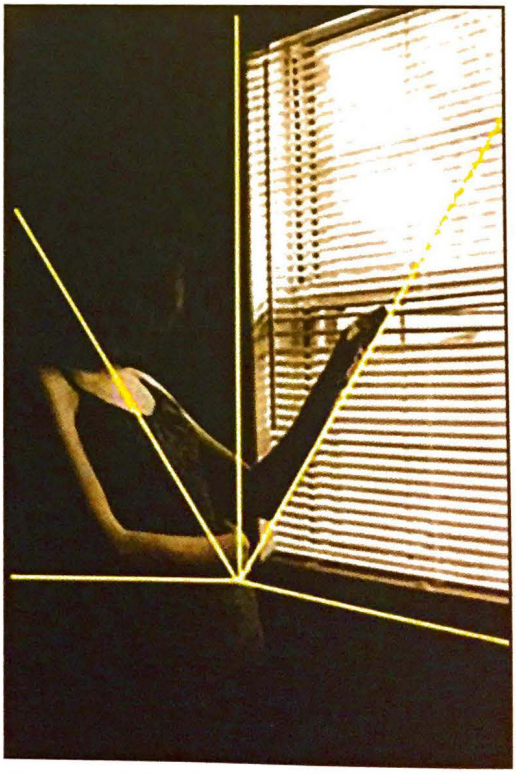


Figure 1.11 "Self in Waiting"

nd blind audiences, the visual mode will often be
al or spatial modes. For instance, screen-reading
convert written text such as transcripts, captions, or
tion to speech are an important technology to con-
igning a multimodal text. Versions of texts in Braille,
g system, may also be made available in print using a
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evice for audiences to feel (see **Fig. 1.12**). These aural
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other readers who may desire or require transcripts to
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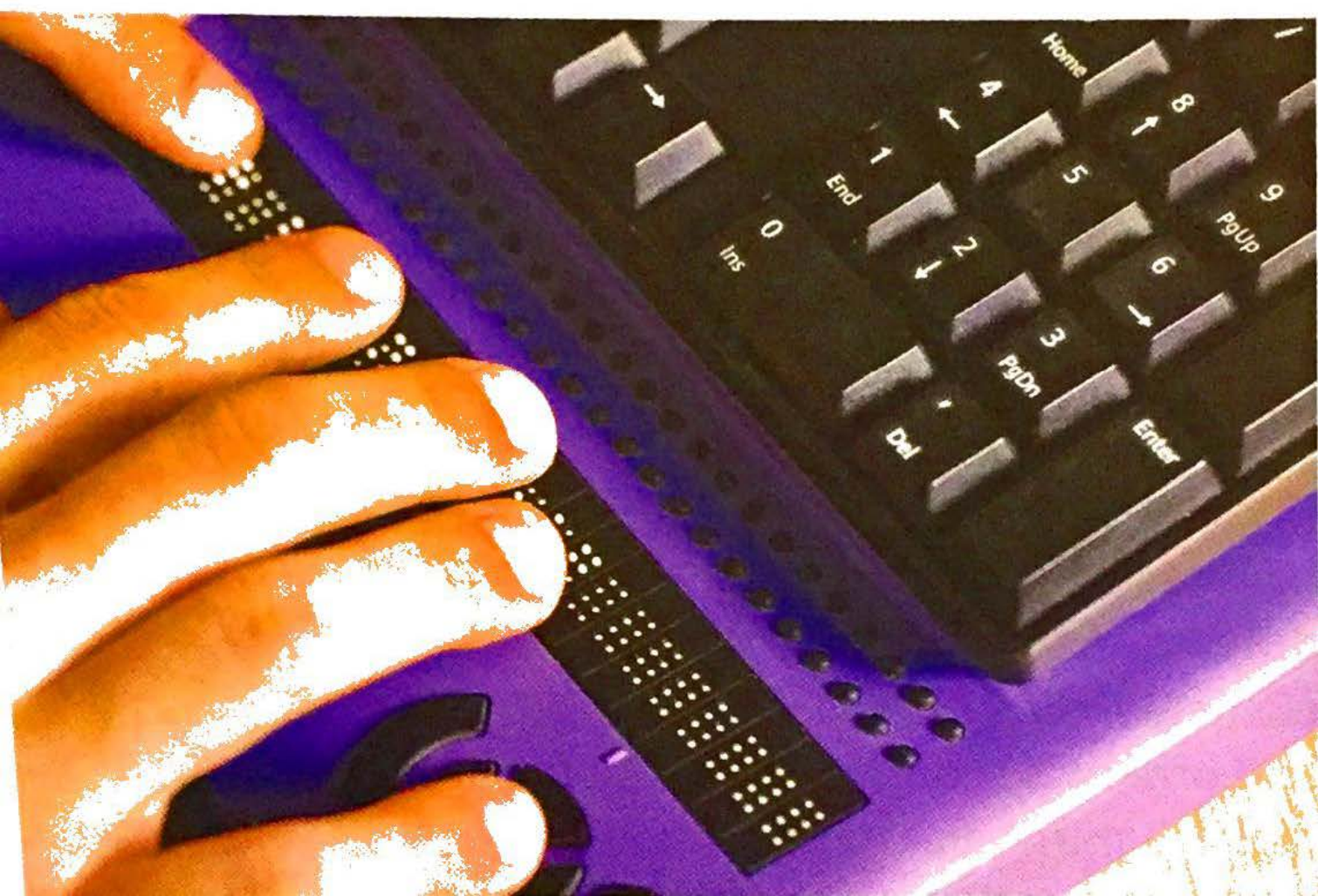

For low-vision and blind audiences, the visual mode will often be replaced by aural or spatial modes. For instance, screen-reading programs that convert written text such as transcripts, captions, or website navigation to speech are an important technology to consider when designing a multimodal text. Versions of texts in Braille, a tactile writing system, may also be made available in print using a Braille typewriter or through a refreshable Braille display that reads text on screens and displays the tiny bumps of Braille on an external mechanical device for audiences to feel (see **Fig. 1.12**). These aural and spatio-gestural versions of texts are useful tools to help the low-vision reader make meaning of texts, and some of these options can also help other readers who may desire or require transcripts to parse visual texts.

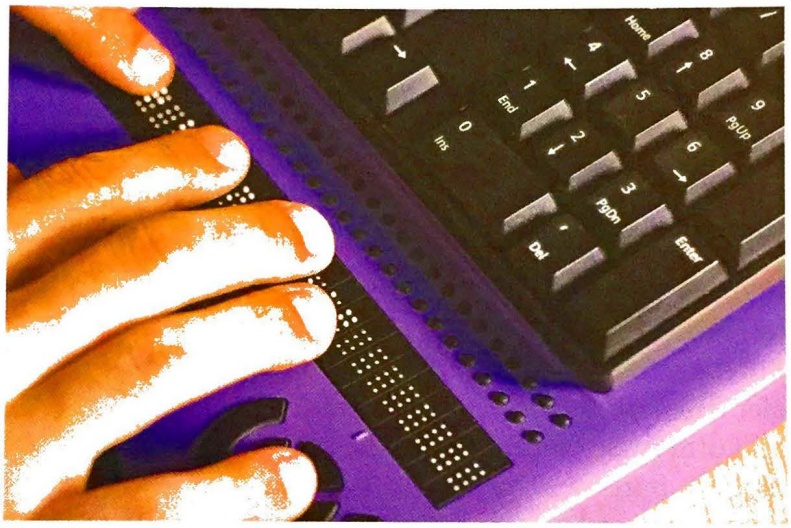

Figure 1.12 Braille Keyboard with a Refreshable Braille Display

zlikovec/Shutterstock

Aural Mode

The aural mode focuses on sound. Whether we are talking about a speech, a video demonstration, sound effects on a website, or the audio elements of a radio program, the aural mode provides multiple ways of communicating and understanding a message, including:

- music
- sound effects
- ambient noise/sounds
- silence
- tone of voice in spoken language
- volume of sound
- emphasis and accent

Although most of us are used to hearing sound all around us every day, we don't often pay attention to how it signals information, including feelings, responses, or needed actions. It's easy to conceive how a spoken message communicates, but what about the increasingly tense background music in a TV drama, or the sounds that let us know when a computer is starting up, or the tones our smartphones make when a text message comes in? Whether big or small, each of these aural components conveys meaning for hearing audiences, just as silence or the absence of sound does.

For deaf or hard-of-hearing audiences, other modes in the form of linguistic and visual information often replace aural information. For instance, closed captions (see **Fig. 1.14** on p. 18) that present dialogue and other aural information on screen-based texts help deaf audiences make meaning of those texts, and they can also be of use to unintended audiences, such as the elderly with hearing loss or, more cheekily, viewers watching their favorite news show on their phones during a meeting.

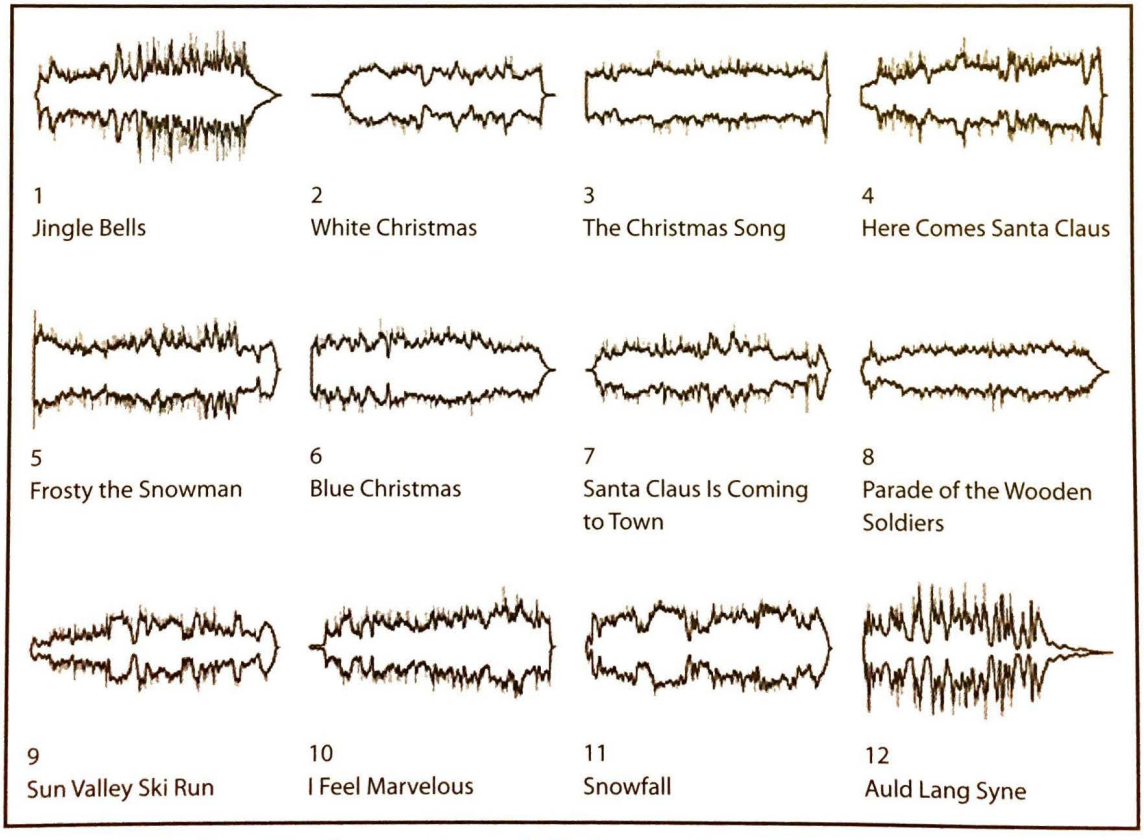

Figure 1.13 Graphic Comparison of Christmas Song Waveforms
Audio can also have visual aspects, as these representations show.

Figure 1.14 Closed Captioning

This video was captured to showcase the work of a class of first-year and senior-level design students at Cape Peninsula University of Technology in Cape Town, South Africa, as they prepared a design project to study sustainability and climate change with the local community. The captions help visualize an off-screen narrator's voiceover.

Spatial Mode

The spatial mode is about physical arrangement. This can include how a brochure opens and the way it leads a reader through the text. For example, see the brochure in **Figure 1.15**. The designer created this conference program so that each fold is slightly smaller than the one below it, allowing readers to have a tab for each day of presentations. The spatial mode can also refer to the placement of navigation on a Web page to maximize access for users. This mode helps us to understand why physical spaces such as grocery stores or classrooms are arranged to encourage certain kinds of behavior (such as all chairs in a classroom facing toward the center of the room to encourage discussion and collaboration). The spatial mode includes:

- arrangement
- organization
- proximity between people or objects

Attention to the spatial mode has become increasingly important as we create content for and interact within online environments such as smartphones. The author of a text must pay attention to how his or her content is organized so that readers can find their way through it without difficulty.

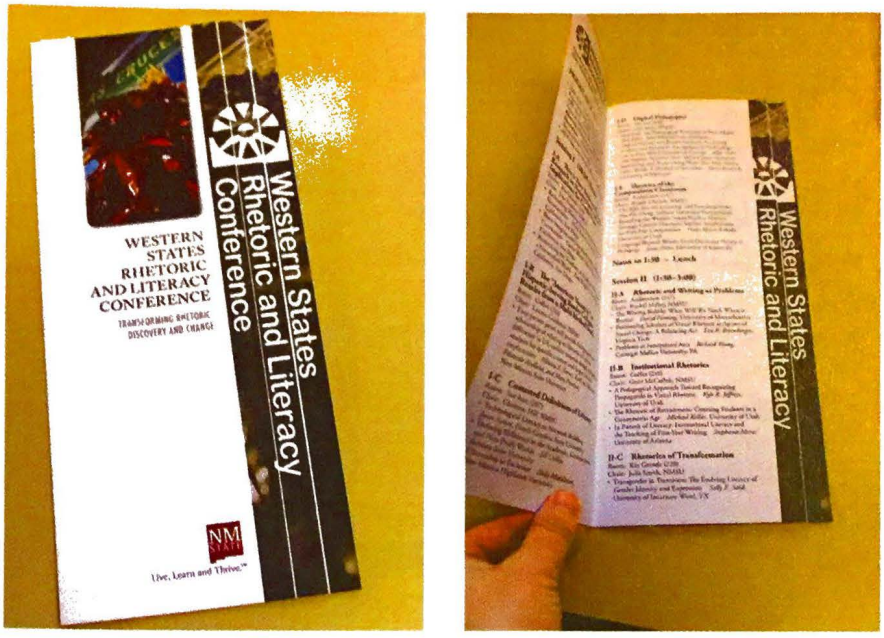

Figure 1.15 Tabbed Brochure Utilizing the Spatial Mode
Edgar Barrantes

Gestural Mode

The gestural mode refers to the way movement, such as body language, can make meaning. When we interact with people in real life or watch them on-screen, we can tell a lot about how they are feeling and what they are trying to communicate. The gestural mode includes:

- facial expressions
- hand gestures
- body language
- interaction between people

The gestural has always been important in face-to-face conversations and in the theater, but understanding the gestural mode is just as important when communication takes place through virtual interactions on-screen. Whether we are participating in a video conference with colleagues, a gaming raid with friends, or an online chat with family, the gestural mode provides a way of connecting (or showing an inability to connect) to other people.

Gestures can even be interpreted in static images, such as in the 1930s posters in **Figure 1.16** (p. 20) from Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal. Hundreds of posters were created to publicize health and safety, education, and community programs. The poster on the left has a strong horizontal split-frame that divides two statements, one that poses a problem and the other that suggests a solution. In the bottom half, a woman (presumably a teacher?) holds a piece of paper

Figure 1.16 New Deal Posters

Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Reproduction number LC-USZC2-5332 (color film copy slide) LC-USZCN4-205 (color film copy neg.); Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Reproduction number LC-USZC2-1116 (color film copy slide)

close to John's face, while John looks on with discomfort. (Likely, as the poster notes, because he needs glasses.) The body language of the two people helps visually tell the story. The poster on the right has a strong diagonal split from the top of the hammer down to the bright yellow piece of metal on the anvil, a yellow matched by the text. The framing here conveys a sense of directed purpose, immediacy, and action (a split second from now, that hammer will strike home).

Gestures convey a lot of emotion and meaning, as much if not more than words can, although writer/designers should remember that not all people in an audience might be able to move, gesture, or see those gestures in the same way. One cool thing about multimodality is that it can attend to multiple senses, which is sometimes necessary if a reader has a preference or need for one mode of communication over another. When creating multimodal texts, authors should *always* remember that not every reader will be exactly like them, whether in culture, society, class, race, gender, or ability. A text should be composed so that readers with limited vision, hearing, or touch—among other possible differences within an audience—can still interact with the text. For instance, imagine that you're filming someone who communicates through American Sign Language—would you film the person from the shoulders up, cutting their hands from the shot? No! As you analyze and compose multimodal texts, be careful to compose for as many different users with as many different backgrounds and abilities as possible.

Touchpoint: Examining a Simple Multimodal Text

We've looked so far at the individual modes and what they mean, but how do they work together in a text? We can analyze a sequence of elements (or groups of elements) and how they are juxtaposed (what we see before, with, or after) to help us create meaning. This Touchpoint asks you to consider the different modes at work in a sequence of video stills we created from a short video called "Stock Photo Love Story," originally designed in the early 2000s by Megan Sapnar Ankerson.

Ankerson used 1950s-era clip art to tell the story. In the original video, the opening screen included a black background with red all-caps text displaying the title, and a quirky game-show-style soundtrack accompanied the stock photos. The author intended this short video to be a fun exercise that also expressed frustration with the oppression of queer people. (In this version, we have replaced the original stock photos with similar ones because we couldn't track down permissions for the originals on this 15-year-old text. See Chapter 7 for more on permissions issues.)

Image 1:
Retro woman

Image 2:
Another woman

Image 3:
Yep, they're in love

Image 4:
The last still in the movie

Figure 1.17 Stills Representing *Stock Photo Love Story*

Images 1 through 4: RetroClipArt/Shutterstock

1. After viewing Image 1, did you expect to see another woman in the sequence in Image 2? Why is she here? Are these two women partners in the love story of the title?
2. In Image 3, how do these elements use gestural, spatial, visual, and linguistic modes of communication to create the meaning of love?
3. The last still in the movie in Image 4 shows a man. Why is he last in the sequence? What does his facial expression signify? What if he were smiling or frowning?
4. How does framing help tell this story effectively?
5. How would that story change if it had words (spoken or written—such as a different title) accompanying the stock photos and soundtrack?

Understanding Modes, Media, and Affordances

Let's say you want to share how much you adore your dog because your dog is so cute! You have hundreds of photos. These pictures are the *media* (singular *medium*) that you can share. The *medium* is the way your text reaches your audience. Other media you might use are video, speech, or paper (not a research paper per se, but the physical artifact on which a research paper would be printed).

Different media use different combinations of modes and are good at doing different things. We've all heard the expression "a picture is worth a thousand words." Sometimes it is much easier and more effective to use an image to show someone how to do something or how you are feeling. Say, for example, that the reason you wanted a picture of your dog is to show your friend in another state what the dog looks like (see **Fig. 1.18**). A picture will quickly convey more information in this situation than will a written description.

At other times, words may work better than images when we are trying to explain an idea because words can be more descriptive and to the point. It may take too many pictures to convey the same idea quickly (see **Fig. 1.19**).

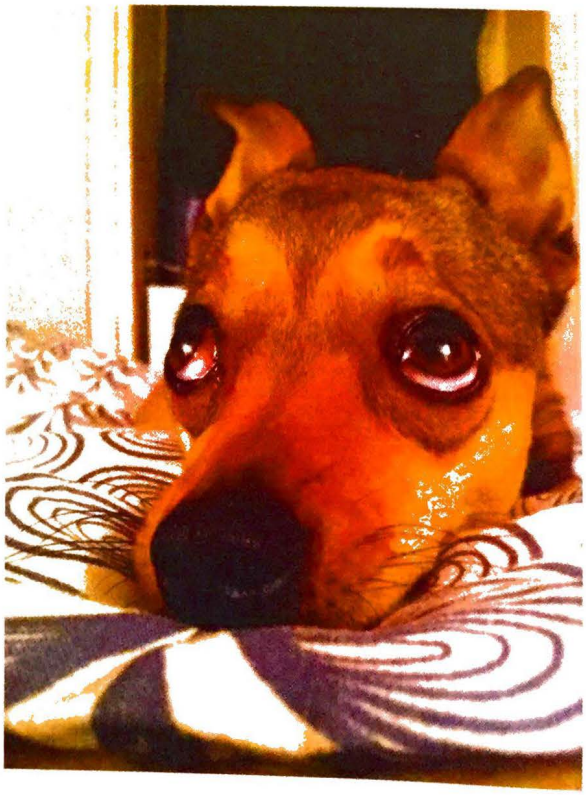

Figure 1.18 Poor, Sad, Adorable Enid

Kristin Arola

Enid wakes me up at 4am on the day I'm leaving. Lies on my chest and stares at me. 22 hours later I get to my hotel. — in Saint Louis, MO.

Figure 1.19 Facebook Status Update Contextualizing Enid's Pitiful Look

Kristin Arola

In other situations where we are trying to communicate how something should be done, it can be more useful to create an animation or video that demonstrates the steps in a process than it is to write out instructions.

These different strengths and weaknesses of media (video, writing, pictures, etc.) and modes are called **affordances**. The visual mode *affords* us the opportunity to communicate emotion in an immediate way, while the linguistic mode *affords* us the time we need to communicate a set of detailed steps. Writer/designers think through the affordances of the modes and media available before choosing the right text for the right situation.

Keep in mind that modal affordances largely depend on how the mode is used and in what context. In other words, the strengths and weaknesses of each mode are dependent on, and influenced by, the ways in which the modes are combined, in what media, and to what ends. Their affordances can also be hindrances to some audiences you want to reach. For instance, the visually brief *emoji* can sum up an entire conversation in a single image or two, as in **Figure 1.20**, but those readers with less emoji literacy or fewer visual abilities might not understand what you mean.

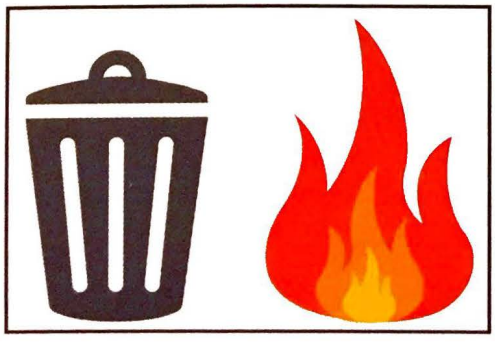

Figure 1.20 Dumpster Fire, in Emoji

Dumpster fire was voted as the 2016 word (phrase, really) of the year by the American Dialect Society.

Dumpster: musicman/Shutterstock; fire: vectorEps/Shutterstock

CASE STUDY

Mapping Federal Spending

Although we've given you examples in this chapter of how each mode works on its own to communicate, we want to conclude with an extended example of how all the modes work together in a single multimodal text. Throughout this example, we're going to highlight some of the key concepts we want you to pay attention to.

The documents in **Figures 1.21 and 1.22** were created by the U.S. government to communicate information about nationwide economic recovery efforts. In the 1930s, the United States was suffering through a severe economic meltdown, known now as the Great Depression. To help alleviate the situation, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) created the Works Progress Administration, which put millions of Americans to work repairing and updating the U.S. infrastructure, including building highways and fixing streets. The map in **Figure 1.21** shows a state-by-state and county-by-county textual and visual overview of street projects funded by the government.

- **Linguistic mode:** The words on this map describe what we are looking at.

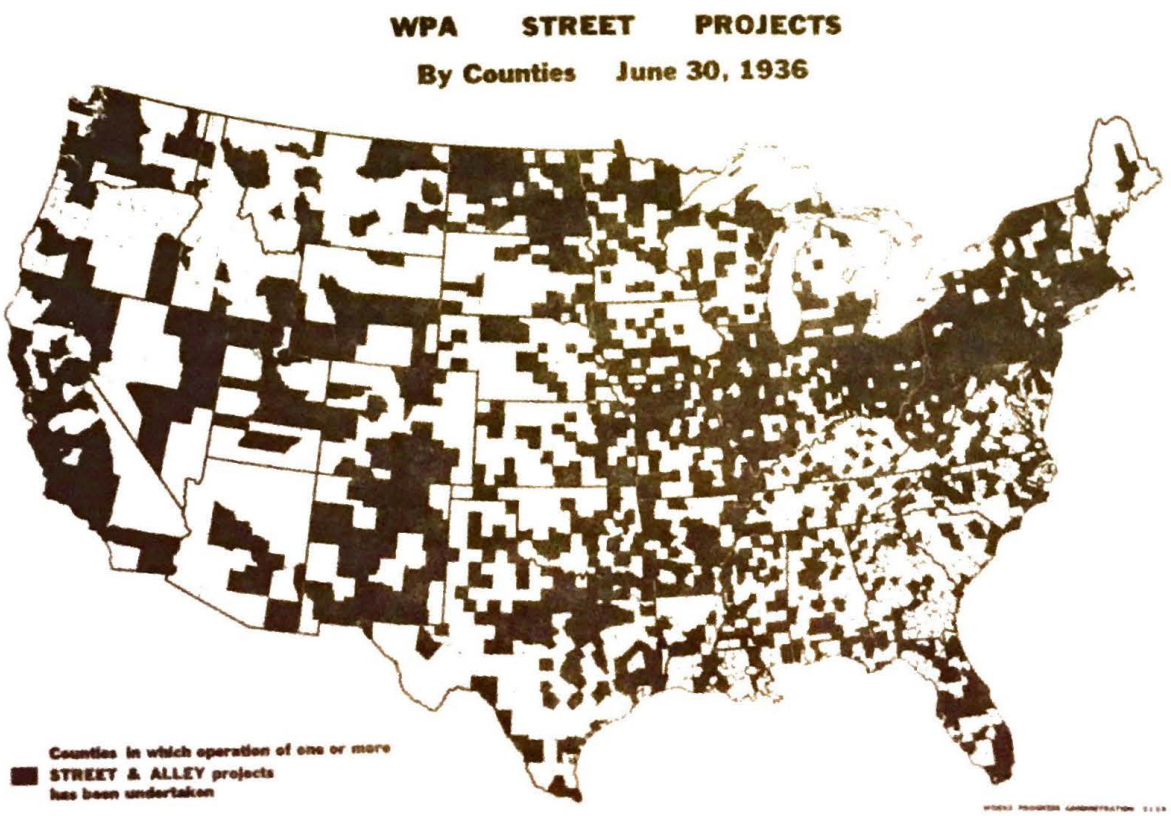

Figure 1.21 Map of WPA Street Projects, 1936

The map, printed in the 1930s as part of the Works Progress Administration government recovery program, is a multimodal text.

- **Visual mode:** The shaded areas on the map visually represent locations where at least one project had taken place. Here, the color-coding shows us what areas received the most assistance.
- **Spatial mode:** The information is organized in map form, which positions the color-coded points according to US counties.

The visual and spatial modes work together to help us make comparisons between locations. For example, the densely shaded area in the Northeast, where the US population was most concentrated at the time, can be compared against the relatively barren spots in the West, where fewer people lived. A spatial representation of the states from 1936, when there were only forty-eight states, will be different from an 1803 map that focuses on the Louisiana Purchase, or from a 2011 map showing all fifty states. So in this map, the linguistic, visual, and spatial modes work together to show readers where street projects occurred in 1936.

What if the proportion of words and numbers (linguistic mode) to visual and spatial information had been changed to favor the linguistic elements? How could this map have been read differently? For instance, what if, instead of the street projects map, readers only saw large tables of data for each state, county, or project? (In fact, other parts of the WPA report from which the map is taken do include many data tables, such as the one shown in **Figure 1.22** on the next page.) The linguistic mode often *affords* readers specificity, exactness, and logical connections, but this can slow readers down as they work to make sense of the information. The visual mode, on the other hand, often can't be as detailed. We don't know from the map, for example, *how many* projects were completed in each area. But a visual presentation of complex information can allow readers to make quick comparisons. This ability for quick comparison is an **affordance** of the visual mode, particularly within the particular medium of the printed map.

We should also consider the affordances of the **media** available at the time of distribution. In 1936, radio and print (typically government reports or newspapers) would have been the primary media used to communicate to the public. Printing in color would have been prohibitively expensive, so black-and-white visuals and written text had to be used. In **Figure 1.23** (p. 27), we can see a more modern version of a similar report, a digitally based map from the former Recovery.gov website that illustrated economic recovery in the United States in 2009–2010. As FDR did in establishing the Works Progress Administration, President Barack Obama created the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to stimulate job creation and repairs to the U.S. infrastructure during the Great Recession.

VALUE OF MATERIALS, SUPPLIES AND EQUIPMENT
PROCURED FOR WPA PROJECTS,
BY TYPES OF PROJECTS

Through May 30, 1936

Type of Project	Total Value	
	Amount	Percent
TOTAL	$ 142,935,931	100.0
Highways, roads, and streets	45,952,629	32.1
Public buildings	27,297,802	19.1
Housing	67,172	0.1
Parks and playgrounds	20,601,596	14.4
Flood control and other conservation	6,817,343	4.8
Water supply and sewer systems	24,065,084	16.8
Electric utilities	586,279	0.4
Transportation	4,156,418	2.9
Educational, professional and clerical	2,944,215	2.1
Goods	3,822,563	2.7
Sanitation and health	3,287,372	2.3
Miscellaneous	3,337,458	2.3

Figure 1.22 Table of WPA Projects Data, 1936

A data table from a 1936 report showing the value of materials used in WPA projects.

Figure 1.23, which appears on the next page, is a contemporary version of the 1936 WPA report; it appears on a website and is interactive (as the highlighting and pop-up about New Mexico show). Its medium is a Web-based map as opposed to a print-based map. It uses linguistic, visual, and spatial modes of communication, just like the 1936 map does, but it also includes interactivity (a **gestural mode**). Below the map, there is an interactive search tool to find specific funding information by zip code. Because of the affordances of the Web (such as cheaper use of multiple colors and the use of electronic databases and interactivity), this map communicates a lot more information than a printed map in 1936 would have been able to communicate, and it reaches a much wider potential audience. These differences don't mean that the Web is a better medium than print—just that, due to the technological changes in the last century, the Web allows for more complex and detailed information to be conveyed to more people using a similarly sized map. It's expected that this information can be accessed online in the twenty-first century, and it would be foolish for the government to not use the affordances of the Web to reach its constituents.

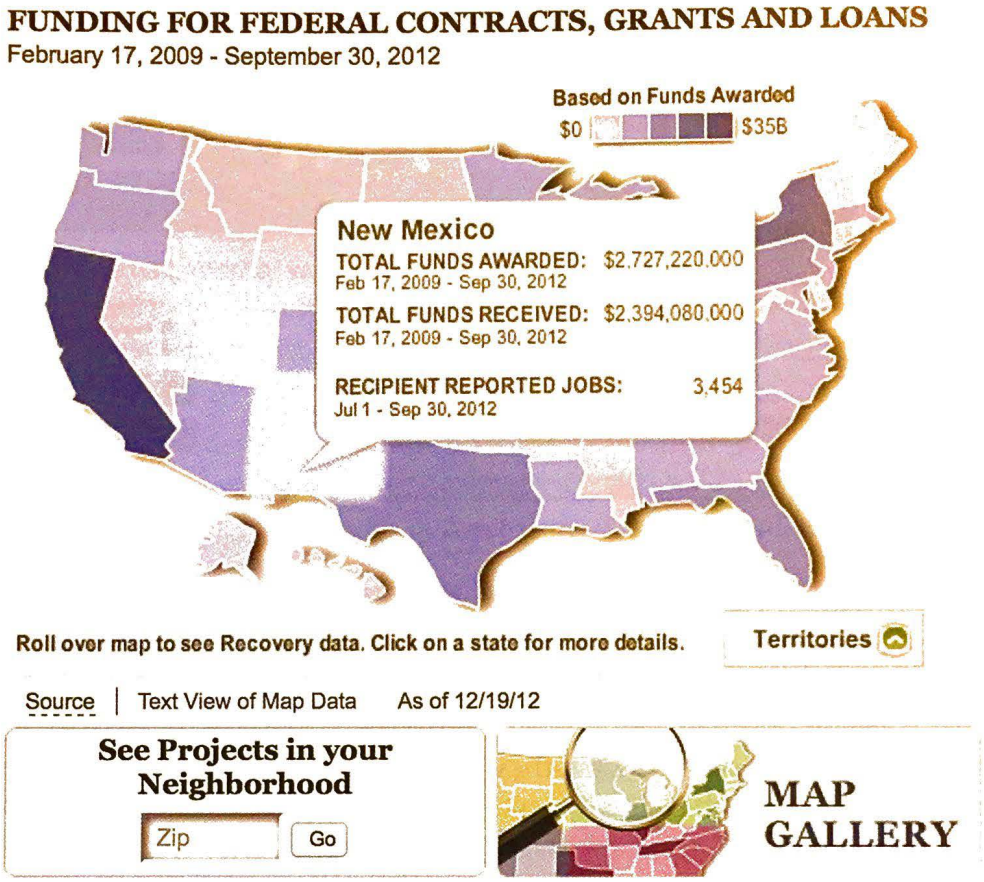

Figure 1.23 An Interactive Map from the Recovery.gov Website

Multimodal Affordances

The image of the map in **Figure 1.23** of the Case Study highlights at least four different modes of communication used in one text (linguistic, spatial, gestural, visual). Other texts, such as video interviews, combine all *five* modes, including the aural. One way to think about the different modes of communication is as a set of tools. You may not use all of them for a single project, because each mode has its own strengths and weaknesses in specific situations—just as a wrench is more useful in fixing a faucet than a hammer is. Like the tools in a toolbox, though, modes can sometimes be used in ways that weren't intended but that get the job done just as well (like a screwdriver used to pry open a paint can).

Together, the many modes that make up texts are useful in different situations. Multimodality gives writers additional tools for designing

Figure 1.24 NoDAPL Twitter Feed

effective texts. This is particularly true when writers are trying to create a single text that will appeal to the interests of a large, diverse group of readers. By understanding who their readers are, what they need to know, and how they will use the information, authors can create texts that satisfy a specific rhetorical situation, a concept we will cover in more detail in Chapter 2.

Every text uses multiple modes of communication and media to make its meaning, and each use of modes and media has affordances that help writer/designers make meaning through them. The Twitter profile in **Figure 1.24** has a lot of words (the linguistic mode), but the colors, layout, profile pictures, tweet sequence, and prominence of photo-rich tweets (visual and spatial modes) play a big role in how users read and understand each page. Also, the strict 140-character limit for tweets is an affordance of the site that *constrains* the way communication happens, offering lots of opportunity for quick broadcasts of ideas but little opportunity for discussion or civilized debate. But hashtags, which allow users to follow a single thread of ideas, are an affordance of multimodal websites that can help bring cohesion to the noise of social media.

Touchpoint: Mode, Media, and Affordance in Everyday Texts

To get a better sense of how prevalent multimodality is in all texts, and how different modes and media draw on their affordances to communicate to readers, collect and/or list texts of any kind that you come across in your daily schedule. These might include anything analog or digital, such as a receipt, flyer, business card, email, meme, website, book, video, song, advertisement, or photo. If you choose to make a list via social media, create a hashtag to keep track of them. If you're working as a class, use the hashtag to create a class record that you can analyze together.

Describe what modes and media the texts use. Count the number of modes that texts use, and see what patterns you can discover across the texts.

- Are they similar types of texts?
- Do they come from a similar time period, location, or publication?
- Are they making similar kinds of arguments?
- Which two texts are the most different from each other?
- How are the modes used in those texts? Which text uses the affordances of its media elements in the most surprising or unusual way? Are there any texts that are using modes and media in ways that seem counterproductive?
- How might you suggest the writer/designers of these texts revise?

write/design! assignment

Mapping Your Multimodal Process

This chapter has been about introducing you to the concepts of multimodality, which might be new for you, but it has also been about informing you that designing multimodal texts is based in a writing process that you are likely already familiar and comfortable with. Writers create with ease certain kinds of texts that they write often. Do you write a lot of emails? Facebook updates? Text messages to your friends or relatives? Do you write reports for work? Make presentations for clients? Write handwritten receipts for artwork you sell? Post forum notices to your fantasy football league? You likely do these tasks without thinking about them because they've become routine for you—you know the formula for writing the text, you know the people (or kinds of people) who will read this text, you know exactly how they will use it, and so on. So the process of writing has become automatic, something you don't stop to think about. This assignment

is meant to help you realize the scope of things, interactions, and situations in which you write so that you can attend to the different processes, places, services, texts, and events that your writing functions within the next time you sit to write/design.

Think for a moment of the last major writing or design project you undertook: for a class, for an after-school group, for work, for a local organization or club, or just for fun—this project could be as simple as creating a flyer for your chess team, designing your wedding, writing a paper, or creating a website for your hobby.

Now that you have a project in mind, break it down into as many parts as possible and then visualize how those parts work to help (or hinder) you in completing that project. Create what's called a **gigamap**. Gigamaps are *BIG* maps used by designers to document everything they can about a system, which might include people, places, events, processes, services, tasks, texts, or experiences. In other words, gigamaps help you visualize your process.

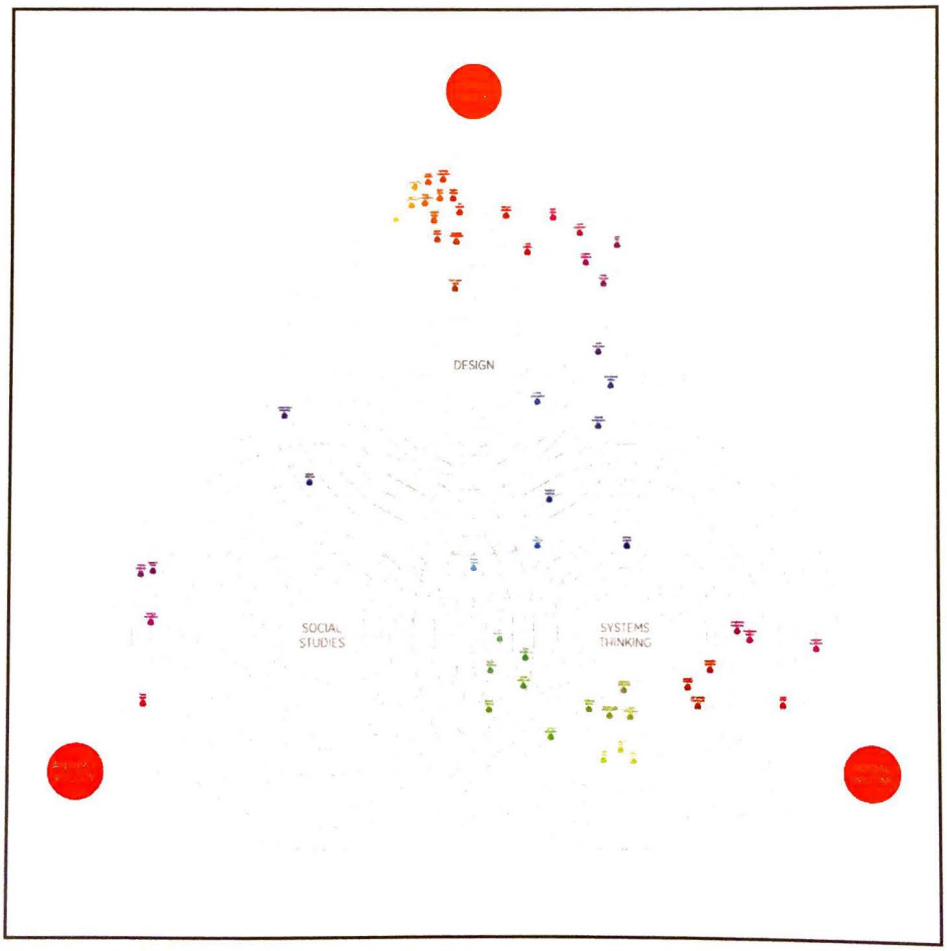

Figure 1.25 Manuela Aguirre's Gigamap of Research for Her Dissertation Project

Manuela Aguirre

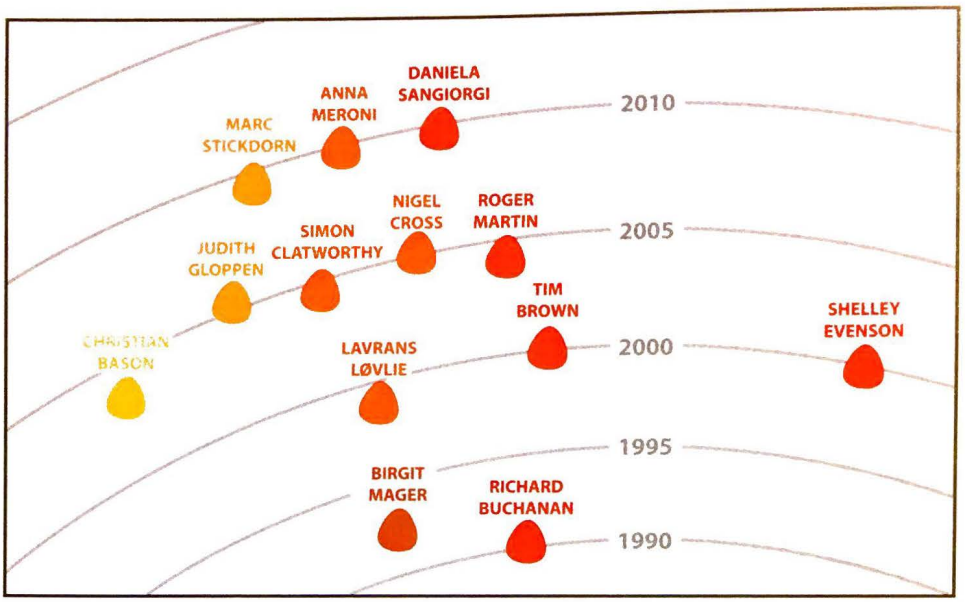

Figure 1.26 A Zoomed-in Portion of Manuela's gigamap

The gigamap shows the years that different texts were published and their proximity in terms of disciplinary area (coded by color).

Manuela Aguirre

Gigamaps start out scrawled on really large pieces of paper—rolls of paper, if you have access to those, or you can use a dry-erase board, a giant piece of cardboard you might have handy, several poster boards taped together—as long as you don't start on a computer. (The process of mapping is more fruitful when you begin in analog form, and using paper is easier if you are collaborating with others, which often happens in design and large writing projects.) Do an image search online for gigamaps to see a variety of examples—they're too large to recreate in detail in this book, so we recommend exploring them in zoomed-in detail on a computer.

What do you include in your writing-process gigamap? Literally everything you can think of that relates to the *who-what-when-where-how* of the project you thought of a moment ago. We have adapted this assignment from Norwegian designer Birger Sevaldson, who created gigamapping, and we offer the following tips adapted from his guidelines to help you start:

- **Nothing is irrelevant:** Deactivate any filter of relevance to the task.
- **Nothing is uninteresting:** Even the smallest detail is interesting in its own right. Search and hunt for it. Look for the smallest details in a chain of events.
- **Strive for information richness:** Work toward a minimum of 100 entities on the map. If you don't have enough, stop filtering yourself or zoom out on your perspective.

- **Don't talk too much—write and draw:** Don't worry about wasting paper. Don't plan the mapping but allow it to develop organically. Don't get trapped in conversations on what the map should look like or what should be included; just include it.
- **Start anywhere.** Start to unfold at any detail. Avoid a central nucleus. Centers of gravity will be found or generated later. Avoid gravitating to hierarchical structures.
- **Activate existing knowledge:** Do not research information in the beginning. This will stop your flow before you even have started. Use your existing knowledge and map it out completely. Then identify what is insufficient and what is speculative and plan your information-gathering research accordingly.
- **Messy is good:** Do not let your inner designer take over the process too early. Let it be as messy as the reality you try to cope with.
- **Mix it up:** Strive to produce a deep map that contains many layers of different information. Allow for different ways of representing information in the map.

Finding and creating relations between different types of information that seem totally unrelated is one of the goals in gigamapping. Therefore, once you have a draft of your gigamap:

- **Create relations:** Use the mapping to create relations that are not there today. What relations should be created to make the system function better? A simple line is not sufficient. Arrows indicate directions of relations. Use additional font variations and color coding. Use other types of relations like proximity or sequencing. Put labels with small descriptive texts or other notes onto the relations and not only onto the entities.
- **Analyze and be critical:** Search for points and areas where there are possibilities for doing things better. Search for possible new relations, intervention points, and innovations in your writing system for this project.
- **Switch media:** Redraw the mapping on your computer and plot it out in large formats to continue working manually. Then repeat the process with new iterations.
- **Share with others:** Present your gigamap to others working on similar projects, in a studio, classroom, study space, work space, or so on, to explain what you've gleaned about your own writing and design process, and what you might improve on as you begin a new multimodal project. What surprised you about how your writing/designing process expanded? How were people, places, or tasks grouped? Why were those groupings important? And so on.

write/design! option: Multimodal Literacy Narratives

We bet you have plenty of experience with multimodality, whether you realize it or not. This assignment asks you to consider who you are as a multimodal reader, writer, and designer. Maybe there was a special book or teacher or performance you saw growing up that struck a chord with you? Or maybe it was an app you couldn't put down, or a game, or a TV series, or a movie? Tell a story about your use of and interaction with multimodality in the world.

Some questions that might help you think about a topic:

- Is there a particular text that stands out in your memory?
- Have you had a good (or bad) experience in learning to do something? Has it been in the classroom? Recreationally?
- What barriers to reading, writing, or technology have you encountered as a user?
- How does multimedia shape your ability to process and interpret information?
- What are the ways in which you use multimodal texts to navigate life in and outside of work or school?

Compose a narrative in whatever medium you want that includes any combination of modes—but it has to include at least three different modes at once. The story should tell about your engagement with multimodal texts. You can search for examples online using key phrases such as "literacy narrative" or "multimodal literacy narrative" or "technology narrative."