



# Expertise with New/Multi/Modal/Visual/Digital/Media Technologies Desired: Tracing Composition's Evolving Relationship with Technology through the MLA *JIL*

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## Abstract

This article reports on the results of a detailed examination of the past two decades of MLA *Job Information List* advertisements to identify the changing ways in which members of the field of rhetoric and composition have talked about the kinds of texts, technologies, and composing practices they are looking for in the teaching and research of new hires. This study catalogued the ways in which seventeen technology-related keywords have been used in MLA job advertisements over the past two decades. It discusses how trends can be understood through the lens of significant developments in the field of computers and writing suggests future trajectories. Finally, it argues that by taking ownership over the way we name and define the new composing practices and technologies we have come to value, we will be better positioned to guide the development of our students and articulate the importance of our work in a way that ensures its continuation.

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Over the past two decades, rhetoric and composition has adapted to a wide variety of composing technologies and practices that have changed the way we teach and the way our students communicate. These changes can be observed in research by scholars in the field who have asked us to pay attention to digital (e.g., McKee & Devoss, 2007; Porter, 2009; Eyman, 2012), new media (e.g., Bolter & Grusin, 1999; Ball & Kalmbach, 2010; Wysocki, 2004), visual (e.g., Hocks, 2003; Handa, 2004; Hill & Helmers, 2004), multimedia (e.g., Hocks, 2001; Faigley, 2003), multimodal (e.g., Kress, 2005; Selfe, 2007; Palmeri, 2012; Shipka, 2005), online (e.g., Hewett, 2004; Warnock, 2009), and other new composing practices and environments. The changes can also be observed through textbooks that now include multimodal assignments and readings (e.g., Roen, Glau, & Maid, 2008; Johnson-Sheehan & Paine, 2009), resolutions and position statements put out by CCC committees (e.g., “On Teaching, Learning, and Assessing Writing in Digital Environments,”), topics in chairs’ addresses (e.g., Faigley, 1997; Selfe, 1999; Yancey, 2004; Wooten, 2006), and changes in the WPA outcomes statement, which added a “composing in electronic environments” plank in 2008.

Changes in composing technologies have not necessarily changed the fundamentals of rhetorical thinking and problem solving, but they have expanded them to include additional modes and media through which to construct

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meaning. For instance, blogging, as a communicative practice, is not an entirely new form of writing, but, in fact, shares a great deal in common with journaling projects of the past (Jonathan Alexander, as cited in Lauer, 2012). Conversely, James Porter (2009) argued that “computers are not merely instrumental tools of writing, but rather influence the nature of composing and our rhetorical understanding of the composing situation” (p. 384). And scholars such as Jason Palmeri have shown how we can look back in our field’s history and see the extent to which we have always already been engaging in multimodal teaching and text production (Palmeri, 2012; Lauer, 2012). At the very least, new technologies have facilitated our ability to choose from and engage with an increasing number of modes (such as sound, color, image, video) beyond just written words on a printed page. New technologies have also ushered in expanded avenues for the circulation and distribution of texts that are more instantaneous and diverse than ever before, bringing our students in touch with new audiences and opening them up to an ever-widening array of conversations.

As the textual and technological possibilities for constructing meaning have expanded, so too have the terms scholars and teachers use to describe the work they and their students do. While we have seen trends in term use emerge (the present popularity of *multimodal*, for instance), technology-related terms are not always used or defined consistently. And yet, if we value the new composing practices that enable our students to communicate thoughtfully and develop into engaged citizens, we must be able to authoritatively articulate that value to those outside our classrooms, including those who approve requests for courses, majors, hires, and grants. This does not mean that as a field we must always agree on which terms to use or how those terms should be defined. Rather, we must strive, as individual scholars and teachers, as well program and field representatives, to have reasoned and thoughtful justifications for the terms we use and how we define those terms so that we can build our credibility and justify our leadership in this area. As a field we have engaged in serious research and reflection about our approaches to technology over the past few decades (see every issue of this journal and the 2012 WPA-L discussion of MOOCs, for instance). Toward this effort, we can examine the terms that have been used throughout the last 20 years and take note of which terms have fallen in and out of favor, when, and in what contexts. This knowledge can then inform how we lead the way forward through our rapidly changing technological landscape.

In this article, I report on the results of my examination of the past two decades of Modern Language Association’s *Job Information List (JIL)* advertisements to identify the changing ways in which members of the rhetoric and composition field have talked about the kinds of texts, technologies, and composing practices they are looking for in the teaching and research of new hires. I interpret the *JIL* data through the lens of significant developments in the field of computers and writing and suggest reasons why this data is valuable to our conception of the field as we move forward. I argue that by becoming aware of the terms we have been using and by taking ownership over the way we name and define the new composing practices and technologies we have come to value, we will be better positioned to guide the development of our students and articulate the importance of our work in a way that ensures its continuation.

## 1. How language use provides a chronicle of the field

The language scholars and practitioners have used to describe the work we are doing in composition studies has lent insight into the contextual landscape of the field at various moments in history. Duane Roen (2005) in his book *Views from the Center*, examined the chair addresses from the past 25 years of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, noting how they reflect the vast constellation of scholarship that has defined the field, and locating common themes that chairs have spoken about, including teaching effectively, evaluating scholarship, giving voice to those on the margin, viewing CCCC as an organization, sharing autobiographical narratives, and confronting vexing issues in the field. Roen cited Andrea Lunsford’s 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary address as one that suggests that our field has not followed a typical disciplinary trajectory of setting out clear boundaries and then defending those boundaries. Rather, we have valued heterogeneity, expansiveness, and inclusivity. This may help explain the eagerness with which we have identified the potentials of new technologies and composing practices and the ambiguity with which we have often named those practices.

Similarly, Erika Lindemann (2000) in “Early Bibliographic Work in Composition Studies” examined the *MLA International Bibliography* for rhetoric and composition and suggested how the taxonomies of multiple bibliographies preceding and including the *MLA International Bibliography* reflected the time in which they were developed and left a legacy for members of our field to witness how the field has defined itself over the past few decades. Lindemann suggested that composition’s bibliographic efforts have enabled the field to bring more visibility to our scholarship,

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