



# Multimodal Composition in a College ESL Class: New Tools, Traditional Norms

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## Abstract

Research has noted that multimodal writing allows for better communication of knowledge and expression of personal identities through various modes of representation. Studies of multimodal composition have tended to examine separate modes, or have looked at connections between only a few selected available modes. Less attention has been devoted to multimodal composition from a holistic perspective. Drawing on the concept of synaesthetic semiosis [Kress, Gunther. (1998). *Visual and verbal modes of representation in electronically mediated communication: The potentials of new forms of text*. In Ilana Snyder (Ed.), *Page to screen: Taking literacy into the electronic era* (pp. 53–79). London: Routledge; Kress, Gunther, & Van Leeuwen, Theo. (2006). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge], the present study examines how ESL writers in a freshman composition class used available modes in multimodal argumentative essays posted on the World Wide Web. The findings indicate that word-dominated discourse was the primary factor in selecting available modes. Non-linguistic modes were primarily used to illustrate written essays. However, students also used non-linguistic modes to project cultural and national identities and to express emotional connections with their topics. The ways in which the students synthesized multiple meaning-making modes represented the social practices of learning multimodal genres in which they were engaged. The paper concludes with suggestions for pedagogy and research in multimodal composition.

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## 1. Introduction

Along with the ever-increasing influence of computer-technologies on academic writing practices, college-level writing courses have started to draw on multimodal approaches to composition. Computer-based multimodal composition changes one's ways of making and

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expressing meanings in that digital multimedia provide writers with imagery and audio-visual modes of representation beyond the linguistic mode for engaging in academic genres, if writers are willing to use these non-linguistic modes. As John Seely Brown argued in an interview with Sarah Powell (Powell, 2005), these non-linguistic modes enable writers to present and communicate knowledge in different ways and to convey meanings within certain subject areas more powerfully and “naturally” than the linguistic mode.

As such, multimodal approaches to composition provide writers who are having difficulty in using language, including those writers for whom English is a second language (ESL), with powerful tools for sharing knowledge and for self-expression. Beyond the practical benefits of multimodal composition, researchers argue that understanding specific ways of using non-verbal elements in texts is an essential part of developing certain kinds of disciplinary knowledge for mainstream and ESL learners alike (Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Johns, 1998; Miller, 1998; Rowley-Jolivet, 2001; Van Leeuwen, 2003). Thus, ESL students need to gain knowledge of how to use non-linguistic modes at the same time that they are developing their English writing abilities. Nevertheless, few studies have looked at the academic multimodal text production of ESL students.

This paper examines multimodal texts composed by ESL college students in the United States, studying significant patterns in their appropriation and synthesis of a range of available modes. It first explores ways in which a group of students in an ESL freshman composition class utilized linguistic, visual, audio, and spatial modes of representation for academic composition before examining the ways in which those separate modes were synthesized to form integrated multimodal texts. After reviewing relevant research studies pertaining to multimodality, writing as design, and multimodal composition, the paper looks at web pages composed by the students as part of an expanded argumentative composition assignment. The paper concludes with suggestions for pedagogy and research in multimodal composition.

## 2. Multimodality, and writing as designing

Multimodal approaches to communication maintain that meaning-making processes entail cultural ways of using modes of representation available in a given instance of communication (Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Kress, 2003, 2005). From this perspective, writing is no longer “monomodal”; it has become multimodal (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Van Leeuwen, 2003). The multimodal approach to writing has become more significant with the transfer of writing from paper-based books to computer screens, in that writers have more choices for making and representing meanings (Jewitt, 2006). These modes of representation range from written text to imagery, sounds, hyperlinks, and videos. With increased semiotic resources, writing texts has become a matter of composing through available designs, which translates into the notion of writing as *designing* (Kern, 2000; New London Group, 1995). Writers design and redesign all the modes of representation they draw upon in the production of multimodal texts in order to convey their intended meanings.

The process of designing available modes of representation is not only a matter of individual choice but is also a representation of cultural, social, and discursive values and norms. Taking this position, Gunther Kress (2005) argued that modes of representation and representational

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