



# Digital Writing, Multimodality, and Learning Transfer: Crafting Connections between Composition and Online Composing

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## Abstract

Most university students have a wealth of prior writing experience from writing in digital spaces before entering their first writing class, and much of this prior experience includes making meaning using multiple modes of communication. However, these students may not perceive their digital and multimodal writing as connected to classroom practice. Because of this, they may have a challenging time using writing knowledge learned in digital spaces to help with their academic writing. This study uses survey and interview data gathered from first-year university students to help better understand what prior digital and multimodal writing experiences students have as well as how students perceive the connections between these experiences and their own classroom practice. The author suggests ways to help students see connections between their varied writing experiences in order to facilitate learning transfer between their prior digital and multimodal experiences, their experiences in the composition classroom, and their experiences in other contexts.

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Digital writing and multimodality are deeply intertwined. It is difficult to think of examples of modern social networks, apps, or other digital writing spaces that do not use multiple modes to convey information to readers simultaneously. In fact, multimodality is not only encouraged but often *required* in popular forms of social media, such as Instagram or Snapchat. Several scholars in composition studies have demonstrated the importance of both digital writing (Buck, 2012; Fraiberg & Cui, 2016; Monty, 2015; Shepherd, 2015; Vie, 2008) and multimodality (Alexander & Rhodes, 2014; Palmeri, 2012; Shipka, 2011), but fewer texts have explored how the multimodal writing that students are already engaged with in digital spaces may inform and enhance the writing they do in composition classes. Several articles and books on multimodality offer creative and engaging methods for composing in multiple modes (Alexander & Rhodes, 2014), justifications for why multimodality is important to composition (Selfe, 2009; Yancey, 2004), and effective ways for incorporating multimodality into classroom practice (Shipka, 2005, 2011). To build on these studies, this study offers a glimpse into the types of digital and multimodal composing students are engaging in outside of school and puts these practices into conversation with practices in composition classes. By putting these practices into conversation, teachers may be able to foster learning transfer between students' various writing experiences.

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Incoming freshmen often have years of experience as both consumers and producers of multimodal texts through digital and social media. Most of these students regularly view and interpret content in digital spaces such as YouTube, Instagram, or Snapchat that includes multiple modes of communication. Many have created posts in social media spaces that include images, videos, and audio in addition to writing, sometimes editing or remixing content before they post. Research in the field has often acknowledged the importance of exploring literacy practices, such as these and others, that take place beyond the classroom (Fraiberg & Cui, 2016; Michaud, 2013; Monty, 2015; Roozen, 2008, 2009, 2012). We can further build on these studies by acknowledging the lived experiences that students already have with multimodal texts created in digital spaces. In other words, we can help students bridge the gap between their “home and academic” literacies (Monty, 2015, p. 128) by helping them to put their lived experiences with multimodality and digital writing into the broader constellation of writing experiences they engage in both in and outside of school. We can help them to understand “how their out-of-school literacies afford and constrain their academic socialization and learning” (Fraiberg & Cui, 2016, p. 84) as well as how their academic learning may afford and constrain learning in other contexts.

Students may not think of the multimodal composing they are doing outside of school as connected to composition at all (DePalma & Alexander, 2015; Shepherd, 2015) and may not be reflecting on those practices in the same way they do in the classroom context. When we bring multimodal composing into our writing classes, we can help students build a broader definition of writing that includes the various contexts in which writing takes place in their lives: in digital and analog spaces, in multimodal and text-based writing, both in and out of school. With a clear and direct connection made between writing in various contexts, students may see their out-of-school writing as more important, may see it as connected to classroom practice, and may be able to learn from it in a way that they were not able to previously.

Most of us in the field of computers and composition will see the connection between classroom writing and multimodal writing in digital spaces as obvious, and the “broader definition” of writing that I present above may be something that we have understood, internalized, and used for years as scholars, researchers, and teachers. However, many of our students may struggle with this broader definition of writing. Of course, some of our students may not have easy and regular access to digital technology, but even those who use digital media daily may not see what they are doing as related to writing. Students must be not only made aware that writing is more than words on paper, but they also must be convinced that their digital writing experiences have value and the broader definition of writing that includes these experiences will be useful to them. If students do not perceive their digital and multimodal writing as related to the content of their writing classes, it is unlikely that they will use these prior experiences to aid with classroom content, and it is unlikely that they will use classroom knowledge when they return to these spaces outside of class.

To better understand how teachers can help students bridge the connection between out-of-class and in-class composing, I suggest exploring the widening literature on learning transfer in composition studies and beyond. By exploring the advice given to us by scholars such as Kathleen Blake Yancey, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak (2014), Elizabeth Wardle (2007), and Anne Beaufort (2007), composition teachers can help students to make use of the prior composition experiences that they bring with them from digital and multimodal spaces to the classroom and can help students to contextualize those experiences for use in future writing contexts. Using lessons from transfer literature will allow teachers to contextualize the learning that students already have and build a bridge between classroom practice and out-of-school literacies. In what follows, I present the results of a survey and interviews of freshman students about their writing practices, I explore what transfer means and why it is important to the students’ previous writing history, and I use this data and theory to build a framework for how to connect students’ prior experiences in multimodal and digital composing to classroom practice.

## 1. Methods

The purpose of both the survey and the interviews was to understand the types of writing students were doing outside of school as well as the perceptions they had of those types of writing. With IRB approval, I distributed the link for the survey through listservs and social media for composition instructors in September of 2015 with a request to pass the link along to students. By the time the survey closed in October of 2015, 151 first-year composition students from various universities in the US and Canada had responded. All respondents were beginning their freshman year, were currently enrolled in a writing course, and were at least 18 years of age. Despite efforts to distribute the survey widely to different instructors at a range of institutions, nearly 75% of responses were from students at large, doctoral-

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