

New Media Matters: Tutoring in the Late Age of Print

by Jackie Grutsch McKinney

About the Author

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At the turn of the century, John Trimbur predicted that writing centers would become “Multiliteracy Centers,” drawing on the terminology of the New London Group (30). These re-envisioned centers, he suggested, would provide help for students working on a variety of projects: essays, reports, PowerPoint presentations, web pages, and posters. His prediction has proved true to some degree most notably in the state of Michigan. The University of Michigan’s Sweetland Writing Center opened a Multiliteracy Center in 2000 within its writing center, a place where students “could receive one-to-one support as they worked on digital projects such as websites, PowerPoint presentations, and other forms of communication that depend on multiliteracies” (Sheridan, “Sweetland” 4). Additionally, at Michigan State, digital writing consultants worked with students on digital texts as early as 1996 (see Sheridan, “Words” and DeVoss). Institutions outside of Michigan have responded to new media writing also. The Worcester Polytechnic Institute where Trimbur works renamed its writing center the Center for Communication Across

the Curriculum, with “workshops” in writing, oral presentation, and visual design (Trimbur 29), and the Center for Collaborative Learning and Communication was created at Furman University (Inman). Many other centers have not changed names but have begun tutoring students on a variety of texts.

However, in one of the few published articles on writing centers and new media, entitled “Planning for Hypertexts in the Writing Center...or Not,” Michael Pemberton asks if writing centers should open their doors to students working on hypertexts. Although he answers “maybe” he believes directors should decide based on their local needs and constraints—the bulk of his argument seems to say “no” more loudly than “yes,” as seen here:

Ultimately, we have to ask ourselves whether it is really the writing center’s responsibility to be all things to all people. There will always be more to learn. There will always be new groups making demands on our time and our resources in ways we haven’t yet planned for. And there will never be enough time or enough money or enough tutors to meet all those demands all of the time. If we diversify too widely and spread ourselves too thinly in an attempt to encompass too many different literacies, we may not be able to address any set of literate practices particularly well. (21)

Now—twenty years after Stephen Bernhardt urged us to *see* student texts; after Craig Stroupe, more recently, argued for the visualization of English studies; after Diana George showed us how visual literacy has been a part of writing instruction since the 1940s; and after Gunther Kress argued convincingly that the revolution in writing dominated by the image is not coming, it is already here—the writing center community seems divided on whether writing centers should work with new media.

Though at first blush I thought that Pemberton’s argument was shortsighted, upon reflection, I think this sort of response actually speaks to an understandable uncertainty. We are fairly sure that we do good work with paper essays, pencils, and round tables. We are just not sure that we can do good work when those things change into new media texts, computer screens and speakers, mice and keyboards, and computer desks. The argument follows that if we are not certain we can do good work, then we should not do it at all.

I agree with Pemberton that we shouldn't take on work that we are not prepared for. But our agreement only goes so far, because I *do* think it is our job to work with all types of writing in the writing center—including new media. In this article, then, I suggest that writing centers need to offer tutoring in new media texts, but not the same tutoring we've always done. I begin by briefly defining *what* new media are (or, really, how I will use the term) and outlining *why* I think writing center tutors should work with new media texts. The bulk of this essay is devoted to *how* to tutor new media, since I see that as the crux of the issue, so in the last part, I describe the ways that writing center directors and staffs wanting to work with new media can evolve their practices to do so.

What Is New Media?

Scholars use the term “new media” in a handful of ways that both overlap and diverge, which can make matters complicated. Are new media texts digital? Can they be print? Are they the same as multimodal texts? Or are they employing a different rhetoric? Cynthia Selfe, Anne Wysocki, and Cheryl Ball each offer definitions of new media that I find helpful, not because they agree with one another, but rather because I can see from the sum of their individual definitions the exciting range of new media texts.

For Cynthia Selfe, new media texts are digital. She defines new media texts as “texts created primarily in digital environments, composed in multiple media, and designed for presentation and exchange in digital venues” (“Students” 43). Although such texts contain alphabetic features, she claims that “they also typically resist containment by alphabetic systems, demanding multiple literacies of seeing and listening and manipulating, as well as those of writing and reading” (“Students” 43). She would use “new media” to describe a web portfolio or another text viewed on screen that would contain alphabetic texts and other modes, too.

Anne Wysocki, though, sees new media as any text that in its production calls attention to its own materiality:

I think we should call “new media texts” those that have been made by composers who are aware of the range of materialities of texts and who

then highlight the materiality: such composers design texts that help readers/consumers/viewers stay alert to how any text—like its composers and readers—doesn't function independently of how it is made and in what contexts. ("Openings" 15)

This attention to materiality means the text might or might not be digital. As Wysocki writes, "new media texts do not have to be digital; instead, any text that has been designed so that its materiality is not effaced can count as new media" (15). An example of a new media text that isn't digital is Wysocki et al.'s *Writing New Media* itself. Design choices in this text, such as the horizontal orientation of the page numbers, make readers "stay alert" to how the writers are playing with the usual conventions of a book. The key term for Wysocki's conception of new media, then, is materiality.

A third definition of new media comes from Cheryl Ball in "Show, Not Tell: The Value of New Media Scholarship." She writes that new media are "texts that juxtapose semiotic modes in new and aesthetically pleasing ways and, in doing so, break away from print traditions so that written text is not the primary rhetorical means" (405). For Ball, then, like Selfe, new media is multimodal and digital. Unique to Ball's definition, however, is that what's "new" in new media is the way in which these texts make arguments—the primacy of non-textual modes. New media texts make fundamentally different types of arguments. She illustrates this difference in her article through analysis of two web texts. One relies on print conventions to make its linear argument; the other radically departs from print conventions as it asks readers to compose the argument by dragging and dropping audio, still images, and text to play together in an order determined by the viewer/reader.

Combined, the three definitions show a range of texts that are "new" in significant ways: 1) their digital-ness; 2) their conscious materiality or form; 3) their multimodality; and/or 4) their rhetorical means. Of course, texts that fall under the category of *new* media by one or more of these definitions have existed for some time, but it is only recently that students, especially in writing classrooms, have been regularly asked to read or compose new media texts. The norm in colleges and universities for decades has been typed, double-

spaced, thesis-driven texts on 8½-by-11-inch, stapled, white paper. Thus, in this article, when I say that we should train tutors to work with new media, I mean the sorts of texts that would fit any of the three (Wysocki's, Selfe's, or Ball's) definitions outlined above. Practically speaking, this would mean that tutors would also be trained to work with texts that are not traditional, paper, alphabetic, text-only, academic print essays or assignments. Increasingly common, new media assignments in first-year composition (FYC) include PowerPoint presentations or slidecasts; video essays and documentaries; audio essays or podcast series; posters, collages, and other visual arguments; websites or hypertexts; and comic books, animations, or graphic novels. These are the sorts of texts we must be prepared to work with in the writing center in the twenty-first century in addition to the more traditional texts that have been the norm.

Why Tutor New Media?

Pemberton suggests four ways of dealing with new texts in writing centers: 1) ignore them since they will rarely appear; 2) use specialist tutors; 3) treat new media texts like other texts; or 4) train all tutors to work with them.¹ The last of these is the approach I will argue for; I believe the writing center is the place to tutor students with their new media texts. I think all tutors should be trained to work with these texts and that these texts have unique features, which means some of our traditional tutoring practices will not work (more on this later). Here, I will briefly defend my belief that we should take on the task of tutoring new media. Many readers, I imagine, will not need convincing, as writing centers around the country already work with new media writing. For these readers, this section might help them articulate this new work to colleagues or administrators who question the evolution of their writing centers. Other readers might find themselves more resistant to offering what they perceive as yet another service when demands on their resources and time are already too high. I can empathize with this position but do my best to articulate how I do not think tutoring new media is something we can or should opt out of. It is not another thing—it is *the* thing we have always done, just in new forms, genres, and media.

Reason #1: New Media Is Writing

Writing has irrevocably changed from the early days of writing centers. Early writing centers in the 1960s and 1970s developed peer tutoring techniques when student texts were written by hand or with typewriters. Adding another mode—even a simple image—to paper texts was difficult and usually avoided. The 1980s and 1990s brought us personal computers with word processing, but for the earlier part of this period, the texts writing centers worked with did not radically change. Word processors made texts that looked like they came from typewriters; texts were composed on screen but printed and distributed on paper.

Fast forward to the 2000s. Student texts now are nearly always composed on screen. Most students have their own computers—laptops are popular. Many texts that students compose, even for FYC, never leave the screen. Students write reading responses in a course management system, like BlackBoard. They post the response to the course discussion board where the instructor and other students respond. Likewise, longer writing assignments—essays and web pages—can be “turned in” and “turned back” without ever being printed out. In fact, when Microsoft Word 2007 was released, it sported a new default typeface created for onscreen viewing, replacing the long-reigning Times New Roman, because of the frequency with which texts—even word-processed texts—were viewed on screen.

In these ways, we have witnessed a fundamental change in the textual climate. Before, putting a text on paper—and writing for that linear, left-to-right, top-to-bottom, page-to-page form—was *the* way to write. That has changed. Now, there are many ways to communicate through writing; consequently, putting a text to paper is now a rhetorical choice that one should not make hastily. We ought to really think through whether a paper essay, say, is the best way to reach our audience or purpose. If we decide to compose paper essays knowing we have the wide range of available textual choices, we are deeming the paper essay the best way to meet our rhetorical ends. Many of us, perhaps, have spent our lifetimes writing paper essays because that was how arguments were made—academically if not otherwise. The paper essay was the default. This is no longer the case even in academic circles. Many academic conference presentations

are not paper essays read to the audience but arguments presented with PowerPoint slideshows, videos, animations, and print or digital posters, suggesting that many academic writers, upon weighing their rhetorical choices, are no longer choosing paper essays.

I think it is unreasonable to grant that writers have a wide range of options for meeting their rhetorical ends—even academically—yet to insist that we will only help with those texts that writing centers have historically worked with, namely, paper essays and assignments. New media is “new,” as the earlier definitions show, yet it is still writing. More than that, it is a type of writing that academia and the greater public value more and more.

Sending students with new media texts to another center or a specific tutor, as some centers have done, could give the message that new media is not writing, that it is not something the writing center values. Some universities might be in the position, as the University of Michigan was, to create a separate center for new media texts. But many of us struggle, annually, to keep one center open. Many of us also struggle to run one center, and most of us would not find additional compensation for willingly increasing our workload, I imagine. However, preparing all tutors to work with new media texts requires no second space or additional staffing. It does not necessarily require great investments in new technology or technology training. Most writing centers are likely adequately outfitted with at least one, if not several, computers on which to view digital texts. We might very well want to acquire large monitors or projectors to enable viewing of certain texts (e.g., slidecasts, video essays, or PowerPoint presentations), but these texts can be viewed on small screens for the purpose of tutor response.

Reason #2: The Line between New Media and Old Media Is Blurry

Though I attempted a clear-cut definition of new media texts in the previous section, it is often the case that a text straddles the old media/new media line. A writing center that officially works with only essays, reports, and other such alphabetic texts will increasingly, if not already, find multimodality and digitality a part of such texts. Pemberton’s question about hypertexts is a good example. He meant,

I think, to question whether writing centers ought to work with digital texts composed in HTML and viewed in web-browsers, otherwise known as web pages. Yet many programs now, including Microsoft Word and PowerPoint, allow for hypertext links (not to mention color, images, charts, sound, animation, and video), so traditional essays are quickly becoming less, well, traditional. If we say we do not work with hypertexts, would we then not work with essays that contain links?⁹ Or what of a webpage that contained an essay with no links?⁹ When is it an essay and when is it hypertext?

I think a writing center that sets out to determine when a traditional essay becomes a new media text—in order to say “yes” we work with these or “no” we don’t work with those—will find this an increasingly difficult task. Likewise, a writing center that asserts that it can only help with the “writing” part of a new media text is also on shaky ground. The alphabetic text in a new media text is subsumed into the whole and must be read in context of the whole composition.

*Reason #3: If We Don't Claim It for Writing,
Others Will Subsume It as Technology*

If we surrender the composition of web texts or other new media texts to computer science or another department on campus, we allow new media composition to be lost to the technology. As Danielle DeVoss writes, “Writing center theory and practice must . . . evolve so we can situate ourselves as crucial stakeholders, working towards more complex and critical use of computing technologies and computer-related literacies” (167). If composing new media texts are just about mastering the technology, then we can be convinced (or others will try to convince us) that new media is better left to those on campus who know the most about technology. For example, if creating a website is only about learning HTML or CSS, then we could let the computer science department teach it. Yet, if we consider new media as texts composed consciously in multiple modes, we would have to acknowledge that we are responsible for and good at teaching composing.² We ought to speak up about how creating digital texts involves more than mastering a software program just as loudly as we speak up about how writing in general is more than mastering MLA format or rules for comma usage.

New media texts are texts written for particular occasions, purposes, and audiences. As such, writers of new media still need human feedback. Related to this, the “CCCC Position Statement on Teaching, Learning, and Assessing Writing in Digital Environments,” a guide for classroom instruction of digital writing, advises, “Because digital environments make sharing work especially convenient, we would expect to find considerable human interaction around texts; through such interaction, students learn that humans write to other humans for specific purposes.” The statement reminds us that digital texts are rhetorical and therefore need rhetorical feedback—of the ilk a writing center typically provides—not just technical troubleshooting. The evolved writing center secures a spot for humans to meet other humans over texts, digital or not. Working with students on their new media texts asserts our stake as composing professionals in the new media age.

How to Tutor New Media

In the previous two sections I argued, perhaps paradoxically, that there is something new and different about new media writing, yet that it is writing and therefore we should tutor writers working on it. For me, there is enough that is “new” about new media that I had to ask myself how well our traditional tutoring practices address it. Trimbur is clear, too, that the change in types of projects we see in the center will change our tutoring. He writes,

The new digital literacies will increasingly be incorporated into writing centers not just as sources of information or delivery systems for tutoring but as productive arts in their own right, and writing center work will, if anything, become more rhetorical in paying attention to the practices and effects of design in written and visual communication—more product-oriented and perhaps less like the composing conferences of the process movement. (30)

I have to agree with Trimbur that it would be foolish not to prepare my tutors to work with these texts. What I have come to believe is that accepting new media texts necessitates rethinking our dominant writing center ideas and revising our common practices. Practices vary from center to center, from tutor to tutor. Still, there are some

practices espoused repeatedly in the literature of the field and tutor training manuals that seem to compose our general tenets. Many of these practices will have to change. Although such radical re-imaginings of writing center work may seem daunting, we could see this as an occasion to reconsider how well we are responding to all texts, to all writers—an occasion to improve the work we do.

Up to this point, I have been concerned with arguing that we ought to work with new media; now I complicate that. I think it would be irresponsible not to think through (and follow through with) consequent changes to our practices. In what follows, I look at the often-espoused practices for tutoring writing, particularly the ways we read student texts and the ways we respond.

How We Read Student Texts

Ever since Stephen North published his writing center manifesto, “The Idea of a Writing Center,” writing center scholars and practitioners have been guided by this statement: “in a writing center the object is to make sure that writers, and not necessarily their texts, are what get changed by instruction. In axiom form it goes like this: our job is to produce better writers, not better writing” (37). What follows this writing center mantra is important; he writes, “In the center, we look *beyond* or *through* that particular project, that particular text, and see it as an occasion for addressing our primary concern, the process by which it is produced” (38, emphasis added). This idea has been translated into practice in various ways. For one, Christina Murphy and Steve Sherwood, in *The St. Martin’s Sourcebook for Writing Tutors*, describe tutoring in terms of “pre-textual,” “textual,” and “post-textual,” where the goal of tutoring is, indeed, to get beyond the text. In these three stages, the tutor is to first talk about the paper with the client, then read the paper with the client, and finish by moving from the paper and dealing with the client’s issues in writing in general.

Another way to “look beyond” particular projects is to not physically look at them. This comes in the form of a hands-off policy in relation to student texts. We train our tutors to leave the text in front of the client or between tutor and client. As Leigh Ryan and Lisa Zimmerelli suggest in *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*, “Give the student control of the paper. Keep the paper in front of the

student as much as possible. If you are working at a computer, let the writer sit in front of the screen as well as control the keyboard” (19). When a student hands a tutor a paper, the tutor often quickly puts it down on the table. Irene Clark and Dave Healy note that this practice, which they call the pedagogy of noninterventionalism, exists because of an ethical concern in some centers. If tutors hold the paper, write on the paper, or otherwise “own” the paper, they may be unwittingly helping the student too much, i.e., plagiarizing or editing. Linda Shamoon and Deborah Burns, in turn, call this hands-off practice “The Bible,” an orthodoxy that has attained the force of an ethical or moral code within writing center studies (175).

Likewise, tutors are encouraged to use a read-aloud method for tutoring. Tutors read the student text aloud to the client or request the client to do so. However, this common approach of reading texts in writing centers might not be helpful for students with new media texts. The intertwining of multiple modes may be lost if the tutor looks *through* the text or does not look *at* the paper or *at* the screen. Furthermore, there is no way to “read aloud” visual elements or sounds. Consequently, the tutor may just skip over these elements thereby privileging the verbal, perhaps to the detriment of the student.

For example, several years ago one of my composition students, “Amy,” took her final project to the writing center for help. She was working on her “book,” a type of portfolio project that asked students to rethink their semester’s work in terms of a consistent theme and design. She had decided to use divider pages featuring Winnie the Pooh throughout her book. It was an odd choice as a design feature that became downright inappropriate when one of her “chapters” was an essay on Hitler. The baffling juxtaposition of Pooh and Piglet and the horrific details in her essay surely did not escape her tutor; however, the tutor did not say anything to Amy about this choice quite possibly because the tutor was working under the typical assumption that the alphabetic text was her domain, or because the tutor never even saw this visual element since Amy held the book and read aloud to the tutor. Amy might have received a similar silence had she used certain types of online tutoring which ask writers to cut and paste their text into email forms or whiteboards, allowing tutors to see only

the alphabetic text.

How we read texts in writing centers is especially problematic for certain new media texts, such as digital texts, which offer the reader a choice in navigation—where to start, when to go back, where to go next. A tutor must look at a hypertext and interact with it to read it, which begs the question: how would one—or why would one—read aloud a website? The first step in evolving writing center practice, then, is insisting that tutors look at texts to *see* student writing. Stephen Bernhardt's suggestion to composition teachers that they ought to look *at* student texts instead of *through* them seems just as important for writing centers now. If we don't, Bernhardt warns that we are ensuring our own irrelevance as the gap widens between the literacies we have traditionally taught and the ones students need: "Classroom practice which ignores the increasingly visual, localized qualities of information exchange can only become increasingly irrelevant" (77). Doing so, we ask tutors to consider the materiality of texts from the resolution of images to the quality of paper for a resume.

Secondly, instead of asking tutors to read aloud, we can ask tutors to talk aloud as they negotiate a text—a subtle yet important change. In reading aloud, the tutor may be tempted to skip over nonverbal elements since the elements are, well, not verbal. In fact, in my own tutoring experience, I have worked with students who quickly turn the page past charts or graphs as if they are inconsequential to the text at hand. However, if the tutor talked through the text, he or she would instead render a reading of it, showing the student how it could be read in its entirety. For instance, imagine Amy taking her book to a talk-aloud session. The tutor right away would begin with the materiality of the text. "Wow, this is quite a big document. I see it has lots of pages. This, here, seems to be a title. Is this a collection of writings of sorts?" And then, "I'm noticing as we go through this that you've used Winnie the Pooh on each divider page. Why is that?"

This tactic would be immensely helpful for hypertexts, too. The tutor could talk through the links and her expectations for how to negotiate the pages. "OK, we've read through this page on Senator Clinton. I'd like to go back to the page on Moveon.org, but I don't see how I'd do that." Or, "The first thing I notice is these images

changing – fading into one another. They all seem connected by their subject – all protesters of sorts? This makes me think this website is about protesting even though the title says, ‘Citizens of America.’” This sort of talking aloud would let students see how a reader makes meaning by reading the various modes in the text: images, text, layout, color, movement, and so forth.

How We Talk About Student Writing

In a typical writing center session, tutors are trained to read through the student’s text and then to set an agenda on what issues to tackle during the remainder of the session. Many tutors are trained to focus the tutorial on higher order concerns (HOCs) first. These are defined as “the features of the paper that exist beyond the sentence-level; they include clarity of thesis or focus, adequate development and information, effective structure or organization, and appropriate voice and tone” (McAndrew and Reigstad 42). Only after working through the “higher order” issues does the tutor turn to lower order concerns (LOCs), which primarily manifest on the sentence level. All in all, this practice makes sense. It is only logical to work students through revisions that might necessitate substantial changes first before tackling what is happening on a micro-level.

Nonetheless, there may be a problem with this practice for new media texts since tutors are not trained to see other modes, such as visual elements, as contributing to the overall meaning of the text. That is, they are not trained to see that visual elements can be and often are a higher order concern and should be attended to as such. For instance, a tutor, Bryan, told me last year of a student he worked with who was composing a scholarship essay. The student had selected an apple clip art border for his text that he felt was fitting for the type of scholarship – a scholarship for future teachers. These apples, which Bryan felt inappropriate for the genre, were really the only thing he remembered about the essay, yet were not something he discussed with the student since he said he wanted to discuss “the more important issues” first. Clearly, this is just one example, but I believe it does speak to the way we set agendas – what we decide to talk about with writers.

Tutors do not typically broach the subject of formatting without

direct questioning from the student because issues of formatting, if they are seen at all, are seen as LOCs or because tutors usually work with drafts and may assume the students will know how to “fix” such elements by the final copy. The visual aspects of a text may not even be on the tutor’s radar, let alone other modes such as sound, color, or motion. In numerous tutoring manuals, there is little acknowledgement that visual elements or document design are important for tutors to read and discuss with students. The closest are Ryan and Zimmerelli’s *Bedford Guide*, which states that lab reports should have headings, includes a page on PowerPoint presentations, and asks tutors to consider if resumes are “pleasing to the eye” (87), and Bertie Fearing and W. Keats Sparrow’s “Tutoring Business and Technical Writing Students,” which focuses mainly on issues of voice, diction, economy, emphasis, and parallelism, but also devotes one paragraph to typography, headings, and lists. Beyond this, there is little about the multimodality of academic essays and more often than not nothing about considering the multimodality of any other type of assignment. Even when telling tutors how to work with typically visually-heavy forms—manuals, instructions, memos, proposals, progress and feasibility reports—McAndrew and Reigstad do not show tutors how to give feedback on the non-verbal elements. Obviously, if writing centers are going to work with new media texts—those texts which purposely employ various modes to make meaning—tutors will have to be trained to know when and how the interaction of various modes are HOCs.

Furthermore, unless trained otherwise, tutors might not suggest the use of non-textual modes in revision planning with the student. There are moments as readers when the use of a diagram, illustration, or image could help with our comprehension of ideas, and there are times when the use of a bulleted list, graph, or chart allows a writer to present ideas succinctly. Tutors, as readers of and responders to texts, need to be able to describe to clients their expectations in terms of verbal and other elements and plot out the tutoring sessions to reflect that. Tutors need to be able to talk about new media texts, which requires both a broader understanding of rhetoric (of how new media texts are rhetorical) and a new set of terms about the interactivity between modes and the effects of that interactivity.

Several composition scholars have theorized how we might respond to or assess classroom-assigned new media writing. Several of them emphasize the rhetorical nature of new media, thereby arguing that we can respond to new media in ways similar to how we respond to other texts, as they are all rhetorical. For example, in “Looking for Sources of Coherence in a Fragmented World,” Kathleen Blake Yancey argues that we need new ways of talking about digital writing: “Without a new language, we will be held hostage to the values informing print, values worth preserving for that medium, to be sure, but values incongruent with those informing the digital” (89-90). To that end, she offers a heuristic for readers to ask of digital texts: What arrangements are possible? Who arranges? What is the intent? What is the fit between intent and effect? (96) Though she sees digital composition as different, she sees rhetoric as “being at the heart” of all the writing composition teachers assign and assess (90).

Likewise, Madeleine Sorapure’s “Between Modes: Assessing Student New Media Compositions” suggests teachers look for the use of the rhetorical tropes of metaphor and metonymy when assessing students’ new media compositions, thereby focusing on the relationship of modes. She writes,

Focusing assessment on the relations of modes might alleviate part of what Yancey described as the “discomfort” of assessment: that part that comes from our sense that we are not the most qualified people on campus to judge the effectiveness of the individual modes of image, audio, or video in a multimodal composition. But I think we are indeed qualified to look at the relations between modes and to assess how effectively students have combined different resources in their compositions. (4)

I think Sorapure’s idea is on the right track. We don’t need to be, say, filmmakers to respond to video in new media compositions. However, we do need to be able, at a minimum, to respond to how the video relates to the whole of the text. As Yancey, Sorapure, and others suggest, new media texts are rhetorical. We can talk about how the text is motivated, how it is purposeful, how it is written to a particular audience. These conversations can be similar to the conversations we have about old media texts.⁴ Yet if we do read rhetorically to determine

how well a text meets its ends, our tutors need to be able to explain how a text has or has not done so. I do not think our language for talking about texts is adequate in and of itself for this task.

Instead, I have increasingly drawn on other fields to give tutors ways to talk about the interactivity of modes and their sense of the gestalt in students' new media texts. Teaching tutors these terms will give them a vocabulary to describe the relationships between modes; without such an understanding, many times students and tutors assume that images, graphics, animation, or other modes are decoration or supplementation (although they probably won't use that term) for the real mode of writing: the words. I've tutored more than one student who assumed that visuals always make sense to readers, that other modes don't need interpretation like words do.

As a start, I think it is appropriate to teach tutors Karen Schriver's terms for the relationships between modes, Robin Williams's principles of good design, and Cynthia Selfe's criteria for visual assessment. Each of these, I believe, gives more concrete language for tutors or teachers responding to new media. The space of this article will not permit me to draw out extended examples of each of the terms; I hope that readers interested in these ideas will look to the primary texts. However, I will briefly look at a sample new media text to see how this terminology as a whole might help a tutor respond to such a text.

Relationships Between Modes: Karen Schriver

Schriver's terms were intended to describe how visuals work with alphabetic text, though they easily translate to the relationships between different modes, too, such as sound, video, and color.

Redundant: “substantially identical content appearing visually and verbally in which each mode tells the same story, providing a repetition of key ideas” (412)

Complementary: “different content visually and verbally, in which both modes are needed in order to understand the key ideas” (412)

- Supplementary:* “different content in words and pictures, in which one mode dominates the other, providing the main ideas, while the other reinforces, elaborates, or instantiates the points made in the dominant mode (or explains how to interpret the other)” (413)
- Juxtapositional:* “different content in words and pictures, in which the key ideas are created by a clash or semantic tension between the ideas in each mode; the idea cannot be inferred without both modes being present simultaneously” (414)
- Stage-setting:* “different content in words and pictures, in which one mode (often the visual) forecasts the content, underlying theme, or ideas presented in the other mode” (414)

Principles of Design: Robin Williams

Williams’s four basic design principles come from her work *The Non-Designer’s Design Book*, where she tries to simplify design concepts for those who must design on paper or screen but do not do so as their primary occupation. Using this sort of text draws on the field of graphic design, which has multimodal composition at its heart.

- Contrast:* Difference created between elements for emphasis; elements must be made quite different or else the elements simply *conflict* with one another (63)
- Repetition:* How consistently elements (e.g., typeface, color, pattern, transition) are used; repetition unifies (49)
- Alignment:* How elements line up on a page, the visual connection between elements; “every item should have a visual connection with something else on the page” (31)
- Proximity:* How closely elements are placed on page or screen: related items should be close to one another, unrelated items should not be (15-17)

Visual Assessment Criteria: Cynthia Selfe

The last set of terms comes from a chapter of *Writing New Media* in which Selfe, drawing on the work of Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, gives assignments and rubrics for helping writing instructors incorporate new media into their classes. This set of terms is helpful in looking, literally, at the gestalt of a new media text.

Visual impact: “the overall effect and appeal that a visual composition has on an audience” (“Toward” 85)

Visual coherence: “the extent to which the various elements of a visual composition are tied together, represent a unified whole” (“Toward” 86)

Visual salience: “the relative prominence of an element within a visual composition. Salient elements catch viewers’ eye [*sic*]; they are conspicuous” (“Toward” 86)

Visual organization: “the pattern of arrangement that relates the elements of the visual essay to one another so that they are easier for readers/viewers to comprehend” (“Toward” 87)

Using the New Terminology to Respond to a New Media Text

Figure 1 is a grayscale reproduction of a poster created by the Writing Center staff at Clarion University. They produce these posters collaboratively as a staff and sell customized versions via their website. This one, the “Criminal Justice Poster,” is one of my favorites. I selected this text to model a new media response because it fits within the very general definition of new media that I have used throughout this article, because it consciously takes advantage of its materiality as a poster, and because it relies on multiple modes to make its argument. It also is exchanged as a digital text first—composed digitally and bought from digital previews before it is printed poster-size. In addition, I wanted to select a text which a reader of this article could see in its entirety (though my response is to the original full-color file which can be viewed at <http://www.clarion.edu/80053.jpg>).

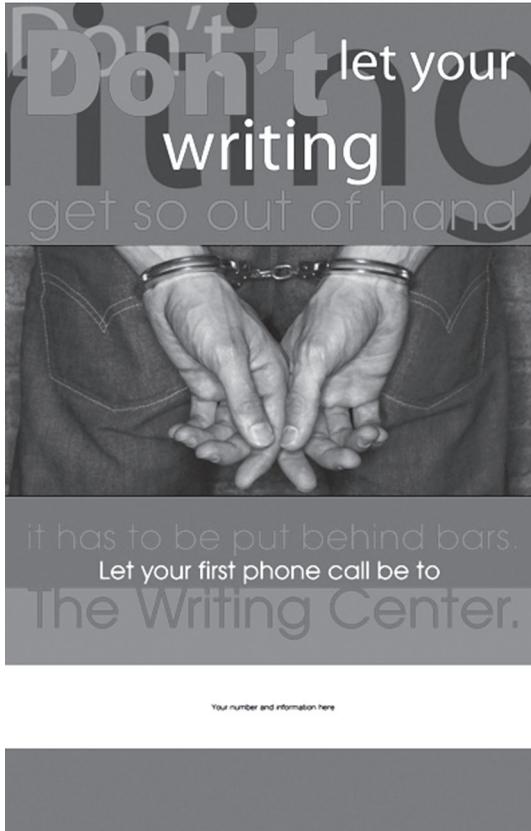


Fig. 1. Clarion “Criminal Justice Poster”

So, first off, what kind of relationship do we see between the modes here? The composer has used text, photograph, color, and typography to make this text. The image of the handcuffed person is in a *complementary* relationship with the text, “Don’t let your writing get so out of hand it has to be put behind bars.” The image helps give the reader context. Though the text is a threatening command (do this or else), the orange, bright blue, and green colors and typography are more playful than foreboding. Perhaps this *juxtaposition* is purposeful to play up the humor of the poster, or perhaps it takes away from the effect. This could be something to discuss with the writer.

We can also look at the principles of design at work here.

Contrast is evident in the change in typeface. The composer wanted to emphasize the word “Don’t,” so it appears larger than the other words. The different colors, sizes, and weight of the other words and background signal difference, perhaps of importance. “Don’t let your writing” is in one typeface; the rest of the text is in a very similar sans serif typeface, which makes for a *conflict*. *Repetition* is evident in the color choices; the background colors are also used for the type. The words “Don’t” and “writing” are actually repeated and faded into the background. There are varied *alignments* here. Mostly, the text is center-aligned and shares the same base line. However, “Don’t” and “let your” don’t share a common baseline. The (mostly) center alignment makes the words on the left margin and right margin nearly line up. Further, there is no consistent alignment within the colored blocks; the text sits near the bottom in blue and green squares but floats to the top in orange. There are two sentences here, and the *proximity* is very close between them, signaling to the reader that these ideas are closely related. The image breaking through the first sentence makes the reader understand the picture as part of the message of that first sentence.

Finally, we could look at this as a visual argument. Using Selfe’s terms, we would probably acknowledge that the overall *visual impact* is quite striking. This is a poster that stands out because of the image and bright (though not garish) colors. The purpose of a poster is to call attention to itself, and this poster has the potential to do that. The *visual coherence* is also quite strong because of the repetition of colors and type. The poster will be customized in the white box with the purchaser’s logo or information. There is a possibility that there will be less coherence when that element is introduced if there are different types or colors. The elements that are *visually salient* are the word “Don’t” and the photograph. Both hold key positions—one in the top left corner and one across the center of the poster. The quick in-a-glance message provided by these two elements is, “don’t end up in cuffs”—pretty powerful! The placement of the prominent “Don’t” at the top invites the reader to start there and move down; thus the *visual organization* of elements tells the reader how to use the text.

At this point, I should mention two things. First, I am not

implying that a tutor would or should go through reading/responding to a text as extensively as this during a session. Like other sessions, the tutor and student would discuss what seems most pressing. I, for one, would probably talk to this composer about how color and type relate to text and image and the overall alignment – another tutor might focus on other elements. Which brings me to my second point: not everyone using these terms is going to come to the same reading. The reader’s job with new media is still interpretation. Responding to new media requires close interaction with the text and ways to talk about what we read/view/interact with.

Summary and Closing Thoughts

This article has been about reconsidering how we train tutors to read and respond to texts. The subject here has been new media texts. I’ve asked us to reconsider how we tutor and how we talk to students about their writing. The impetus for these evolved practices is the arrival of increasing numbers of new media texts assigned in university classes. As new media texts consciously and purposefully employ multiple modes to make meaning, they require us to direct our attention to texts differently. Current practices won’t suffice, as they limit us to the alphabetic text. Thus, I believe it is imperative to train all tutors in these evolved practices because they will change the ways we respond to all texts, considering more than we have before, perhaps in significant ways. In short, here’s the 28-word, visually-arranged version of this article:

Twentieth-Century Tutoring	Twenty-First-Century Tutoring
Read aloud	Talk aloud
Getting beyond the text	Interacting with the text
Zoomed in: talk about words	Zoomed out: talk about whole

It strikes me that writing center studies is at a crossroads, a moment in time where tough decisions regarding the scope of our practices need to be made. Certainly, changes in composing technologies have asked us to push beyond the writing center practices that developed in the 1970s writing center boom. I, for one, do not think this is a time for conservatism, for preserving the tradition for the sake of tradition. Though I understand the impulse as a writing center director to say, “Not one more thing! We do enough!,” to me, tutoring new media is not another thing. Writing has evolved with new composing technologies and media, and we must evolve, too, because we are in the writing business. A radical shift in the way that writers communicate both academically and publically necessitates a radical re-imagining and re-understanding of our practices, purposes, and goals.

Finally, I want to address one of the concerns that I discussed earlier: that we are not sure that we can do a good job of tutoring new media, so perhaps we shouldn't try. I think we need to remember that writing centers are largely based on the idea that talk among peers will help. We've never been concerned about expert tutors or perfection, and our feathers get ruffled when others (students or professors) expect this. If we evolve the practices in the ways I suggest, tutors will not be experts in new media composing, but they will be able to offer a response. And that is what we do.

NOTES

1. Pemberton focuses exclusively on hypertexts, not all new media.
2. For more on this, see Grutsch McKinney.
3. This could also hold true for tutoring via email or chat. The texts may be copied and pasted into an email and the tutor will not see the text as it will materialize for its intended audience, for example, how it prints out on the page.
4. For example, see JoAnn Griffin's schema in “Making Connections with Writing Centers” for discussing audience, purpose, form, context, organization, unity/focus, detail/support, style, and correctness of alphabetic essays, audio essays, and video essays (155-56).

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